

REPORT TO THE IUT

COVID19 AND THE FORMATION OF THE REDE H – NATIONAL HOUSING STUDIES NETWORK

Rede H - National Housing Studies Network

Officially founded in February 2020, but constituted and in formation since the summer of 2019, Rede H gathers around 60 academics, including activists and other civil society actors, united by their interest in studying the topic of housing. This open letter marks the beginning of a journey of reflection and active participation in the debate on housing in Portugal during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The preparation of a more detailed policy brief is still underway, where they will deepen ideas and proposals, considering a longer time frame.

This network launched an open letter to the government titled “Housing and COVID-19: open letter”

Housing conditions are both a cause and a consequence of social inequalities. In times of crisis, the effects of these inequalities are heightened. We know that Portugal is one of the European countries with the greatest difficulties in accessing decent housing and where, therefore, the impact of COVID-19 will be more profound.

In situations of confinement at home, housing conditions become even more important because the quality of life of individuals and families depends on them: those who live in overcrowded accommodation will face increased difficulties; anyone who is homeless or living in precarious housing, such as camps or squalid buildings, sometimes without water, electricity and basic sanitation, will not be able to protect themselves from the virus. As the economy slows down, more families will be unable to pay their rent or credit installments with housing and other essential goods such as water, electricity and gas. Access to the internet and therefore to information will also be severely constrained.

With this open letter addressed to the Government, Parliament and other public entities, Rede H - National Housing Studies Network, its members and other people interested in the housing issue demand extraordinary measures that they consider necessary to guarantee safety and health people in situations of homelessness or precarious housing.

They understand that the measures approved so far by the Parliament (such as the suspension of evictions, the effects of the termination of lease agreements and foreclosure) and by some Municipal Councils (such as the suspension of evictions from the municipal housing stock) are positive, but still insufficient in the face of today's needs.

Under a high risk of non-compliance with the Housing Basis Law and the National Contingency Plan COVID-19, as well as the various information circulars from the Directorate-General for Health and the Ministry of Health, we request the immediate compliance with a set of measures directed at housing, namely:

1. Mobilize the available spaces (hotel industry, airbnb and short rental, dwellings that can be temporarily ceded) to supply the fulfillment of self-insulation and quarantine in order to avoid risks to individual, family and public health. This immediate use, if necessary through a request as provided for in the State of Emergency declaration, should primarily benefit people who are homeless, families living in conditions of extreme housing precariousness or overcrowding, victims of domestic or gender violence, workers precarious housing and, if necessary, health professionals.
2. To automatically extend the rental contracts (housing or not) during the national emergency period, plus an adequate period for finding new permanent and decent housing after the same.
3. Prevent the increase in housing charges, through the reduction or suspension of payments of rent and mortgage credit for families that suffer from a decrease in income.
4. Protect smallholders whose income constitutes a substantial part of their livelihood, with tax relief and financial support measures.
5. Guarantee protection measures against the risk of contagion with COVID-19 to construction workers and domestic and home service providers.
6. Guarantee resources and support to prevent mental health problems resulting from isolation, paying special attention to the most vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, the elderly and children.
7. Strengthen instruments to protect situations of domestic and gender-based violence.
8. Ensure the creation of personal protection instruments, information and access to tests for COVID-19 for all personnel employed or volunteer in the work with homeless people.
9. Ensure access to computer equipment and internet access for families who cannot access services such as the purchase of essential goods online, distance learning and other information.
10. Guarantee the permanence in Portugal, and access to all applicable measures mentioned here, to immigrants, refugees and foreigners who await decision on asylum application and residence permit (or do not have it), insofar as the their living conditions can worsen substantially.

The challenge we face requires urgent and extraordinary measures: it is unacceptable to think that residential systems and the real estate market return to the pre-COVID-19 situation, which was already characterized by significant dysfunctions and injustices in access to decent housing, given the lack of countless abandoned apartments and buildings.

Housing is a fundamental right, enshrined in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic. The defense of the right to housing is even more relevant at times like this, when all the contradictions and harmful effects of commercialization and financialization of real estate become more explicit. It is not possible to defend the full right to health without guaranteeing the right to housing. In this very difficult time that we are going through, we ask the Government, Parliament, Municipalities and all the civil society actors to recognize that it is imperative that housing fulfills the fundamental function of protecting people and families.

Lisbon Tenants Association

March 25, 2020