

# 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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# REFUGEES

Carlos Nolasco

In 2018, 70.8 million people were in a situation of forced mobility due to persecution, conflict, violence or violation of human rights. Of these, 25.9 million were refugees, 41.3 were displaced in their countries of origin and 3.5 million were asylum seekers. Half of the refugees were under the age of 18 and 111,000 were unaccompanied children. Every day 37,000 people enter a situation of forced displacement. By comparison, in 2009, the number of people in forced mobility was 43.3 million. These figures have been rising especially since 2012, with successive armed conflicts and persecutions in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Bangladesh, and lately in Ethiopia and Venezuela, among others. One third of refugees are in the world's poorest countries and only 16 percent in countries in developed regions. The paradoxes of the world are clear in these figures, made available by the UN. People are being increasingly forced by circumstances to flee their places of origin. At the same time, countries that are signatories to conventions in which they commit themselves to reception, that possess high development indicators and arrogate themselves to a political ethics based on the defence of fundamental rights intensify border protection efforts by raising obstacles to reception, refusing entry to refugees and, in some cases, criminalising humanitarian aid to those who help them.

In face of an increasingly harsh reality, aggravated by the social and political circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the alternatives are apparently simple, but almost utopian in their implementation. Firstly, where Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to seek asylum on the part of those who are persecuted, it should also provide for the recognition, on the part of States, of the obligation to take in those who need refuge – simply because the chances of leaving become difficult if they meet with a lack of willingness to receive. Secondly, a new refugee status must be established, extending its scope to those seeking refuge as a result of environmental problems and natural disasters. By the same token, all those who are forced to leave because of widespread poverty and lack of life prospects must also be considered refugees, even if they come from countries not experiencing conflict. Thirdly, all countries that signed conventions and refugee statuses must be penalised under international law and be subject to economic sanctions if they refuse to support and receive refugees. Fourthly, countries with better development indicators must develop effective common refugee protection policies. Finally, the most relevant of all the alternatives is that global measures and actions must be developed to prevent barbarities, promote regional development at a political, economic and environmental level, and defend fundamental rights without concessions.