



The Program on Governance  
and Local Development



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Valesca Lima

Working Paper  
No. 53 2021



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and Local Development



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

# **Changing Repertoires of Housing Mobilisation: Struggles to Stay at Home During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Dr Valesca Lima

Dublin City University

valesca.lima@dcu.ie

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by a grant from the Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg. I am grateful to Dr Dominika Polanska and Dr Luiz Alex Silva Saraiva for their helpful comments and feedback on previous versions of this paper, and to all research participants – their time is highly appreciated.

## **Abstract**

In this study, I examine how social movements focused on the right to housing have responded to the challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic. It particularly sheds light on new modes of contestation generated and expanded by housing groups as producers of political innovation, knowledge, resistance, and transformative possibilities. To this end, I compare two cities, Fortaleza (Brazil) and Lisbon (Portugal). The research provides a fresh approach to the study of changes in social movements and their roles in pandemic responses. This contribution attempts to overcome the existing limited cross-continental approaches to semi-peripheral/peripheral countries. The study shows that groups focused on the right to housing were particularly active in three main areas: anti-eviction campaigns, new ways of organizing protests, and the creation/expansion of solidarity networks and new alternative futures.

Keywords: Housing activist, solidarity, social movements, right to housing, anti-eviction.

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light shortcomings in health and financial systems worldwide. This health crisis has not made existing housing challenges disappear; on the contrary, the mandatory order to ‘stay at home’ has created some new and very urgent housing problems. With the state of emergency resulting from the pandemic, historically marginalized groups - such as women, self-employed workers, the homeless, and the elderly - have suffered even more from the weight of discrimination, given the social changes that have arisen both during and after the lockdown and quarantine periods. This crisis has revealed how inadequate housing conditions are an obstacle to full compliance with health guidelines, as people who are most vulnerable to contracting Covid-19 are often exposed to poor sanitation and overcrowding. The novelty of the disease and the scope of the pandemic have challenged all sectors of society and have required fast-paced reactions, meaningful local engagement, and consequential responses from civil society and grassroots organizations (Franco et al., 2020).

As health restrictions began in March 2020, so did campaigns organized by housing movements across the European continent and in the Global South. For housing campaigners, the bottom line was to keep people housed (Humphrey, 2020). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, housing was a controversial topic as governments struggled to respond to the current housing crisis. Under Covid-19, ‘stay at home’ became the motto and the main strategy to curb the spread of the virus. But how does someone stay at home when they don’t have a home? Organized by solidarity networks and campaign groups, local communities provided mutual aid and information and campaigned for anti-eviction legislation to address issues during the pandemic. Governments responded to these demands in various ways, but most responses were topical, means-tested, and temporary during severe lockdowns.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on housing movements that have organized rapid responses through campaigns, mutual aid networks, and direct action to address housing issues during the pandemic. These movements demanded the creation and extension of rights to protect the most affected by the financial and social problems generated by the pandemic. While most of the recent social science literature on the impact of Covid-19 has focused on state-led responses to the crisis, this contribution looks at responses to the crisis at the grassroots level. In this way, I intend to contribute to the social movement and political participation literature by focusing on the changing action repertoires motivated by the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, I answer the question: **how have housing movements responded to the worsening housing inequality during the pandemic?** I argue that these social movement changes have focused on three types

of action: protests, solidarity networks, and anti-eviction campaigns, with which some groups have achieved important wins, such as measures to protect tenants. I draw on the concepts of ‘repertoire of collective action’ and ‘movement outcomes’ as overarching analytic tools with which to explore the agency of housing movements in facing the Covid-19 pandemic.

To answer the question, I consider the responses and reactions to the housing access problem by comparing two cities on different continents: Fortaleza, in the northeast of Brazil, and Lisbon, in Portugal. A comparative framework allows me to compare and contrast different macro-level units to reach conclusions and explain differences and similarities between objects of analysis while considering their contextual conditions. The two cities have been chosen because they are both archetypal sites featuring residential segregation, insecurity of tenure, spatial injustice, real estate speculation, and housing financialisation in the pre-Covid era, with vibrant housing justice movements which have grown stronger and louder as housing conditions have worsened. Besides my familiarity with these two cities from previous research, this choice is also justified by the need to overcome the current north/south global divide in housing and social movement studies created by the methodological nationalism limiting cross-continental approaches. Portugal is a semi-peripheral country, combining characteristics of developed and developing countries (e.g., late industrialisation, backward economic development), making it more similar to peripheral countries than to the core Northern and Central European countries (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Santos, 1985).

Thus, this paper attempts to understand the role of social movements and the challenges they face in order to contribute to an international perspective on civil society and build transnational analytical categories (Pleyers, 2020; Anheier et al., 2001). The comparison of these two cities enables the expansion of geographical boundaries when it comes to comparative housing studies and contributes to narrowing this knowledge gap.

The article is organised in the following way. The next section discusses the literature on activism and urban mobilisation in Latin America and Europe, with special attention to agency and the outcomes of collective action. I then move to present the responses of social movements to the housing challenges imposed by the pandemic. In the final section, I reflect on the findings and suggest areas for future research.

