

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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José Reis

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Ana Cordeiro Santos, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Fortuna, João Rodrigues,
José Castro Caldas, José Reis, Pedro Hespanha, Vítor Neves

Linguistic Revision

João Paulo Moreira

Editorial Assistant

Rita Kacia Oliveira

Design and Pagination

André Queda

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HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Daniela Nascimento

The World Health Organisation's declaration of a pandemic in March 2020 had a very negative impact on the existing humanitarian crises, which were aggravated by the priorities given to the urgent need of a response from governments. The global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic has left millions of victims of humanitarian crises in a particularly vulnerable situation, not only in terms of their level of protection against the spread of the virus – because of the extremely precarious and fragile basic health and hygiene conditions they find themselves in, which make them much more prone to infection – but also because this negligence has led to an even greater reduction in funding and support for these crises, namely humanitarian and emergency aid.

Most victims of humanitarian crises resulting from violent conflict, natural disasters or climate change currently live in very poor countries, challenged by high rates of malnutrition, low levels of immunity and an immense vulnerability to a multitude of chronic and/or highly infectious diseases, combined with increased difficulties in terms of access to basic economic and social rights such as health care, access to food and housing, for example. From the refugee camps in Greece to the internally displaced individuals and victims of armed conflict in Yemen or Mali, to the millions of Venezuelans affected by years of economic and humanitarian crisis due to political instability, the impact of the pandemic has been devastating. For the 25 million or so refugees in the world who depend on international aid, not only are budgets increasingly limited, but most of the countries that receive them have no concrete plan to deal with and fight the pandemic as well as to respond to the very specific needs of those who are already more vulnerable.

In this context, the alternative must be to fight the pandemic through tangible and inclusive actions, policies and measures directed at the multiple needs and vulnerabilities of the victims of these crises. This entails the assumption of, and respect for, the most basic humanistic principles and solidarity with all, regardless of their condition, origin or specific situation. It is a complex challenge requiring a closer look at these realities of increasing vulnerability, as well as a serious political commitment and will on the part of those who take the most important decisions within the international aid system. Also important is a civil society mobilised by and attentive to these other needs, even if from far away.

It therefore requires a clear position that caters for real needs, instead of divisive, exclusionary economic and/or geopolitical agendas that (re)produce inequalities and vulnerabilities. It involves a greater and better availability of medical equipment and resources to treat the infected, infrastructure enabling access to basic water and sanitation – which are essential for the sanitisation of these communities – and, above all, reinforced humanitarian support in the communities plagued by humanitarian crises that most need this aid. As UN Secretary General António Guterres stated, it is true that COVID-19 threatens all mankind without distinction and it is essential that mankind fights it with all its forces and capabilities. Our response must be to not ignore the “ultravulnerable”, the millions of people who depend on aid and who cannot be abandoned, lest we forget, along with them, what solidarity is.