

A Galician-Portuguese Community Living in Unstable Housing in Barcelona

A reality of social exclusion and continued right infringement

Summary

How has the economic crisis affected in Catalonia? Are economy and social conditions back on track? What is the current situation of those who already lived in social exclusion conditions before the economic crisis? From the association *Amigos del Movimiento Cuarto Mundo Catalunya* (ACMC), we wish to draw the attention on a group of families who have lived in settlements and unstable housing in Barcelona for the last two decades. In this period, they have suffered recurrent forced evictions as well as the lack of adequate institutional response in relation with the protection of their rights.

Poverty in Catalonia

As recent data on the risk of poverty in Catalonia evince, economic recovery has yet to be translated into an improvement of the status of many households. And, further, poverty has become chronic. This has been reported by the *Entidades Catalanas de Acción Social*¹ (ECAS) and the *Instituto de Estadística de Cataluña*² (Idescat) which alert about the fact that job insecurity and housing instability have become the norm.

According to Idescat, a 21.3% of the Catalan population³ is at risk of poverty. And the AROPE rate of risk of poverty or social exclusion yields 24.7%. Both figures represent a substantial increase over the last three years. It is also worth noting that early school leaving in Catalonia is around 17.1% - more than 7 points above the European average.

Having a job is not synonymous with avoiding poverty either. As ECAS reports⁴, 12% of the working population live in precarious conditions. Along the same lines, in the absence of governmental social welfare programs, the poverty rate would now reach 40.9%.

¹ Entidades Catalanas de Acción Social (ECAS). *INSOCAT, informes de indicadores sociales en Cataluña*. <https://acciosocial.org/que-fem/informes-i-publicacions/insocat-informe-dindicadors-socials/>

² Instituto de Estadística de Cataluña (idescat). Junio de 2019. *Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida*. <https://www.idescat.cat/pub/?id=ecv&lang=es>

³ Instituto de Estadística de Cataluña (idescat). Julio de 2019. *Tasa de riesgo de pobreza o exclusión social y sus componentes*. <https://www.idescat.cat/indicadors/?id=annuals&n=10412&lang=es&tema=cvida>

⁴ Entidades Catalanas de Acción Social (ECAS). Marzo de 2019. *Indicadores sociales en Catalunya en relación al contexto estatal y europeo Núm. 10. Trabajo precario, vivienda preventiva y falta de inversión social*. https://acciosocial.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/INSOCAT-10_Precariedad-laboral-habitatge-privatiu_Mar%C3%A7-2019_ECAS.pdf

Unstable housing in Barcelona

European social organizations accompanying homeless people typically use the ETHOS⁵ taxonomy to determine homelessness types. Being homeless means being forced to live on the streets, sleep in a shelter, or live in a temporary institution or a hut, etc.

Since one decade ago, the data collected to analyze homelessness issues in Barcelona is partly (but not fully) in line with ETHOS taxonomy. Currently, more than 3800 homeless people live in Barcelona, this representing a 81% increase compared to one decade ago. Out of them, approximately 1200 people⁶ live on the street, some 2100 stay in public⁷ and private shelters, and more than 530 live in irregular settlements.

Many of the families that *Amigos del Movimiento Cuarto Mundo Catalunya* accompanies belong to this last group. According to ETHOS, they spend their life in inadequate housing (temporary structures, huts and trucks or mobile homes in lots and/or disused factories) or insecure housing (without legal title or illegally occupied).

In Barcelona, the City Council has elaborated the “Action Plan against Homelessness⁸ 2016-2020”. This plan identifies a number of issues in relation with irregular settlements but no specific measures have been proposed in this respect.

The reality of Galician-Portuguese families in Barcelona

In the late 1990s, a group of families from Portugal and Galicia moved to Barcelona and settled on streets with their mobile homes and trucks. The main aim was to improve their working and living conditions. Yet, admittedly, their overall situation has improved, most of them still live in a chronified social exclusion and their rights are systematically infringed.