## 2. Urban Movements and the Right to Housing

In recent decades, important literature has focused on the crystallisation of new forms of resistance to the neoliberalisation of the urban space and how neoliberalisation in cities after the Great Financial Crisis (G.F.C.) has impacted activism. Currently, urban social conflicts centre on socio-spatial rights and needs, including the growing privatisation of both services and places, the gentrification processes pushing low-income groups out of upscaling neighbourhoods, and the lack of affordable housing and accessible public spaces (Domaradzka, 2018, p. 608). The emergence of urban movements, such as those seen at the Taksim Square protests, Occupy, the M-15 protests in Europe, and various protests centred on students, women, black people, and pro-democracy campaigns in Latin America, has fomented an important scholarship (e.g., Rossi & Büllow, 2015; Castañeda, 2012).

In this study, I use the definition of urban movements as a subset of social movements that have developed in urban areas. Within this definition, the role of housing movement organisations is significant as part of the political struggle against multifaceted forms of inequality and housing precarity in urban areas. Their attempts focus on improving urban living conditions, usually through demands on the State for public services, including sewers, paved roads, better transportation facilities, better medical facilities, running water, and electricity (Mainwaring, 1987). If in Europe it was austerity policies that mobilised new forms of the urban resistance agenda, in Latin America, it was the neoliberal globalisation processes, as illustrated by the resistance to privatisation and the push for the consolidation of democracy throughout the region. The contestations around neoliberal policies have become large and heterogeneous, given that the accelerating trend of austerity in recent years has triggered protests and resistance to deepening austerity policies. The struggle against the neoliberalisation of the urban space has taken on various forms, from Right to the City networks around the globe to massive anti-austerity protests. The disruption brought about by successive austerity budgets and the retrenchment of the State provided a context for new grassroots solidarity initiatives to build alternative responses to the economic crisis (Mayer, 2016).

Material grievances are often appointed as a cause for social mobilisation and resistance (Simmons, 2014). In fact, in the period of economic austerity that followed the crisis, material grievances have causal force, but only to the extent that grievances are placed in relation to their social construction and their translation by collective actors into sets of practices and claims (Hayes, 2017). In Europe, as pointed out by Hayes, the main call of the protests was a set of demands and practices which challenged the disciplinary disempowerment of citizens as a condition of the imposed fiscal

austerity. However, resistance and urban mobilisation against neoliberalism did not follow the same pace as in Latin America. In that region, the ending of violent conflict and military governments in the 1980s and the renewed energy from popular mobilisation had crucial implications for understanding how social movements transformed grievances against poverty, violence, and lack of opportunities into spaces of mobilisation and contestation (Dagnino, 2004; Lima, 2019a).

One particular aspect of neoliberal market mechanisms transforms cities into economic assets. Providing a connection with movements centred around housing and habitation in contemporary cities around the world is the interpretation that land is seen as merely a playground for finance capital, uprooted and disconnected from human needs (Rolnik, 2019, p. 239). As the current housing crisis has become a typical characteristic of globalised cities in both the Global North and South, a contradiction has appeared in the rise of property prices associated with the development of cities and the housing needs of the poor. The daily lives of many people are increasingly characterised by poor housing, lack of infrastructure, increased physical displacement, insufficient housing policies, and failures in urban policy regarding the land market and skyrocketing rental prices (Rolnik, 2013; Routledge, 2010; UNDESA, 2020). Counter-movements to the neoliberal housing model have grown out of pressure from social movements and political contestation. Overcoming many challenges, social movements for housing have pushed an agenda of rights and achievements, aiming to confront neoliberal housing models during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is this challenge I explore in this paper.

### **3. Social Mobilisation and Agency - Organising in the pre-Covid Era**

Before the pandemic, the housing shortage in urban centres was already a major challenge. However, as a consequence of market-oriented neoliberal policies, states have shifted their focus away from delivering social housing to regulating or coordinating the delivery of welfare. As a result, in many European cities, such as Lisbon, housing movements have sprung up to demand the right to housing. This mobilisation has led to the creation of several housing justice groups focused on putting housing on the political agenda. In Brazil, urban movements that fight for decent housing continue to play an active role (Gohn, 2015). These movements have a long history of organising, and local, regional, and national organisations are prominent. This is the case with the Federação de Bairros e Favelas de Fortaleza (Fortaleza's Neighbourhoods and Favelas Federation or FBFF) and Central Única das Favelas (CUFA, Ceará sectional), who are part of the group of entities that created the campaign *Despejo Zero* (zero evictions), and were interviewed for this research (interview participants P1 and P2). Both entities are urban movements engaged in



campaigns for decent housing, but they are also engaged in other areas such as sports, equality, and access to better public services. In the case of Portugal, the emergence of new urban movements is closely associated with anti-austerity ideology, giving renewed stimulus to collective action in the struggles for the right to housing and the city (Mendes, 2020). Some of those movements are Habita, Mora em Lisboa (M.E.L.), and Stop Despejos, among others that created the petition-campaign ‘*Como se faz quarentena sem casa?*’ (How do you quarantine without a home?) in Lisbon and who were interviewed for the research (interview participants P3 and P4). This paper will explore how the urban movements above reacted and responded to the housing problems exacerbated by the health crisis and the re-organisation of practices.

