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VIII.Stage IV – Responses to Government Decisions Affecting the Future of Cova da Moura

VIII.1 The Influence of the Redevelopment Project on the Target Families in Cova da Moura

This section describes how the residents negotiated implementation of the Redevelopment Project and indicates how this may have changed the life of the second generation of the target families.

Cova da Moura is an area with one of the most negative images in the greater Lisbon area and even in the whole of Portugal. But it has special characteristics: it is not a totally illegal neighbourhood (the owners of the houses and shops pay tax to the Municipality of Amadora); it is not a council estate and it is not a slum. For these reasons, Cova da Moura was not selected for all the programmes¹¹² implemented by the former Governments, aiming to clear the greater Lisbon area of shacks and implying subsequent relocation of their inhabitants (cf. Fontainhas, 1^a de Maio).

The Cova da Moura Redevelopment Project was a new programme that started in 2007 and involved seven Ministries, Welfare, Municipalities, Associations (Clube Desportivo e Social da Cova da Moura, Moinho da Juventude, Associations of Residents representing the Neighbourhood Commission) and the Church of Damaia. Its intervention plan had three objectives: 1) legalization of the neighbourhood: a) purchase of the land; b) construction and rehabilitation of infrastructure and public spaces, houses, commercial spaces, social and educational facilities. 2) a safe neighbourhood: a) re-creation of the image ‘*Nova Cova da Moura*’ b) fighting drug trafficking, social reinsertion of ex-convicts, prevention of domestic violence and legalization of undocumented foreign citizens. 3) an active neighbourhood: a) prevention of disease, b) support for employment and enhancement of human capital. Another

¹¹² The first housing programme that was projected URBAN, Special Programme of Rehousing (Programa Especial de Realojamento), PER (1993) aimed to finished with all the shacks in the Lisbon area by the year 2000 (exceptionally in Amadora district by 2009 due to the great quantity of shacks that existed), (Decree-Law 163/93 of 7 May 1973)

section of the project provided for the creation or development of central places and public squares. Improving the status of the Praça do Moinho (Windmill Square) was an important part of the neighbourhood's improvement policy. This emblematic square is an area where many streets converge, with several cafés and an old run-down windmill – hence its name. It is crowded day and night, mostly with men of African origin and of all age-groups. They gather to socialize, discussing everything from football to politics. The symbolism of this place was emphasized by an old resident who had arrived in the 1960s from the Island of Santiago:

“It’s the place to ‘hang out’, where the old folks meet and now the young ones, too. The mill served as protection from the rain and from the cold Portuguese winter nights, and to hide from the police. Here we were, on the top of a hill, and it was possible to see what was going on in the entire neighbourhood...this was before these constructions. Although the windmill is just a ruin, it’s still our monument.”

The ‘Moinho’ was considered a symbol of the neighbourhood by its residents. As the previous interview shows, it had also a practical use. Due to the lack of public and cultural facilities in Cova da Moura, the proposal to implement a museum inside the mill was accepted by all parties involved in the negotiations.

From the beginning of the Redevelopment Project there was disagreement. For example, the residents tried to organize groups to be heard and to have a vote in the decision-making process. In official meetings, two forms of action were presented: complete demolition of the houses (the land in Cova da Moura is valuable) and subsequent relocation of the residents to improved accommodation, namely council flats in the same municipality¹¹³. This possibility was immediately rejected by the majority of residents. Eduardo Pontes, one of the founders of the Moinho da Juventude Association, participated in these meetings where loud voices of disagreement were heard. This is how he remembered one occasion:

“I was at the meeting and immediately against this proposal; after I objected, many others did the same. We knew what they wanted. It is valuable land, near Lisbon, a good location with good transport facilities. What they (some members of the projects) wanted to build here was a private condominium. But we would not let them”.

Another possibility implied maintaining the neighbourhood on a legal basis for its residents and renovating the private houses, including rehabilitation of the public space. This concept

¹¹³ In Fontainhas in Amadora, the inhabitants were forced to leave the neighbourhood, which was destroyed on Government orders. The residents were reallocated to council houses in the area.

prohibited any type of new construction in the quarter¹¹⁴. It was this second option that received more votes from the residents and it was also the one that interested Josefina:

“I and the majority of the people who live here don’t want to move to these new buildings. We made many sacrifices to have the houses as we like them, and I know everyone around here, and I work here, and it’s here where I made my life. That’s where I will die.”

Josefina’s emphatic statement and strong opinions are corroborated and shared by everyone I talk to about this subject. After many debates, the second proposal was accepted by all parties involved. However, the controversy continues in the media about how this project, which should already be completed, has developed and if it should go on.

In 2007, the Socialist government had publicly announced¹¹⁵ ‘100 million euros for Cova da Moura with the promise of a safe, ecologically and economically attractive neighbourhood’. The article continued with the proclamation of a ‘New Cova da Moura with a future for the children and the certainty that the construction would start by 2009’.

