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INTERDISCIPLINARITY
IN PRACTICE AND IN RESEARCH
ON SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT:
**JOINT PATHS
TOWARDS
RISK ANALYSIS**



PROCEEDINGS OF THE SRA-E-IBERIAN CHAPTER (SRA-E-I) CONFERENCE

**“Interdisciplinarity in practice and in
research on society and the environment:
Joint paths towards risk analysis”**

Edited by:

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FOREST FIRES, COMMUNITIES AND THE ROLE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

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The forest fires that occurred in 2017 were one of the worst disasters that have ever affected Portugal, with more than 275,845 hectares burnt from a yearly total of 424,000 hectares (ICNF, 2017), 116 fatalities and hundreds of people injured. Communities and landscapes were devastated, and houses, livelihoods and businesses destroyed.

Oliver-Smith (1996, p. 309) has shown, from a sociocultural perspective, that disasters of this magnitude impact on place identity and create a sense of loss, mainly when there is a loss of formal public places, of informal gathering places, and of other physical features symbolic of community identity. The impact of forest fires on landscapes identities has been well documented (Butler, Sarlöv-Herlin, Knez, Ångman, Sang, & Åkerskog, 2018), and a multilevel approach to landscape fires as social disasters has been proposed (Gill, 2005).

The literature related to forest fires in Portugal is vast. More recent contributions have highlighted the social context of the areas affected (Oliveira, Zêzere, Queiróis, & Pereira, 2017), the reactive nature of public policies and the legislation produced (Mourão & Martinho, 2016), fire regimes and management (Mateus & Fernandes, 2014) and forest fires preparedness and community engagement (Paton & Tedim, 2013). Fernandes Guiomar, Mateus and Oliveira (2017) proposed a more complex institutional and legislative analysis related to forest fires in Portugal.

One of the most integrative and complex models employed to analyse forest fires from a territorial perspective, in both Portugal and the European Union, is proposed in the notion of the Fire Smart Territory (Tedim, Leone, & Xanthopoulos, 2016). Although the authors clearly stress that fire is a social process, the proposed model is still contained within the hazards/disaster framework, thus limiting opportunities

to develop a greater understanding of the intersections between the systems at work, the actual logic and practices of communities and of individuals and the role of the main stakeholders (Brenkert-Smith, Meldrum, Champ, & Barth, 2017).

Preliminary fieldwork carried out by the Risk Observatory (OSIRIS), Centre for Social Studies, showed that although affected individuals, families and communities were used to dealing with forest fires, their previous experience was not useful when attempting to deal with the 2017 fires in Portugal. The main factors behind this lack of preparation were:

- The direction of the wind;
- An absence of fire fighters in the field (June 2017);
- A weekend during which many outsiders were travelling on holidays (June 2017);
- The presence in the affected places of all family members, and the presence or otherwise of children as a crucial aspect as regards understanding the way in which people behaved;
- No existing evacuation routines;
- No warnings from the authorities;
- Urban and urban-rural interface fires (October 2017);
- Out of season extreme forest fires (in 2017, Charlie Phase, with the existence of maximum resources, and an alert was activated from 1 July to 30 September).

Two catastrophes, two different social autopsies

In order to present the common and different factors that were present in the June and October 2017 forest fires in Portugal, I rely on the two official reports by the Independent Technical Commission (Comissão Técnica Independente et al., 2018; Comissão Técnica Independente, 2017). It is clear that Portugal's 2017 forest fires represented two catastrophes with different social autopsies (Klinenberg, 2002). The common factors were:

- The majority of the victims, either individually or in groups, were fleeing from the forest fires when they got trapped and died;
- All the victims lived or were circulating in the interior zones of the Central Region of Portugal (there were no victims on the littoral);
- The victims had no support from the authorities as regards early warnings, evacuation or avoiding forest fires (institutional seclusion, as regards both risk communication and individual, group and community safety);
- Both events were officially defined as megafires, although it must be emphasized that this definition should not be used to justify what occurred as regards the number of victims that were produced.
- The differences between the two catastrophes are as follows:
- In June, the majority of the victims died in groups, some in families (88%), as opposed to 35% in October;
- Only in June did children and adolescents die (14% of the total). June = mean age of the victims = 49.2; October = mean age = 62.9;
- In June, there was an even number of victims as regards gender. In October, the majority of the victims were male;
- In October, 25% of the victims were inside their houses, as opposed to 6% in June.
- And the biggest difference is that in October, 85% of the victims lived where they died, 11% were regular visitors and 4% were occasional visitors. In June, 50% of the victims lived where they died, 12% were regular visitors and 38% were occasional visitors;
- In June, the victims were concentrated in an area of 20 km², while in October they were dispersed over an area of 4000 km².

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the victims from the 2017 forest fires in Portugal were not the result of social isolation, that is, the non-intentional withdrawal from social interaction networks (confidants, close friends and access to social support). The best indicator of social isolation is a lonely death (related

to heat waves and cold waves), and in the June and October 2017 forest fires in Portugal, the number of people who died alone was low and as the result of illness, reduced mobility and physical or mental disability.

The main reason why the 2017 forest fires resulted in so many victims was the material, symbolic and political distance to decision centres and to those responsible for citizens' safety. This was a consequence of what we have, in our studies with disaster victims' associations, denominated as invisible citizenship. The concept of invisible citizenship (Mendes & Araújo, 2016, pp. 12-13) is related to all those things that, although biopolitically integrated into official statistics and population policies, do not count, are not heard, are of no interest for the State project or do not acquire media relevance. Invisible citizenship affects all those who are victims of indifference. This results in the absence of dignified belonging and the "right to have rights" (Hannah Arendt).

However, the response from civil society was very relevant as regards attempting to provide this invisible citizenship with assistance. There was an unprecedented wave of solidarity by citizens, corporations and other institutions that raised more than 18 million euros in donations (although the support process for victims was dispersed among various entities, resulting in accountability issues). Moreover, thousands of spontaneous volunteers converged on the affected regions, alongside structured volunteer networks set up by corporations, non-profit organizations and NGOs (disorganisation and accountability issues).

But, most importantly, there was the immediate creation of victims' associations in a society with a low civic mobilization after catastrophes or extreme events, namely the Association of the Pedrógão Grande Fire Victims, the Association of Victims of the Biggest Fire in Portugal and the Associative Movement for the Support of the Midões Fire Victims.

These victims' associations foster citizenship rights and "the right to have rights", along with the production of collective memories and personal identities that will allow the commemoration of the traumatic event and the creation of "affective communities" that are visible in the public arena (Heinich, 2011). They additionally strive for memorialisation processes and narrative building in the relation between

the personal experience of the forest fires and the ongoing formation of a social, collective memory (Das, 2007).

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