### **3.1 Brazilian Urban Movements**

The literature has not overlooked the force of urban popular movements in Latin America (Rossi & Bulow, 2015; Alvarez et al., 2017). The scholarship on the development of urban movements from the 1960s to today has underscored how urban movements have proliferated throughout the region against a background of continuous waves of democratisation and political and economic crises. Under the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), authoritarianism, repression, crises, and unemployment became the background against which social movements resisted the dictatorship. The Brazilian literature emphasises the various actions carried out by popular urban groups whose objective was to expand people’s access to land, housing, and collective consumer goods (Maricato, 2011). This process of ‘commoning,’ which characterises Brazilian urban movements, has important results in the corresponding forms of production and use of space (Stavrides, 2016).

The creation of the new 1988 Federal Constitution led the country on the path to re-democratisation. However, the deep economic crisis of the late 1980s continued into the 1990s, with the consolidation of a neoliberal agenda across the continent, leading to setbacks for urban policies such as transport, housing, and sanitation. The period between the 1980s and 2000s witnessed the expansion of participation rights and the growing of ‘new social movements’ (women, indigenous people, black people, and the homeless) demanding the promotion of group-sensitive public policies. The years of the Workers’ Party (P.T.) administration (2003-2016) represented the expansion and consolidation of urban struggles, corresponding to the expansion of participatory citizenship in the management of cities, in local, state, and national councils (Lima, 2019a). The movement for the ‘Urban Reform Agenda’ led to key institutional achievements such as the *Estatuto das Cidades* (Statute of the Cities); this is rooted in the right to the city concept, in

which city planning is democratised, and local governments have legal tools to prevent real estate speculation and balance collective well-being with private property (Gonçalves, 2020).

### 3.1.1 Fortaleza

Most of the literature on Brazilian urban movements focuses on the south, especially Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Urban movement studies on those two cities already have a solid empirical basis, in contrast with urban movements in the northeast, which are not insignificant but nonetheless have received less academic attention. Considering that it is an error to presume that what happens in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro is representative of all of Brazil (Garmany, 2011; Lima, 2019b), I now move to briefly describe urban movements in Fortaleza, the state capital of Ceará, in the north-east of Brazil. Fortaleza is a popular tourist destination and the 5th largest city in the country, with a population of about 2.5 million. While urban movements in the south of the country have historically focused on campaigns for urban reform and the right to the city at the national level, campaigns in Ceará tend to focus upon better housing, slum upgrading, infrastructure, and improved public services. The housing deficit in Fortaleza in 2020 was 130,000 houses, and more than 240,000 housing units were considered inadequate (Tosi, 2020). In addition, 16% of Fortaleza's population were living in *favelas* (slum areas) in 2010 (IBGE, 2014), which indicates the extreme social vulnerability of people living in the poor housing conditions of the *favelas*.

Since the 1980s, municipal and state administrations have implemented slum upgrading programmes but, while those interventions improved - to some extent - the quality of buildings and infrastructure, the narrow scope and discontinuation of the programmes is a factor in explaining the persistence of precarious housing settlements. The origins of the *favelas* and impoverished neighbourhoods in Fortaleza are linked with the historically high level of internal migration in Ceará, characterised by extreme drought in the semi-arid regions and the associated insufficient public services that drove a massive rural exodus (Paulino, 2019). Furthermore, the haphazard expansion of the city, combined with intensified land occupation, gentrification, and real estate speculation in recent years, have pushed the poor to 'risky areas' on river banks, hillside dunes, and other sites that are privately owned or belong to the State. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the growth and expansion of urban movements in Fortaleza are closely connected with *favelas*, where communities face a combination of daily challenges, including housing insecurity, the drug trade, and acute poverty.

Housing movements in Fortaleza were initially established to resist slum removal and eviction threats in *favelas* earmarked for infrastructure projects in the 1970s and 1980s during a period of ‘modernisation’ of the city. This period marked the consolidation of those movements which questioned the people’s right to access housing and public services. Social movements such as the Federação de Entidades de Bairros e Favelas de Fortaleza (FBFF, Federation of Neighbourhoods and Favelas of Fortaleza), and Central Única das Favelas (CUFA), originated in the 80s and 90s as part of community struggles around the occupation of urban land and mobilisation for cultural and social rights for people living in favelas. Their most visible action was when they mediated in the preparations for the FIFA World Cup in 2014, a mega event held in the city that threatened communities with removal (Viana, 2015). Housing movements in Fortaleza are engaged in campaigns against violations of the right to the city, organise land and unused building occupations, and create networks of solidarity geared towards commoning.

