

# The Social Services of Spain after the neoliberal period: Longitudinal analysis from the perspective of Social Work (2012–2018)

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## Abstract

The article presents a longitudinal analysis of the Social Services in Spain during the period characterised by neoliberal policies (2012–2018), as well as the situation and reactions of the professional social workers. The quantitative results of three surveys promoted by the *General Council of Social Work from Spain* on data from 2012, 2013 and 2018 were compared. The sample allows extrapolating the results to all the social workers in Spain. There is a loss of effectiveness and a worsening of the quality of care of the social services. However, social workers do not attribute the deterioration of the system to the increased demand, but to the cuts, privatisation and outsourcing of resources. The professional discourse is critical: it departs from the narrative of punitive neoliberalism and denounces the violation of citizens' rights. Professional practice reveals the ethical–political commitment in the system and the public militancy of social workers in Spain.

**Keywords:** austerity, critical and militant social work, neoliberalism, social services, social work, Spain

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## Introduction

The article analyses the neoliberal crisis management and its ramifications in the population, in social services and in social work professionals from a longitudinal perspective (2012–2018). After providing a sociopolitical contextualisation and an explanation of the methodology used in the studies, the main findings are presented, which analyse: first, what social workers think about the cutbacks in the social services system at a time of increased demand for services by the population; secondly, what their opinion is regarding the quality of the services provided and, finally, what their ethical–political commitment is in the face of the government’s management of the crisis. This article presents the discussion of the results obtained with related investigations to finalise with conclusions targeted towards their projection and transfer.

## The neoliberal crisis management (2011–2018) and its effects on the population

In 2008, Spain suffered a profound structural crisis, as in other countries in Europe. The crisis management was carried out by the neoliberal government of the People’s Party (2011–2018) through austerity policies declared as ‘inevitable’, as in other countries (Kelsey *et al.*, 2016; Salmon, 2017). While the banking institution was being rescued, a ‘ceiling on public spending’ was placed, hiring for staff turnover was limited to one new contract for every ten retirements by public employees, public social protection systems were cut, and part of their services privatised/out-sourced to the business sector or the third sector, mostly of a beneficent-assistential nature, replacing social justice with charity, as in other parts of the world (Davies, 2016; Deusdad *et al.*, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Pentaraki, 2017a; Fong-Leung *et al.*, 2020).

Its impact had important effects on the population according to data from various studies (FOESSA, 2019; Pastor-Seller *et al.*, 2019; AEDGSS, 2020a). In 2013, unemployment had reached 26.94 percent according to official data from the Labour Force Survey, National Institute of Statistics (NIS). Wages went down, labour conditions worsened and part-time work increased. Many families, in addition to losing their jobs or not having employment at all, also lost their homes. Impoverishment grew to 11,600,000 people—in a country with a population of less than 50 million—who in 2013 were living on the verge of poverty (FOESSA, 2013).

Instead of reinforcing public services to cover the basic needs of the population the government shifted its responsibility onto the families, where mostly the women took charge of the provision of care (Moreno,

2013; Leon and Pavolini, 2014; Deusdad *et al.*, 2016; UN, 2020). The government abandonment was justified by the narrative of punitive (Davies, 2016; Hayes, 2017) and authoritarian neoliberalism (Tansel, 2017; Bruff and Tansel, 2019) which blamed the population for ‘living above its means’ (Kelsey *et al.*, 2016; Lorenz, 2016), to ‘contain’ it in the face of the austerity policies.

After a decade of neoliberal management, the severe aftermath in the population has been synthesised by the UN rapporteur, Philip Alston, who toured Spain early in 2020: risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2018, one of the highest rates in Europe. Fifty-five percent of the population had difficulties to reach the end of the month, and 5.4 percent suffered severe material deficiencies. Employment, made precarious, was insufficient to meet fundamental needs. Despite the country’s economic growth in recent years (2015–2019), poverty has only fallen to 23.2 percent, and unemployment to 13.78 percent, more than twice the European average, with rates of up to 30.51 percent among those under the age of twenty-five years. Also, ‘The benefits of the economic recovery have gone largely to the richest businesses and people’ (UN, 2020). According to the *Inequality Report 1-Equal Opportunities 0*, one out of six middle-class families sank into poverty during the crisis years and have not emerged from it despite the recovery. The number of Spanish households in which there is no income has increased in the last year by 16,500, reaching 617,000 households. Poverty and wealth in Spain are ‘inherited’ and are conditioned by the household membership: If you are born into a high-income family, you will earn 40 percent more than if you grow up in a low-income household. For this reason, Spain ranks among the most unequal countries in Europe (Oxfam-Intermon, 2019).

