

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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SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES AND RIGHTS

Marina Henriques, Conceição Gomes

The increase in vulnerabilities to which some social groups and communities are subjected in the wake of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 prompts us to a critical and committed reflection on the strength of the impact of this crisis on the lives of persons for whom the pandemic and the fragility – or even the absence – of measures taken by the State has meant a worsening of the state of exception in which they permanently live. The health crisis has made visible the structural fragility of the fundamental rights of vulnerable persons or persons at risk, such as the elderly, women, children, persons with disabilities, precarious and informal workers, Roma and other ethnic minorities, detainees, the homeless, migrants and refugees. But this visibility was not enough to bring about positive discrimination measures. On the contrary, those groups are not at the top of any comprehensive package or programme, which reflects their abyssal exclusion and makes their lives all the more precarious. Besides peoples' vulnerabilities there is the instability and uncertainty of social support organisations – now faced with structural shortcomings, some of them still a result of the austerity measures of the last economic and financial crisis –, which prevents them from adequately responding to the social emergencies at hand.

The framework of exception in which we currently live reveals the inadequacy and fragmentation of social responses to vulnerabilities and calls for a critical and proactive mobilisation of societies and States.

It is essential to politicise social vulnerabilities and put them on the political agenda, bringing them into the public debate. Public policies must combine national strategies with strong measures at the local level and then seek to provide structured and integrated responses based on an in-depth knowledge of reality, thereby improving the synergies of the institutional network. Given the urgent need for an ethical shift towards a society more in line with fundamental rights and a rule of law that is responsive to vulnerabilities, the alternative requires the development of public policies committed to fairer, more equalitarian and inclusive conditions in three main aspects: 1) promoting decent work as a means of tackling the proliferation of precarious situations and the increasing restrictions on labour and social protection rights, which particularly affects young and less qualified workers; 2) developing an education policy with robust measures strategically aimed at effectively promoting equal access to education for all children and young persons; 3) intensifying the support network for the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, the homeless, migrants and refugees, with the dual aim of reinforcing the synergies of public services and community organisations and developing integrated responses that actively promote change. The implementation of these policies calls on society and State institutions, including the courts, to understand and proactively assume their role in establishing fundamental rights.