### **3.2 Portuguese Social Movements**

The scholarship on Portuguese social mobilisation has often portrayed Portuguese citizens’ political attitudes and participation as ‘mild-mannered,’ arguing the country is characterised by low levels of political involvement, especially when compared to their European counterparts (Baumgarten, 2013; Magalhães, 2005). However, as noted by Accornero & Pinto (2014), historically, to be ‘mild-mannered’ is a feature motivated by decreasing trust in political institutions and is not an accurate reflection of Portuguese citizens’ political participation, which mobilised forcefully during the post-dictatorship period, especially during the austerity years. Nevertheless, the new political activism that emerged during and after the austerity caused by the G.F.C. 2007-08 in Portugal has received considerable attention in the research literature.

The *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution or 25 April) marked the end of the Portuguese authoritarian regime, Estado Novo (1926-1974). This was followed by the revolutionary period of 1974–1975, characterised by various attempts by political parties, trade unions, and citizen groups to organise civil society. This period saw high participation and popular mobilisation through the expansion of associative movements. However, this brief phase of high political activity was followed by a wave of low mobilisation, which was only rekindled by protests against Portugal’s acceptance of financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund in 1983, against Portugal joining the European Union in 1986, and the mobilisation of the global justice movement in the 1990s (Baumgarten, 2013). With the G.F.C., Portuguese society went through another period of transformation: the disciplinary neoliberalism implemented via austerity measures which ushered the country into low public spending. This, in turn, generated a wave of protests about the

iniquities of spending cuts, unemployment, and the reduction in public services (Accornero & Pinto, 2014). In the post-crisis period, tourism and housing financialisation became the cornerstones of economic recovery, as Portugal witnessed high levels of gentrification generated by over-tourism and international real estate speculation.

### **3.2.1 Lisbon**

If the topic of housing was absent during the years of anti-austerity protests, housing struggles gained attention in the post-austerity context with the emergence and consolidation of numerous housing activist groups and coalitions concerned with the right to housing and the city. Lisbon has undergone a tourism boom over the years due to local urban revitalisation strategies aimed at placing Lisbon on the international tourism map and attracting global real estate investment (Cocola-Gant & Gao, 2021). This process was accelerated by the G.F.C., with the entry of poorly regulated foreign investment and a transnational mobile population seeking the ‘coolest’ European capital (Moore, 2017). With a population of 505,526 people in 2017, housing needs in the Portuguese capital were mainly concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto (75% of the 26,000 identified families), according to the IHRU (2018). 50,209 empty buildings drew attention to the intense real estate speculation facilitated by the deregulation of the housing market, as workers, youths, and low-income families were priced out by Lisbon’s skyrocketing rents. Furthermore, persons of African origin, largely from former Portuguese colonies, and Roma were among the poorest and most deprived of adequate housing, often living in *barracas*, suffering discrimination, and lacking access to public services (Fahra, 2017).

The history of urban movements in Portugal is closely connected with the labour movement and housing cooperative movements, which, in the post-revolution context in the 1970s, demanded political stability and democratic governance. From there, this movement expanded to assume an ideology of social transformation, identifying themselves with the defence of the right to housing and the right to the city (Rodrigues, 2015). Before the G.F.C., in the mid-2000s, urban movements protested against poor housing quality in the ‘Plataforma Artigo 65’. They were successful in advocating for the inclusion of the right to housing in the Constitution. With the tourism boom and worsening housing crisis, new housing movements emerged to resist gentrification and give visibility to the issue of housing precarity and the right to the city. Some of those movements are M.E.L., Habita, and Stop Despejos, which are collectives composed of associations, specialists in urban issues, and activists focused on discussing and expanding proposals for transparent and collaborative public housing policy (Mendes, 2020). These groups have stood out in the

Portuguese political landscape, as they have placed and maintained housing and the right to the city on the national political agenda.

By contextualising the social movements, we can see how the urban movements in Fortaleza and Lisbon have responded to housing issues within their particular circumstances and challenges. Several of their initiatives emerged to protect rights and give a voice to poor and discriminated groups such as single parents, the unemployed, and students struggling to pay the rent. The need for survival during the Covid-19 pandemic has seen social movements, especially housing movements, organised around various levels of collective action. For example, movements have stepped in to enable families to stay in their homes when the State is unable or uninterested in providing secure housing during shelter-in-place orders. Movements have also made a valuable contribution in mobilising poor urban communities around networks of solidarity and have provided essential services, such as food, to families, in addition to fostering resilience and advocating for new rights, such as the right to not be evicted during the Covid-19 outbreak. In the next section, I analyse how these movements have become active agents capable of giving visibility to social conflicts around housing rights and how they have implemented resilient community-based actions.

#### **4. Methods**

My analysis is based on interviews with activists and documents produced by them, including blog posts, opinion articles, media statements, material posted on social media, and related policy documents produced by governments such as official statistics, reports, and legislation. Housing groups in both cities have produced several documents, and a rich amount of information is available on movement websites and social media pages, covering the period between 2019 and early 2021. This secondary data was selected according to its relevance to housing during the pandemic (e.g., anti-eviction content, decent housing disregarded as a human right). Housing groups were selected for the study according to their engagement with housing issues in the pre- and post-pandemic environment.