This community approximately comprises 100 families. Due to a number of forced evictions during the last decade, those families have re-located to various neighborhoods in Barcelona and its metropolitan area. *Amigos del Movimiento Cuarto Mundo Catalunya* accompanies 73 of those families (300 men/women, children and youngsters).

Traditionally, those families have lived on the informal economy: collection of scrap metal and

⁵ Federación europea de organizaciones nacionales que trabajan con personas sin hogar (FEANTSA). *Tipología europea de sin hogar y exclusión residencial*. https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos_spain-24518105836657575492.pdf

⁶ Arrels Fundació. Junio de 2019. *Censo de personas que duermen en la calle en Barcelona*. <https://www.arrelsfundacio.org/es/censo2019/>

⁷ Red de Atención a Personas sin Hogar (XAPSLL). Año 2018. *Recuento nocturno de personas sin hogar*. <https://recompte.barcelona/?p=5574>

⁸ Ayuntamiento de Barcelona. Año 2017. *Plan de lucha contra el sinhogarismo en Barcelona 2016-2020*. <https://media-edg.barcelona.cat/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/07132140/PladelluitacontraelsensellarismedeBarcelonav127112016-1.pdf>

cardboard, pallet recycling, different activities in fairs and festivals and, in some cases, begging. Most of those activities are considered illegal by the administration and, thus, entail fines, penalties and economic debts. Virtually all those families receive social subsidies but, as it becomes evident, this measure has not sufficed to transform their living conditions. In the last two years, a few individuals (both male and female), have entered the labor market but this represents a tremendous challenge for them, given their low level of formal education.

This group of families have in common a record track of systematic infringement of their rights and chronic social exclusion, passed on from generation to generation.. All of them have suffered continued forced evictions. In 2011, Amnesty International⁹ collected a few personal stories and testimonies: “My 6-year old child has already suffered 6 evictions in his life. He asks ‘Where are we supposed to go now, mom? Where?’”

Over the last 6 years, a few families have managed to get access to social and affordable rental housing, or already have their own homes. However, 67% of those 73 families still live in lots, disused warehouses, or illegally occupied properties. And, consequently, they suffer adverse situations like those brought to the attention of Amnesty International a few years ago. Currently, 24 families are experiencing forced eviction processes.

Infringed rights

Not having a stable housing often results into the infringement of many other rights¹⁰. On top of that, the families that AMICM accompanies must also add their situation of social exclusion.

The main challenges currently faced by those families are in relation with the infringement of a number of their rights, namely,

- **Right to live in healthy spaces and in affordable housing.** Some 67% of those families live in irregular settlements or in insecure housing and, thus, are exposed to forced evictions. Families have the right to register and apply for social housing and, in fact, most of them have done it. In practice, however, only a 1.5% of the housing in Barcelona is public and affordable¹¹. Besides, the regulations to get access to the so-called *Mesa de Emergencias* (and, hence, to social and affordable rental housing in case of eviction) restrict this right to families who live in settlements.

⁹ Amnistía Internacional España. Abril de 2011. *Derechos a la intemperie. Obstáculos para hacer valer los derechos económicos, sociales y culturales en España*. https://doc.es.amnesty.org/ms-opac/search?fq=mssearch_fld13&fv=EUR4110011

¹⁰ ATD Cuarto Mundo España. Septiembre de 2019. *Realojando derechos. El acceso a una vivienda digna desde la perspectiva de la extrema pobreza*. <https://atdcuartomundo.es/2019/09/26/realojando-derechos-el-acceso-a-una-vivienda-digna-desde-la-perspectiva-de-la-extrema-pobreza/>

¹¹ Instituto Municipal de la Vivienda y Rehabilitación. *Presentación del Instituto Municipal de la Vivienda*, por Josep Maria Montaner, concejal de Vivienda del Ayuntamiento de Barcelona. <http://www.pmhb.org/document.asp>

