

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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INEQUALITIES AND HOUSING

Ana Cordeiro Santos

The pandemic crisis has evidenced the centrality of housing in reproducing spatial, socio-economic, ethnic, gender or generational inequalities. In Portugal, the inequality-reproducing effect was intensified by the lack of a robust public housing stock. As a result, during the COVID-19 pandemic not all citizens were able to adequately comply with public health recommendations to stay at home, because they did not have one, or to be socially isolated, because they lived in densely populated neighbourhoods or overcrowded dwellings. In turn, the disparity of housing conditions created a huge discrepancy in lockdown experiences. That of residents in luxury houses with large outdoor spaces was very different from the one experienced by immigrants living in hostels in the centre of Lisbon, many of them with no citizenship rights, or of those living in slums, where the most vulnerable segments of the population are concentrated. Emergency measures, such as taking in homeless people, suspending evictions, automatically extending rental contracts, or moratoria on housing loans, attest to the relevance of housing in protecting citizens and the community. However, these measures are short term; they remedy the problem but do not solve it.

Medium and long-term measures need to be developed, because much of the right to housing has yet to be achieved in Portugal.

A number of measures must be promptly implemented. The urban rental regime must be reviewed to include the definition of decent contract duration minimums and affordable maximum rent values. The incentives – tax incentives, among others – that have fuelled real estate speculation must be eliminated and channelled to support decommercialised forms of provision, fomenting, for example, the participation of cooperatives or residents' associations. The small public housing stock must be expanded. Lastly, a National Housing Service must be created, allowing access to housing with rents matching the families' income. To this end, priority must be given to existing buildings, rehabilitating public properties or acquiring privately owned or vacant properties. The public housing stock should be of quality from the point of view of construction, size of the accommodation and energy performance. It should also be integrated into the urban network and include public spaces and collective facilities for the well-being of residents. This upgrade of buildings and public space will not only fill a serious gap in a crucial area of social provision, but also boost local economies in times of crisis, creating jobs and generating income. While housing can often be an inequality-reproducing mechanism, it is also a fundamental part of the solution to fighting inequality.