Individual interviews were kept to a minimum due to the difficulty of arranging interviews when activists are deeply involved in their tasks. Those interviews were conducted between 2019 (in person, 4 interviews) and 2021 (virtually via Zoom and email, 4 interviews). The interviewees were members of the following organisations: Federação de Bairros e Favelas de Fortaleza (FBFF) and Central Única das Favelas (CUFA, Ceará sectional) in Brazil, and Habita Association and Stop Despejos in Lisbon.

This paper was created with the expectation of producing knowledge that can inform progressive social change (Flood et al., 2013) and as a means of adding to political debates and contributing knowledge genuinely useful to the movements.

## **5. Movements in the Covid-19 Era - Types of Action**

The Covid-19 pandemic reached the Global South through Brazil in late February 2020. Pandemic preparedness varied across the country, and several states were particularly vulnerable to the impact of the outbreak. By June 2020, Brazil had become the epicentre of coronavirus in Latin America, and the number of deaths surpassed 200,000 in January 2021, with over 4,000 deaths in Fortaleza. The majority of those deaths were concentrated in slum areas and poor neighbourhoods, exposing the serious socio-spatial inequalities that characterise dense Brazilian urban centres (Braga et al., 2020). On the other hand, in European Lisbon, the virus did not find the same architectural and urban typologies as Brazilian shantytowns, but the city still saw high numbers of both cases and deaths in late January 2021, with over 6,132 in Lisbon and Vale do Tejo.<sup>1</sup> In both cities, Covid-19 unravelled unevenly among population groups, affecting the poorest people more severely. Due to their high population density, lack of public services, high social vulnerability, and poor housing conditions, *favelas* and *barracas* are primary spaces for violations regarding the right to the city and also spaces of high coronavirus contagion. As states have frequently failed the poor and the most vulnerable during the health crisis, research evidence on Covid-19 mainly focuses on the negative impacts, but some cases of social innovation and collaboration have started to emerge (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020; Mendes, 2020). Several community groups stepped in via community-driven activities, which I analyze in the following sections.

### **5.1 Anti-Eviction Campaigns**

The objective of the Despejo Zero campaign is to mobilise people to stop evictions and repossessions during the pandemic (P2). Data collected by the campaign shows that between March and October 2020, more than 6,532 families were removed from their homes, and 54,303 families were affected by removal threats during the pandemic in Brazil. In Fortaleza, slum clearance and forced removals are part of the daily lives of many low-income families who live under the constant threat of eviction (P2). It is a structural problem for all major Brazilian cities, but it became more obvious during the pandemic (P1). To stop the evictions, groups have engaged

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<sup>1</sup> In Portugal, Covid-19 data is presented by regional health administrations. In Brazil, the data is compiled at the state and municipal levels.

with government agencies and campaign members to denounce evictions during the pandemic as morally wrong. Activists make the point that housing is a human right, and land conflicts need to be addressed via dialogue and the creation of inclusive public policies, without the use of force by the police and the judicialisation of cases.

Despejo Zero is a national campaign launched in July 2020, with the participation of major urban movements focusing on the right to housing and the city. In Fortaleza, the campaign effectively started in September 2020. According to its founders,

...the social function must prevail over the right to property during a pandemic... for the families being evicted, housing would be turned into abandoned properties, and they cannot be left homeless at a time when staying at home is essential for the preservation of life.<sup>2</sup>

According to its members, it is a permanent campaign under construction, with the overall aim of guaranteeing decent housing during and after the pandemic.

Before the municipal elections in November 2020, Despejo Zero released a public letter urging local council candidates to sign it and to promise to defend the end of evictions during the pandemic, while calling attention to the increased levels of violence against the urban poor and rural and indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> As of November 8, 2020, only eight candidates had signed the letter, but this number may have since risen. The campaign also engaged in lobbying at the national level to approve a bill proposing the suspension of evictions and repossessions during the pandemic. Despite the campaign, a different bill to interrupt evictions was approved by the Senate (Law 14.010), covering only those judicial processes started by March 2020 and preventing evictions until October 2020. As the Senate did not approve more comprehensive anti-eviction legislation, some states and municipalities opted for a temporary suspension of rent payments and free utility services. In the state of Ceará, for example, water and energy services were provided free of charge for low-income families for a period of time. A more relevant win connected to the campaign was the suspension of the eviction of 85 families from occupied land at Carlos Marighella in Fortaleza, in the Mondubim neighbourhood, earmarked for repossession (see Figure 1). In her decision, the judge recognised the activist groups' efforts to negotiate a permanent solution for the 85 families on the site and the critical nature of the health crisis. Members of the campaign understood this decision as a small but definitive win (P2).

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<sup>2</sup> Speaker Kelli Mafort at the opening of the Despejo Zero campaign on 23.07.2020.