## Effects of neoliberalism on the social services system and social work

Despite the population’s increased demand, social expenditure did not increase in Spain during the neoliberal period. On the contrary, the government practically dismantled the municipal social services, which are the main providers of welfare in Spain, reducing their budgetary support from €96,174,030 in 2010 to €27,413,730 in 2014, a figure that only began to increase in 2017 up to €40,000,000 where it has remained in the subsequent years (Government of Spain, 2021). New personnel were not hired but rather positions of retirees were not replaced. Government allowances were not increased, but rather some were eliminated or reduced such as those destined for people with disabilities in 2010 and 2013 (Deusdad *et al.*, 2016), whereas the demand from the population in social emergencies grew 182 percent in 2012 alone according to GCSW (2013).

At the end of the neoliberal period, the expenditure of 16.6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on social protection is below the average of 18.8 percent of the European Union, as is the per capita expenditure, or that destined to family benefits, disability, housing or social exclusion (UN, 2020).

The social transfers for poverty reduction (excluding pensions) in 2018 place Spain as the sixth lowest in the European Union, with 22.94 percent in AROPE rates, compared to the European average of 33.2 percent. Moreover, these transfers did not end up in the poorest households, so ‘many people in Spain have reason to feel abandoned’ (UN, 2020).

In this context, the Spanish social workers face tensions, also identified in other countries: Greece (Karagkounis, 2017; Pentaraki, 2017a, 2017b), Italy (Campanini, 2017), Ireland (Garret and Bertotti, 2017), Romania (Carausu *et al.*, 2017; Lazăr *et al.*, 2019), Lithuania (Atas, 2019) and Turkey (Tansel, 2019, 2020), among others. The first tension emerges in the face of the increased demand and the social services’ incapacity to contribute to the provision of citizens’ well-being (Lorenz, 2005; Healy, 2008; Dominelli, 2010). The second tension, in the ‘continuous crisis of resources and legitimation’ (Wallace and Pease, 2011), places the professionals between ‘accommodation’ and ‘resistance’ to austerity policies. The third tension, due to the ethical mandate of the profession, the need to defend citizens’ rights when they are violated by the social services themselves that implement the government policies (Dominelli, 1999; Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Banks, 2009; Colley, 2012; Strier and Binyamin, 2014; Wronka, 2014; Lorenz, 2017; Viscarret *et al.*, 2020).

## Methodology

In Spain, territorial research has been carried out on the impact of the crisis on social and more global services, promoted by the GCSW (2014, 2015, 2019), on data from 2012, 2013 and 2018, used as a source in this research to describe the situation of the social services, based on the social workers’ opinion.

It was based on a sample universe of between 31,500 and 32,749 registered workers, with a confidence level of 95.5 percent, a margin of error between  $\pm 3$  percent (in the first two years) and  $\pm 2.5$  percent (in the last year), according to the most unfavourable case of  $P = Q$ . The final sample size was 3,896 participants, distributed in 1,361, 1,045 and 1,490 respondents in the different years (2012, 2013 and 2018, respectively), within the territorial framework of Spain. The selection criteria for the participants were: (1) being active social workers; (2) with geographical representativeness throughout Spain; and (3) being registered. Proportional stratified sampling was carried out according to the weight

of the social workers in each professional association per autonomous community. The results are transferable to the generality of social workers in Spain.

The questionnaires were validated before their online distribution. All participants were informed of the objectives of the investigation and responded voluntarily and anonymously. The study was carried out following the code of ethics recognised by the Helsinki Declaration and in accord with the recommendations of the Good Clinical Practice of the European Economic Community and the current legal rules that regulate research in Spain.

The results were explored using frequency analysis, contingency tables, mean comparison and segmentation analysis, performed with the SPSS and Excel software. The most significant hypothesis contrasts were obtained using the chi-square statistic.

In the three Reports, the questionnaires were organised around social worker identification data, professional job characteristics, user profile and professional opinion of the social services system, crisis management and the challenges to be faced, with some variations in each study.