- **Right to a decent job and to education.** People are all too often marginalized in the job market while other alternatives in the informal economy (e.g., collection of scrap metal and cardboard) are subject to penalties. For women is even harder to get access to a regular job. Adults have a low level of formal education and the available educational offers are not in accordance with such level.
- **Right to drinking water and electricity.** All families have lived in disused warehouses and lots and, consequently, they have experienced problems in getting access to drinking water. This, in turn, limits their access to good hygiene practices. This problem still persists for a number of families. In case of forced evictions, the right to drinking water, electricity and other supplies and basic services is indeed disrupted.
- **Right to health.** Virtually all families have access to the public health card and use the public healthcare system on a regular basis. However, insecurity about housing, being exposed to recurrent evictions along with the reality of social exclusion eventually undermine their organic and emotional health¹².
- **Right to the social services needed.** The mainstream social services run by the City Council are dedicated to families living in a more stable housing or, occasionally, in occupied buildings. Families who live in lots and warehouses, on the contrary, are served by a dedicated service: SISFA-ROM¹³. The latter, however, has a clear focus on basic needs and has no resources of its own in the mid and long terms.
- **Right to no discrimination.** This group of Galician-Portuguese families arrived and settled in Barcelona more than 20 years ago. Nevertheless, the public administration has considered them as nomadic until very recently. This has resulted into resources and policies exclusively focused on the short term and, further, with no strategy concerning access to decent housing. This perception of the City Council about their nomadic nature seems to have changed but, despite of this, the situation of this group of families still remains at an impasse. And, worst of all, no specific resources have been allocated to address this issue.
- **Right to alternative housing in case of forced eviction.** In Barcelona, there is no relocation policy for people living in settlements. When an eviction occurs, those affected are neither consulted nor provided with rigorous and comprehensible information about the

¹² Observatorio DESC. Año 2018. *Radiografies de la situació del dret a l'habitatge, la pobresa energètica i el seu impacte en la salut a Barcelona*. <https://pahbarcelona.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Estudi-Salut-ODESC-alta.pdf>

¹³ SISFA-ROM. *Servicio de Inserción Social para Familias Rom no autóctonas con menores a cargo*. <https://seuelectronica.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/oficinavirtual/ca/tramit/20100000368>

eviction process itself or about housing alternatives.

A few proposals and recommendations

Amigos del Movimiento Cuarto Mundo Catalunya was established in 1997 to support a group of Galician-Portuguese families who came to Barcelona to improve their living and economic conditions. The main objectives of ACMC are (i) to break the vicious circle of social exclusion; and (ii) to make the reality of those families more visible. This is accomplished by actions focusing on education, stable housing and access to decent and remunerated jobs.

Leveraging our experience over the last 20 years, we make the following recommendations and proposals:

- **Not to proceed with forced evictions until realistic housing alternatives can be identified** and allow them to continue living in adequate conditions. No one should be exposed to additional right infringements resulting from a forced eviction.
- **To modify the internal regulations of the *Mesa de Emergencias*** in such a way that those living in lots and disused warehouses can also have access to emergency social housing.
- **To increase the endowment for subsidized housing reserved to those living in settlements and insecure housing conditions.** Bearing in mind that some family units also include children and minors, housing with multiple rooms is needed, as well.
- **To prioritize and make public regulations more flexible so that families living in settlements and in high vulnerability conditions can have access to subsidized housing.** In particular, public administrations should not leave families undergoing eviction processes with seriously-ill minors unattended due to shortage of adapted housing.
- **To decriminalize the informal ways of life of those families.** And, further, leverage on their skills in activities such as scrap metal and cardboard collection and/or vehicle driving to stimulate their social and labor market inclusion.
- **To listen carefully to people in such situations,** to empower them in order to be in a position to claim their rights and, also, be aware of their needs.
- **To establish a specific policy on homelessness, with adequate resources and dedicated economic endowment targeted at those living in settlements and insecure housing.** Such policy could well be included in Barcelona City Council's "Action Plan against Homelessness", or be part of the "Catalan Homelessness Strategy", the implementation of which is still pending.