<sup>3</sup> See letter at <https://www.campanhadespejozero.org/>

**Figure 1: Carlos Marighella Occupation Participants and Social Movements Occupy the Secretariat of Cities in Ceará in September 2020**



Photo: Claudiane Lopes / Jornal A Verdade / (CC-licensed image)

After the state of emergency was enacted in Lisbon in March 2020, movements organised to claim people’s right to stay at home and the immediate suspension of evictions. Even before the pandemic, numerous evictions took place, and Stop Despejos, in conjunction with the Habita Association, collectively fought to stop and end evictions and defend access to decent homes (P3). During the health crisis, the struggle for housing has played out similarly in Fortaleza, with campaigns, public pressure on the government, and support for households under the threat of eviction. Both Habita and Stop Despejos have set goals to end evictions and protect tenant rights (P4). In March 2020, in conjunction with other groups and supporters, they launched the manifesto ‘How can we quarantine without a home?’ which was initially signed by over 60 associations and collectives. This manifesto led to an online petition of the same name, which obtained over 2,500 signatures. The petition demanded the suspension of rent payments, the resettlement of people evicted or sleeping on the streets, an immediate end to evictions, and the requisition of tourist, luxury, or municipal apartments for relocation, among other demands.<sup>4</sup> In addition to housing demands, the petition also highlighted that the economic burden of this crisis should not be borne by the most vulnerable in the form of evictions, job loss, and renewed misery.

The campaign put pressure on the Portuguese government to consider the severity of the pandemic and to include special measures to contain the impact of Covid-19 (Mendes, 2020). On

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<sup>4</sup> Petition available at: <https://www.change.org/p/pela-suspens%C3%A3o-das-rendas-e-reajustamento-das-pessoas-despejadas-e-ou-a-dormir-na-rua>



March 19, 2020, aware of the public outcry against evictions during the pandemic and pressure by activists, the Portuguese President enacted Law 1-A/2020: 'Exceptional and temporary measures to respond to the epidemiological situation caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and COVID-19 disease,' which was passed by the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic. Initially approved until September 30, 2020, the temporary legislation was extended until December 2020. While it was a definite win for the campaign, housing advocates were reasonably expecting an increase in homelessness when the eviction ban ended, and the provision of accommodation during the pandemic ceased. In January 2020, the legislation was altered to put special eviction procedures in place instead of the immediate suspension of evictions. Law 4-B/2021 established that when an eviction case starts, a decision will be made to determine whether the eviction puts a family in a fragile situation due to a lack of housing.

Comparing the two movements, in Fortaleza, housing movements were weaker at the beginning of the pandemic. At the national level, the Despejo Zero campaign started in July, but only picked up in the city from September, one month after the Senate approved the partial anti-eviction law. Therefore, it seems that movements in Fortaleza needed more time to organise under the Despejo Zero platform. A possible explanation is the challenge of organising amid a chaotic pandemic, especially in poor communities where other matters were more pressing, such as the need for food, medication, and health services.

Meanwhile, Housing movements in Lisbon were very active from the onset of the pandemic, quickly mobilising around a petition and campaign to protect housing rights. As noted in a webinar on the right to housing and Covid-19 lockdown measures, on April 16, 2020, activist scholars based in Portugal had produced reports, driving government action via academic networks.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the housing groups involved organised online debates and webinars with academics, public servants, and local association members, giving visibility to issues such as domestic violence, the situation for migrants, and the exclusion of Roma communities. In Fortaleza, similar academic groups exist, e.g., the Housing Studies Laboratory of the Federal University of Ceará (Laboratório de Estudos da Habitação, LEHAB-UFC) and the Front for the Struggle for Decent Housing (Frente de Luta por Moradia Digna), which are connected with local activists in technical advisory roles.

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<sup>5</sup> Report from a webinar on the right to housing during lockdowns, available at: <https://radicalhousingjournal.org/2020/stay-home-without-a-home-report-from-a-webinar-on-the-right-to-housing-in-covid-19-lockdown-times/>

## 5.2 Online Protests

The widespread measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 have impacted social mobilisation and political participation in different ways, while social inequalities, human rights abuses, and other struggles have not disappeared. Lockdowns, curfews, quarantines, and similar restrictions have halted ongoing mobilisation in its tracks. But, as Wood (2020) noted, how can social movements ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind without their usual repertoire? Various forms of political participation, such as street protests, have become increasingly challenging. But without the option of a physical meeting, other forms of political activism, such as digital repertoires, have received a boost. This has opened new opportunities for mobilisation as the political actions of social movements continue.