This longitudinal analysis mainly explores the evolution of the Social Services System in Spain between 2012 and 2018, and how the social workers coped with it, in particular, in terms of their ethical–political involvement concerning the neoliberal management.

## Analysis and discussion of results

### Social workers in the Social Services in Spain

Most of the social workers in Spain work in the Social Services System, 62.5 percent in primary care, and 37.5 percent in specialist care. The trend observed in the longitudinal analysis in the *sociodemographic data* of the professionals is the increase of the feminisation of the collective to 88.9 percent (2013: 83.5 percent, 2014: 83 percent), in particular, in the age range of younger workers (20–30 years), and the workforce's average ageing (41.7 years), consistent with the reduction in recruitment, especially of younger professionals, during the neoliberal period.

Concerning the work, this research reveals a trend towards the progressive reduction of social workers in public bodies (2012: 86.8 percent, 2013: 86 percent, 2018: 84 percent) and its increase in the private sector (enterprises) and non-governmental bodies (2012: 13.2 percent, 2013: 14 percent, 2018: 16 percent). It also detects a concentration of professionals in municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants (2013: 22 percent, 2018: 44 percent) and the reduction of hiring in smaller or rural municipalities (2013: 33 percent, 2018: 18 percent). Additionally, it is relevant to point out the insecurity of work conditions shown by the fact

that 18.3 percent of professionals carry out their work in more than one local government and 10.1 percent have to distribute their workday among more than four municipalities, considering that these conditions hinder professional work and mean poorer attention to users of social services. Therefore, there is a decapitalisation in human resources in the public social services system and greater neglect of the population of small villages and rural areas, consistent with the latest UN Report (2020).

The reduction in staff explains why social workers increasingly perceive that the existing staff is insufficient to cope with the workload (2012: 53.9 percent, 2014: 58 percent, 2018: 73.7 percent.), considered 'high or very high' by the majority (2012: 73 percent, 2013: 86 percent, 2018: 83 percent).

However, it is extremely important to identify who is blamed for the work overload, as it reveals the intra-professional accounts of the attribution of responsibilities for the precariousness of the working conditions. Longitudinal analysis tracks this issue through the main problem that affects social workers in their daily work. In 2012, 35.9 percent noted: (i) the 'high demand and low resources', followed by the 14.1 percent who indicated (ii) an 'excessive workload, stress and saturation', and 4.39 percent (iii) 'high bureaucracy'. The 2013 data show increases in the percentages (i) 54 percent, (ii) 17 percent and (iii) 9 percent. However, in 2018, this order was subverted: 39.9 percent of professionals identify (ii) 'excessive workload, stress and saturation' as the main problem; 21.1 percent identify (i) 'high demand and low resources' and 16.2 percent indicate (iii) 'high bureaucracy'. What is interesting (and apt) concerning this latest study is that it dissociates the variable (i) 'high demand and few resources', and this result is highly revealing: out of 21.1 percent of respondents, 14.5 percent indicate 'few resources' as a problem, whereas only 6.6 percent blame their workload on the 'high demand' of the population.

This reversal, which reveals that the account of social work in Spain is increasingly different from the narrative of punitive neoliberalism (Davies, 2016), is particularly relevant because it identifies the policies of cuts and the inner functioning of the system and not the population as the origin of its problem of work precariousness.

It is also significant to highlight the growing trend of professionals denouncing the bureaucracy of the system (2012: 4.39 percent, 2013: 9 percent, 2018: 16.2 percent) or its poor coordination and planning (2012: 5.86 percent, 2013: 7 percent, 2018: 12.4 percent) coinciding with other studies (González-Portillo *et al.*, 2015; Martí-García *et al.*, 2019; UN, 2020). As a novelty, in 2018, we note the interference in the social workers' decision-making: 17.5 percent state that it has been 'suggested' that they modify a technical requirement, and 17.5 percent say that their professional assessment has been openly questioned; also, 11.3 percent state

that policymakers have challenged their prescriptions. Even with low percentages, the mere existence of these situations reveals the devaluation of the social workers' technical criteria during the neoliberal period. It is also relevant that 25.8 percent of the respondents say that the ethical principles of the profession were compromised in their work, and 76.1 percent claim to have worked under stressful conditions.