In 2008, the Residents’ Commission expressed the worries of the inhabitants, using the media to communicate publicly their doubts and mistrust. Various newspapers¹¹⁶ reported the lack of dialogue with residents and the delay in presenting the results of the study carried out by Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia Civil, LNEC (National Laboratory of Civil Engineering). The political parties on the left¹¹⁷ (Coligação Democrática Unitária, CDU and Bloco de Esquerda, BE) also criticized the ‘undefined project’ and the lack of information issued by the Socialist government (PS) about their Rehabilitation Project. In 2010, they denounced the delay of the work in the neighbourhood that should have started months earlier. In 2012 there is still no apparent development in the process concerning legal ownership of the land and the possible date for either renovation or demolition of the houses. The only information tramited to the residents by the responsible comitee is: “at the moment the negotiations are in a stand by, we have to wait...”.

¹¹⁴ Resolution of the 'Conselho de Ministros (Ministers Meeting) nº 143/2005, dated 7 September 2005, establishing the Protocolo de Parceria (Partnership Protocol) between the entities involved in the execution of the Redevelopment Project 2007-2011 for Cova da Moura, in the district of Amadora.

¹¹⁵ *Destak*, 11 September 2007, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ *Jornal da Região Amadora*, 14 to 20 October 2008, p.4, *Jornal Global*, 3 October 2008, p.4.

¹¹⁷ *Metro*, 26 May 2008, p. 4.

Second Generation

Most residents, including the members of the second generation of the target families hoped that their situation would improve in the near future with home ownership and better infrastructures inside the neighbourhood, as Albertino stated:

“What I really hope will happen in Cova da Moura is the legalization of the neighbourhood. My parents knew from the beginning that they had bought an illegal house, but they struggled a lot and paid all these years to the state, so we (himself and his brother Felizmino) should be entitled to it. I want to come back and live here with my kids, in my own house.”

For Albertino, his parents' hardship and difficulties in buying and remodelling their habitation, and paying taxes to the Municipality should be reason enough to own it. Certainly, the house has gained material and also high emotional value. It becomes a symbol of upward mobility and economic stability that can be passed on to future generations.

Others, such as Francisca, see in this Project an opportunity to move somewhere else. She dreams of selling her parents' house as soon as it is legalized, after having the necessary repairs done. With the money of the sale, she would change from Cova da Moura to a neighbourhood with a 'better reputation' and possibly open a small café, as she says:

“I really would like to go somewhere else, I don't mind where, but I want to start from zero. For the time being, I have no other place to go ... Here, I have a small house, a school for the children, the Moinho (da Juventude) but no future for me. I don't have many friends here. When I have the house legalized, I will sell it and start all over again and, who knows, maybe fulfill the dream of my lifetime (own a small café).”

For Francisca, a legalized house in Cova da Moura represents a possibility for future business and an opportunity to start a new life in a different place.

Her cousin Guiducha has a similar approach. She, her husband and her son were living in her parents' house in Cova da Moura. A conflict between Guiducha and her father made them leave the house. They could not find a flat through official agencies, because her husband is an undocumented Cape Verdean citizen. With only her husband's salary, they moved to a rented room in the neighbourhood, where the three of them lived. She expects that they will be entitled to a council flat outside Cova da Moura after the Project's implementation:

“I could not stay with my father any longer. I am looking for a cleaning job or just some hours of work in a café around here, because we cannot live the three of us on 500 € a month. But until now nothing has come up. The room is too tiny for the three

of us, but I hope with the Project, we can move to a new house not far from here. I have no space for anything, not even for my clothes and my few things. But I cannot really leave, because my mother lives here and helps me a lot with the kid and I know everyone here.”

In 2011, this Project, aiming to create better conditions and forms of integration for poor families who live in shanty neighbourhoods, was suspended, due to the lack of financial support from the government. But the residents are suspicious and doubt this official version, as Antónia confided in me:

“Deep inside, I knew that these negotiations would lead nowhere. There is a Portuguese saying which puts things in the right light: ‘when there is plenty, the poor mistrust’. And that’s exactly what it was. Here (in Portugal) no one gives anything to others, if he can’t benefit from it somehow. That’s why we keep the cents and the others (the decision makers) keep the millions, and nothing is really done.”

Originally, three neighbourhoods had been taken into consideration for these measures: Cova da Moura, Lagarteiro (Porto) and Vale da Amoreira (Setúbal). The Redevelopment Project intended to intervene in different areas: legalization of properties (plots and houses already built) for the residents, rehabilitation of infrastructures, private houses, public spaces and social facilities. However, the time limit (2011) for implementation of the project is long past. The first phase of the project was accomplished with evaluation of the properties and registration of the inhabitants per household in 2009. Furthermore, negotiations with the landowner were suspended, as disagreements about the value of the property continue. The differing ideas of the involved parties concerning value and compensation have not yet been reconciled.

As explained above, future ownership of their houses depends on the government resolution concerning the Redevelopment Project for the area. Apparently, there is an estimated possible delay of five years until the Project’s conclusion. In the meantime, all necessary restoration and remodelling of the houses in Cova da Moura are prohibited until new inspections assess the state of each property. For the time being, Cova da Moura will inevitably remain an ‘illegal’ squat in the greater Lisbon area.