In Fortaleza, organised movements provide not only direct support, as presented in the next section, but also demand more action from the State in protecting the most vulnerable. Through petitions to stop evictions, online campaigns to collect food, and online events, they can discuss important issues and give problems media visibility. The Despejo Zero campaign, for example, was organised nationally without face-to-face meetings, and was an innovative strategy to connect groups dispersed around the country around the theme of stopping evictions during the pandemic (P2). The campaign launch was streamed online via YouTube and Facebook. In Fortaleza, other online events were organised, such as a Facebook live ‘Against Evictions During The Pandemic’ in August 2020 and the ‘Outside the Classroom’ meeting, organised by a local university. Both events assembled academics, activists, and practitioners to discuss challenges, defend housing rights during and after the pandemic, and think of new pathways for housing delivery.<sup>6</sup> Housing groups also made extensive use of social media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to organise online, spread campaign awareness and information, contact people in need of help, and strengthen local and national networks.

In Lisbon, Habita, Stop Despejos, and M.E.L. denounced illegal evictions and organised public campaigns and events to demand rapid responses to the crisis. These groups denounced illegal evictions with public letters to authorities and posted video records of illegal removals online.<sup>7</sup> M.E.L. also organised public online events with the general public and academics from Rede-H

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook live ‘Against Evictions During the Pandemic,’ available at: <https://fb.watch/40qP0UjaJ3/> and the ‘Outside the classroom’ meeting, available at: [https://www.unifor.br/web/graduacao/noticia/-/asset\\_publisher/jY9xVCH8IUQ4/content/encontro-virtual-discute-a-producao-de-moradia-popular-atraves-do-cooperativismo](https://www.unifor.br/web/graduacao/noticia/-/asset_publisher/jY9xVCH8IUQ4/content/encontro-virtual-discute-a-producao-de-moradia-popular-atraves-do-cooperativismo)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Stop Despejos recording of five families evicted in Loures in March 2021, available at: <https://youtu.be/QpjuIWsvWVqc>

(National Housing Studies Network), focusing on the current housing situation and giving a platform to different voices in the struggle for housing, such as immigrants and the homeless. Rede-H is a network composed of academics, activists, and other civil society members focusing on collaboration, with a view to develop housing studies in a non-academic context (Rede-H, 2020). During the pandemic, Rede-H has provided both expertise and a more structured dialogue with public entities, producing alternative data and contributing to public deliberation and debate on housing (Mendes, 2020). One of those events was ‘What Housing Do We Want Post-Covid?’ in May 2020, coordinated by M.E.L. and transmitted via Facebook and YouTube as part of a series of online debates on the right to housing and the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Housing groups in Lisbon also used email bombing and open letters to political authorities to pressure local and national administrations.

### **5.3 Networks of Solidarity and Mutual Aid**

The final action strategy was the creation of networks of solidarity and mutual-aid groups. In the days of social distancing and isolation, social movements have become ‘essential services’ (Wood, 2020) with the provision of support for the most vulnerable families, as local grassroots organisations become the frontline in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. While governments in Brazil and Portugal created temporary welfare payments to those who lost their income, these payments were not accessible to all workers – artists and other self-employed workers were initially excluded and only managed to receive state support after coordinated protest actions (see Holanda & Lima, 2020).

In this crisis period, popular movements, grassroots organisations, and citizens have played a leading role in engaging in mutual support, providing basic needs, and solidarity in their community (Players, 2020). In Fortaleza, CUFA (Central Única das Favelas) set up logistics for distributing groceries in registered slum areas across the city as part of a national campaign by the entity. In the ‘Favela de Rosalina’, for example, in the southeast of the city, mothers received grocery kits with food for a week and medicine. This ‘service’ was sometimes the only way single mothers with small children had something to eat at the end of the month (P1). These actions are important, not just for providing food to the poor but also to help the community cope with the effects of the pandemic, since movements build ties and implement resilient community-based actions to confront the lack of public services and draw attention to the *favelas* during the pandemic. Even in this serious situation of unemployment and hunger, the movements wanted to

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<sup>8</sup> ‘What housing do we want post-Covid?’ available at: <https://youtu.be/KDMkZiC1sBA>

show solidarity to communities and help them get through this very difficult moment with material support and information on how to reduce the spread of the virus (P2).

Although a less frequent practice in European countries, numerous mutual aid groups have emerged during the pandemic (Players, 2020). In Lisbon, the *cantina solidárias* (solidarity canteens) involved volunteers from several different groups. This service had already existed through social institutions but was expanded during the pandemic, with pop-up restaurants providing meals to people in situations of socio-economic vulnerability (Mendes, 2020). Maintained by donations, the canteens provided up to 350 meals a day, but started to face some difficulties from health restrictions that closed the bars and restaurants that supported the canteens. As of December 2020, this study identified at least five active canteens around Lisbon. Importantly, canteen volunteers and organisers believe it is not just about food distribution, but providing a friendly face to shop for the elderly, stop by for a chat, and take care of people where the State seems unable to do so. The canteen is, therefore, a way of ‘putting into practice collective processes of autonomy and organisation that will allow us to face the times ahead.’<sup>9</sup> In both Fortaleza and Lisbon, mutual-aid groups existed, but rapidly expanded after the onset of the pandemic.

The locally-based solidarity and mutual-aid groups that emerged during the pandemic have focused on daily survival and everyday needs, proving themselves to be valuable actors in urban struggle strategies as they respond to the changing context of the crisis. Taken together, their actions resulted in concrete interventions that galvanise the human potential for collective action to 1) empower the most vulnerable and 2) (re-)create networks for mutual support to help resist hardship.

