

March 2019

## Foreword

**Albert Sales**

“Spare change for food”, “I need help to feed my children” or “I’m hungry”, are regular signs on posters used by people who are begging on the pavement, in order to attract the attention of passers-by who are concentrating on their own, everyday problems or staring at the screens of their mobile phones. They know that anyone who is asking for charity is suspected of wasting the money they receive. And they are well aware of the mistrust with which city residents view their movements, they try to convince well-meaning people that the coppers they give them will go towards buying food, not alcohol, drugs or other vices. People who live on charity know that one of the regular excuses those passers-by have for ignoring the cup or box containing the coins is the fear that their donations will be wasted on drink. Hunger, on the other hand, is more emotive. We need to eat, there is no choice.

City residents who give them coins are not only worried about their money being wasted on alcoholic drinks. Any product that does not strictly follow the rules of austerity, anything that does not serve for survival, is considered to be an unnecessary waste of money. “They can’t be that hungry if they are eating a croissant instead of a jar of chickpeas”, or “They can’t be that poor if they have a mobile phone”. The obsession with establishing what families in a situation of poverty should spend their money on, and for verifying that they are in need, reminds me of my grandmother when she came across someone begging outside the supermarket. “Never give them money, because they’ll just spend it on drink”. Then she would buy a loaf of bread and a tin of tuna so that “the poor man” could eat.

The monetary transfer policies for impoverished households and individuals are based on the same prejudices that led my grandmother to decide that a diet based on bread and tuna was better than having cash in hand. The emergency help administered by municipal social services have to be temporary, conditioned to compliance with obligations and subject to control mechanisms which ensure that the money is used to cover “basic needs”. The Minimum Insertion Incomes (RMI) are designed to provide households without resources with modest temporary incomes, which are conditioned to compliance with employment plans where the final objective is “job placement”.

Behind the conditions, the temporary nature and the scrutiny, we find the suspicion that poverty is the result of the beneficiary’s inability to manage their lives and those of their family. This suspicion justifies a contradiction which the beneficiaries of these benefits, as well as unsuccessful applicants, have to live with every day: they are expected to be self-sufficient and make an effort to overcome their dependence on the benefit, but they are denied a leading role in, and the ability to make decisions about, their own survival strategies.

I met Pere in a Barcelona soup kitchen in 2015. After working for seventeen years as a cook in various restaurants, he had been unemployed and sick for seven. “A job. I don’t need a soup kitchen, I need a job”, he complained, while we were having lunch together. He had received various benefits and he was fed up of doing recycling courses to get back to work. “I’ve reinvented myself so many times, I’ve run out of invention”. His assigned social worker had referred him to a soup kitchen because the room he was living in didn’t have a cooker and because it was a way to cut back on spending. “No one hires an old cook who’s diabetic and

lame... but with some money, even if it was only a little, and a cooker, they wouldn't have to serve me food every day.”

Cristina made a formal complaint to her city council because they had told her in her social services centre that she couldn't receive any emergency benefit if she didn't cut back on unnecessary expenses. They had analysed her bank statements and told her that she had to cancel the internet connection in her home. Her assigned social worker told her that her children could study using the internet connection in the public library. “After explaining your problems, you have to show them what you spend your money on, because they tell you what you need and what is essential, as if you didn't spend all day counting your money down to the last cent...”.

When forming part of society depends on the way you dress, your leisure activities and the electronic devices in your pockets, we demand that people suffering from poverty give up any kind of consumption beyond covering their basic physiological needs. We assume that the administration, or those people who can afford to donate money, have an ability to govern the lives of these “attended” people which they themselves cannot demonstrate. This is the logic that emerges in the debates on guaranteed income policies. Should administrations give money without any conditions? Are we not perpetuating vagrancy? How do we ensure that “the poor” spend their money on what is best for them?

The authors of this issue of *Barcelona Societat* provide theoretical approaches, empirical evidence and reflections in order to tackle these questions and preconceived ideas about economic transfers, poverty and the role of public policies in guaranteeing social rights.