### The evolution of the effectiveness and quality of care in the social services system

Longitudinal analysis shows a trend towards the worsening of social services. The deficiencies of the system, among other issues, are observed through the delay in the care of the population. In 2018, only 26.2 percent of the professionals could attend to people without an appointment, 20.4 percent did so in a week, 20.3 percent in two weeks and it is very relevant that the remaining 33.1 percent could not offer their services before one month, and, in some cases, the population had to wait up to three months to receive an appointment (3.3 percent of those surveyed).

After the population was cared for, the number of positively resolved technical service/resource requirements, which were finally not granted to social service users, was tracked. In 2013, 49 percent of the respondents estimated that half or even more—although in 2018, the situation was less severe—50.7 percent of the professionals still identified this situation for 25 percent of the cases attended to.

Moreover, delays in granting any service or provision were a source of complaint of the population according to one-third of the respondents (2013: 35 percent, 2018: 36.5 percent), as well as the refusal/inadequacy of the requested benefits, identified by another third (2013: 35 percent, 2018: 29 percent). All other citizen claims indicate the organisation, over-bureaucracy or inadequate treatment by the staff (2013: 1 percent; 2018: 4.0 percent), which, although residual, point to a loss of quality in the care provided by the professionals.

The respondents consider that the quality of care in certain groups has worsened significantly, in 2012, for dependents, disabled and older citizens, as well as for impoverished people. In 2013, care for the women's collective, which emerges from *re-familiarisation* in Spain (Deusdad et al., 2016; González-Rodríguez et al., 2018) also worsened (UN, 2020). The system's incapacity to respond to the main problems of the population is widespread in 2018. Social workers have thus been forced to refer users to the private sector to apply for food, clothing, training and employment, in line with UN (2020) data, which reports the transfer of government responsibilities to a third sector 'with insufficient funds'. Only 9.3 percent of the respondents claim they have not made referrals. This

is consistent with the social workers' absolute rejection of the privatisation/outsourcing of social services: only 1 percent of the respondents defended it in 2018.

The main concerns of the survey participants are the financing of the system as well as the increase in its workforce (2012: 61 percent, 2013: 54 percent, 2018: 62.4 percent) and organisational issues (2012: 30 percent, 2013: 54 percent, 2018: 26.3 percent). On the other hand, the main challenges are 'to ensure that the social services remain public' (2012: 21.45 percent, 2013: 34 percent, 2018: 29 percent) and to solve the 'funding problems' (2012: 11.75 percent, 2013: 20 percent, 2018: 9.4 percent); also, with lower percentages but with an increasing tendency: 'to improve the quality' (2013: 11 percent, 2018: 14.1 percent), 'to face and adapt to new needs' (2013: 10 percent, 2018: 19 percent), 'to meet the greatest social demands' (2013: 8 percent) and 'to improve the organisation' (2018: 11.1 percent).

### The ethical–political commitment of social workers in Spain to the management of the crisis

The social workers' opinion of the management of and coping with the crisis is presented by comparing results from 2013 and 2018, as the five years that separate them allow us to see the trend of the positioning of Social Work in Spain.

The allocation of responsibilities for crisis management is clear: in 2013, 90 percent of the respondents felt that the government did not diagnose the scope of the crisis, nor did it take into account the impact that its policy of cuts could have on the care of the social services. In addition, 74 percent felt that the maximum available resources were not used to avoid the effects of the crisis in the population. In 2018, 47.2 percent believe that sufficient resources are still not currently used to alleviate the effects of the crisis, coinciding with the UN Report (2020).

Social workers report that, in their professional practice, they know some people who have lost access to the social services, or benefits/services (2013: 71 percent; 2018: 68 percent). So, 90 percent in 2013, and almost all of them in 2018 (99.3 percent) consider that the effects of the crisis affect the human and social rights of the most socially fragile people.

The 2018 report deepens the personal commitment of social workers in the face of neoliberalism. Attempts are made to identify whether Social Work in Spain expresses a 'resilient discourse in daily activity' (Hyslop, 2018), manifest acts of 'micro-resistance' (Pentaraki, 2017a) based on 'ethics at work' (Banks, 2009; Colley, 2012); and, if it continues, beyond professional practice, in militant attitudes of a political nature (Pastor-Seller, 2017; Pastor-Seller *et al.*, 2019).