## 6. Final Remarks

This contribution examines urban movements in times of pandemics, shedding light on the protagonism of activists and housing groups as producers of knowledge, innovation, resistance, and transformative possibilities generated by the health crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed even more extensive inequalities and dysfunctions in current housing systems as a result of government policies prioritising profit over the necessities of the population. The absence of the State as a guarantor of rights aggravates the impact of the pandemic on the most impoverished communities, especially in the Global South, where a disproportionate number of vulnerable

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<sup>9</sup> About Solidarity Canteens, available at: <https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/14/local/noticia/ha-brigada-voluntarios-cozinhar-cantinas-urgencia-1915507>

people live in informal settlements and suffer extreme material needs (Pequeno et al., 2020; Rolnik, 2013, 2019; Simmons, 2014; Franco et al., 2020). The multiple ways social movements have reacted to the worsening conditions have attracted academic attention to the political innovations of social movements, resulting from their need to find novel ways to organise, protest, and resist oppression. This grassroots activism, carried out even before the pandemic, involved mostly local communities and pre-existing groups which reorganised and adapted their agendas based on the health crisis. By capitalising on previous synergies, housing groups, associations, and collectives defending the right to housing have targeted political authorities to guarantee minimal conditions for survival during the pandemic.

The health crisis was also a moment of rupture for social movements, providing opportunities for enhancing social engagement to improve the right to housing while also improving local governments' coping and response capacities (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020; Mendes, 2020). Accordingly, community-driven initiatives were essential for responding to the risks and uncertainties of the pandemic and, in my interpretation, social movements have not just been transformed by the pandemic; they have become vital to the protection of vulnerable people and to the protection and expansion of social rights, which in Wood's (2020) words 'will aid longer-term struggles against exploitative housing.'

There are also some important differences in the context in which the movements analysed here are based. Portugal has had higher social investment and a unified national response allowing the rapid implementation of health and economic measures to contain the spread of the virus and social impacts that ensued. In Brazil, the federal government lacked a national plan to tackle the pandemic, while the President insisted on downplaying the seriousness of the disease and openly sabotaged sanitary measures imposed by state governors. The federal government's anti-scientific discourse, coupled with its ineptitude, has led to a high number of cases and deaths (Idrovo et al., 2021) and slow response to the crisis, as evidenced by the late approval of the eviction ban (five months into the pandemic) and the deterioration of living standards. From the comparative framework employed in this study, we learn the similarities and differences between the two cities and that, despite the impacts of the health crisis, new pathways for mobilization and resistance were opened, with their own challenges and possibilities.

The repertoires of action are similar in both cities but, due to the structural levels of inequality and poverty in Brazilian cities, the actions of mutual-aid groups have proved to be indispensable for the poorest groups in managing sanitary restrictions. In both cities, housing became a

focal site for political mobilisation. Due to the political actions of movements, housing precarity was kept in the public eye by movements that a) exposed the contradictions, inequalities, and privileges involved in ‘stay at home’ and social distancing regulations, and b) adopted innovative and decisive actions to allow communities to continue to mobilise and (re)create networks of actions and solidarity. Importantly, the community mobilisation in response to the pandemic, of which mutual-aid groups, housing campaigns, and online protests are now a part, is a significant component and a potential driver of renewed civic and community action. At the risk of overestimating, these can be interpreted as redefining forms of civic action for social change in which new understandings and practices of active citizenship have been developed and carried out during short-term crisis responses. Even if they were limited in their political responses, the Covid-19 crisis was an exceptional moment to recognise the important role of social movements. Singularly, it was a moment to conclude that, yes, there are alternatives for a more inclusive social welfare system and perhaps a new alternative future, even if this is not the definitive death of capitalism.

My interest in this study was to explore practices of forms of collective action in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but the pandemic is a fast-evolving situation, and its rapid escalation makes the work of comparing housing situations challenging for researchers. More generally, since the outbreak of the pandemic, the academic interest in mobilisations, new networks, innovations, solidarity networks, and collective action under lockdowns has grown substantially, so a lot is to come from these novel investigations.<sup>10</sup> The questions raised by mine and this new corpus will generate further research into the results of collective actions that led to more permanent changes in public policy and on the new repertoires and practices of social movements.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Interface* special issue ‘Organising amidst COVID-19: sharing stories of struggles’ (2020), Adam Michael Auerbach and Tariq Thachil article on slums affected by Covid (2021), ECPR’s session on Social Movements and Political Participation in a Global Pandemic (2021) and the book “Os impactos sociais da Covid-19 no Brasil: grupos vulneráveis e respostas à pandemia (Covid-19’s social impacts in Brazil: vulnerable groups and responses to the pandemic) by Corrêa et al. (2021). Those are just a few examples of recent research that focuses on the political responses and impacts of the pandemic as an emerging topic of academic enquire.

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