

A PERSONAL REFLECTION BY PAULO SCATOLA

This personal reflection delves into the experience of encountering homelessness in Portugal, emphasising the fundamental rights and challenges faced by those without stable housing. It discusses the role of NGOs and projects like Housing First in addressing homelessness and enabling civic participation. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the homeless population is also highlighted, along with the solidarity shown during the crisis. The piece underscores the importance of exercising rights, including voting, and calls for increased participation and advocacy to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness.

By **Paolo Scatola**, Expert by Experience, Portugal

*I'm walking in a city I've known for many years. I got lost.
Will I be free? Only those who don't know the way are lost...
I decide to walk ahead...*

I have seen a very significant increase in people experiencing homelessness in Portugal. There is talk of a 70% increase in the number of people who are homeless - but these people do have rights!¹

Is it in one's own right to ask for help? I am referring, of course, to people experiencing homelessness who beg on the street. Stigmatised by potentially dangerous habits – ‘he is probably just another drug addict’, or ‘someone asking for money for alcohol’. Alcohol that, for many, is consumed to forget a life story – a story unknown to most.

Everyone, everyone! We each have a life story. This story, which for millions of people, scattered around the world, began to be told under "a roof" of a decent dwelling with all the basic conditions for the survival of the human being itself in a more united Europe and Portugal... Portugal, a country represented by ten million people. Perhaps realistically speaking eleven million people, because we can't forget foreigners, which makes me quite happy. Welcome! But what saddens me is the delay in legalising those who need it most, to be able to enjoy their civic rights and, thus, be able to fight on an equal footing to build a better life!

¹ Bastos, J. P., Moleiro, R., & Miranda, T. (2023, October 20). Os sem-abrigo aumentaram 78% em quatro anos: são mais de 10 mil, entre homens, mulheres, jovens, idosos, estrangeiros, famílias inteiras. *Jornal Expresso*. <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2023-10-19-Os-sem-abrigo-aumentaram-78-em-quatro-anos-sao-mais-de-10-mil-entre-homens-mulheres-jovens-idosos-estrangeiros-familias-inteiras-e109bfba>

As far as people experiencing homelessness are concerned, they live in a country that has in its constitution the unquestionable right to a decent home, but where, unfortunately, not everyone has this right. Whether due to ignorance, weariness, or even lack of faith, I don't know. The only certainty I have is that a percentage are completely alien to certain existing laws and rights available to them.

But all is not lost! There are NGOs, such as GAT and Crescer, among others, that tirelessly fight to improve the lives of every person experiencing homelessness: to raise awareness of the importance of exercising a civic right guaranteed to everyone. It can change everyone's life. I am talking, of course, about the right to vote in all democratic elections in Portugal, but it is very important not to forget the European elections.

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From my own experience, I refer again to NGOs, such as GAT and Crescer projects such as Housing First - a house for all! In this case, as in others, of course, funding is the key! Mediation: public services, charities, this whole package is important. Hence, technicians, and street teams, work tirelessly to make everything work in the best possible way, without ever forgetting to remember how important it is to exercise civil rights.

Honestly, it is precisely in this area that I am concerned! The almost total lack of interest in elections among homeless people. It is important not to forget that in a homeless situation, discouragement is always present. Serious psychiatric illnesses, sometimes chronic, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc. also not forgetting alcohol and drug dependence, unfortunately, a growing phenomenon (which, in my view, not even the most sceptical will be free of this same phenomenon). It is important to remember that alcohol, a legal, cheap, and easily accessible drug, unfortunately with an increase in users of this harmful "drug" when used in excess. Although, I remind you that not all people experiencing homelessness have problems with alcohol or drugs.

Projects such as Housing First help many people experiencing homelessness to cope with their addictions with excellent results. Many of these people could get the support bases to be able to see how good it is to live again, that it is possible to be happy and "fly" again.

In one of the most difficult times on our wonderful planet, I am referring of course to the "monster" called COVID-19. These were difficult times for a huge portion of the 8 billion inhabitants. At a time when traumas and paranoia came to the fore. But now at home. Because on the street, only homeless people, no matter how many rights they had, were left out.

I don't want to be unfair; I want to show that I am proud of my country, Portugal. Who did a great job and, in some cases, bordering on excellence. But it didn't. Many people experiencing homelessness couldn't find a place in shelters. Others, of course, preferred to stay on the street. In tents, building arcades, tents built with cardboard and wood, etc. They complained that the conditions were not the best, which proved to be true in some cases.

“We need to be more participatory. We must be present at the demonstrations for housing and better living conditions. We must be listened to in order to improve our condition and get out of homelessness.”

At a time when some homeless people were saved by the R.S.I. (Social Integration Income). I don't want to discuss its low value in terms of the poverty limit, I can't ignore it either, that it was an amount that helped a lot in that phase when it felt like we were watching a movie about the end of the world. One of the few good things about those times was to hear animals again in the deserted cities of people and cars, and even to see some that we only saw in zoos.

I also must remember the work of the NGOs that supported the people who did not have a place in the shelters with food, blankets and clothing, medication, and accompaniment to health services.

And the individual people who at that time, without anyone on the street asking, also helped with food, blankets, and clothing. Everyone seemed to have more solidarity.

Of course, with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, this solidarity disappeared, and the problems came back with more force. The best example is the housing crisis in Portugal.

That is why homeless people must exercise their rights. They must vote. Whoever they believe will stand up for their rights. But it's not enough. We need to be more participatory. We must be present at the demonstrations for housing and better living conditions. We must be listened to in order to improve our condition and get out of homelessness.