Some authors argue that Spanish Social Works' rejection of neoliberalism does not delve into the causes of the structural inequality generated by the market, as it perceives the poverty but not the roots of people's impoverishment, or it does not reflect sufficiently on how the profession reproduces neoliberal mandates from its position of control (palliative, individualised benefits, demand for compensation to be able to receive insertion incomes, 'disciplinary measures', etc.) (García and Rendueles, 2017; Aguilar, 2020). It was not possible to certify in this research the extent to which the professionals have internalised a *theoretical* discourse that is critical towards neoliberalism, but it was found that their professional practice is well aware of its effects, and its coping has led 79.6 percent of the professionals to denounce the violation of the rights of the population. Of these, 25.5 percent have promoted formal complaints in the social services or have helped users make complaints; 21.8 percent have been publicly involved in strikes and demonstrations; 32.3 percent have combined denunciation at work with public protest mobilisations. Only 10.4 percent admit 'having wanted to denounce without knowing how to do so', 1.8 percent say that they do not consider themselves to be obliged to denounce these facts, and 8.2 percent deny that human and social rights have been violated.

We conclude the analysis by noting that the neoliberal management of the crisis has had a personal cost for Spanish social workers, especially the older workers: pessimism affected 27 percent in 2012, which increased to 38 percent in 2013, and expanded in 2018 to 46 percent of those interviewed. The results express a growing trend towards discouragement, demoralisation, professional exhaustion and stressful working conditions for 76.1 percent of the social workers, coinciding with other studies in Spain (Pelegrí et al., 2015; García-Domingo and Sotomayor-Morales, 2017; Gómez et al., 2019; Caravaca et al., 2019; González-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Senreich et al., 2020; Verde-Diego et al., 2021).

## Discussion

Upon analysing the results, we find a dismantled system left to its fate after the austerity policies (reduction of staff, cuts in services and benefits, privatisation, high bureaucracy, etc.), coinciding with other investigations (UN, 2020) or with what has happened in other countries (Garret and Bertotti, 2017; Karagkounis, 2017, 2021; Pentaraki, 2017a, 2017b). The neglect by governmental responsibilities in terms of meeting the needs of the population contrast with the defence by social workers of the public system of social services.

All this allows us to identify the tensions maintained by Social Work in Spain in the face of neoliberalism, as in other parts of the world

(Dominelli, 1999, 2010; Ferguson *et al.*, 2005; Wallace and Pease, 2011; Karagkounis, 2017; Pentaraki, 2017a) especially in these three aspects:

- a. Coping with the increased demand, from social services with fewer resources, is resolved by the social workers, attributing the system's deficiencies (excessive workload, stress and saturation; few resources; high bureaucracy) to the austerity policies, or to the (poor) internal functioning of the system itself (improving quality; improving the organisation). The Social Services never attribute the breach of the welfare contract to the population, in congruence with their estrangement from punitive neoliberalism, which blames people for their impoverishment and abandonment, despite their complaints and demands, coinciding with the UN Report (2020).
- b. The tension experienced by the professionals by not being able to contribute from the social services to the provision of well-being (Lorenz, 2005; Healy, 2008; Dominelli, 2010) is met with more innovative and community interventions, and professional practices of coping and resilience (Hyslop, 2018), as opposed to 'accommodation' in the face of the situation (Wallace and Pease, 2011), consistent with other studies carried out in Spain (González-Portillo *et al.*, 2015; Pacheco-Mangas and Palma-García, 2015).
- c. There is a clear and majority defence of the citizens' rights by the Spanish social workers. They have also extended their denunciations to the political sphere, in demonstrations of a vindicative and militant nature, in line with globalised protests, such as those existing in other countries (Patrut and Stoica, 2019), or even before the European Parliament (GCSW *et al.*, 2015).

In line with the description carried out by Ioakimidis *et al.* (2014) and Pastor-Seller *et al.* (2019), this research confirms the reconceptualisation of Spanish Social Work and its progressive tendency towards critical and militant professional practices.

## Conclusions

The assessment carried out in this longitudinal analysis of the evolution of the social services (2012–2018) allows us to confirm certain trends as 'consolidated' at present.

The impact of the crisis, along with the effects of the neoliberal management carried out by the government following the crisis, has been flawlessly identified by social workers in relation to the population, to the social services system and to the worsening of their own labour conditions.

First, the incapacity of the social services to provide a sufficient response to the citizens is confirmed, one decade after the onset of the crisis.

The extent of the chronification of the abandonment of the government functions in the provision of the needs of the population (refamiliarisation, delays in care, referrals to the third sector, services resolved but not covered) is hereby made visible.

There is a worsening of the quality of care in social services, attributed to the dismantling of the system, as well as to its privatisation/out-sourcing. In contrast, the social workers defend the public nature of the social services and the citizens' legitimacy to obtain social protection from the system as a guarantee of social justice.

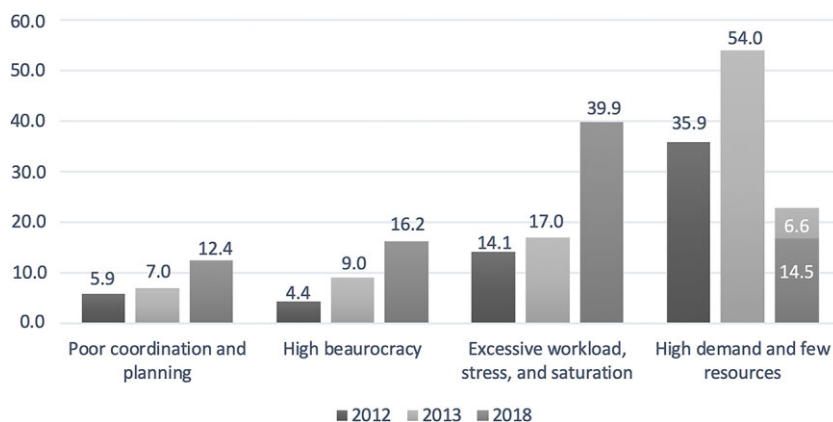
Thus Spanish social workers direct the challenges of the social services at overcoming the cuts (making the social services remain public; financing, increasing staff) and the renewal of their own professional competences (to meet and adapt to new needs, and respond to greater social demands).

The defence of rights places the Spanish social workers in the narrative of relational citizenship (Lorenz, 2017), empowering and promoting people's active participation so that they regain their dignity and their democratic legitimacy by demanding the guarantee of their social rights (Pastor-Seller, 2011, 2015, 2017; Black, 2014; Hayes, 2017). This finding coincides with other research in Spain that identifies 'a vindicative and proactive role, of social influence and transformation' (García-Domingo and Sotomayor-Morales, 2017, p. 65) in the social workers, in accordance with 'ethics at work' (Banks, 2016).

The fact of the professionals—as government workers—allowing themselves to be instrumentalised to 'contain' citizen outrage from within the system has not been detected (Davies, 2016; Lorenz, 2017). On the contrary, from their work post, they have denounced, on their own and in complicity with the users (Pentaraki, 2017a), the cuts, the deterioration of care and the palliative, individualistic, assistential and moralising measures (Lorenz, 2016).

In this sense, the longitudinal analysis carried out herein confirms the majority ethical and political commitment of Social Work in Spain, coinciding with the radical social work described by Lavalette in the UK (Verde-Diego and Lima, 2014) or the anti-oppressive social work identified in other countries such as New Zealand (Hyslop, 2018), Greece (Karagkounis, 2017; Pentaraki, 2017a), Ireland (Flynn, 2017) or Italy (Garret and Bertotti, 2017).

Maintaining this critical trend in social work will be essential in the face of the new crossroads caused by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) with 2,670,102 cases of contagion and 57,291 deaths on 27 January 2021 (Government of Spain, 2020). It is estimated that, after the health crisis, a major economic crisis will follow, and the current six million users of



**Figure 1:** Longitudinal analysis of the main problems affecting social workers (GCSW, 2014, 2015, 2019).

Spanish social services will reach ten million (AEDGSS, 2020b) in a very dismantled system, as has been seen. The pandemic has shown that economic liberalism has weakened our salvation network, as pointed out by Richard Sennett (2020), who advocates strengthening the Welfare State (Pérez-Lanzac, 2020). Only the future will confirm whether the new government (2020) reverts the neoliberal policies towards ‘common good’ policies sustained by social justice and caring for people rather than capital. In the future, the position of social work ‘between control or emancipation, between domination (subtle or manifest) or critical-transformative action’ will be tested (Aguilar, 2020).

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