

Disasters, environmental changes, and migration in historical perspective

Author(s): Uwe Lübken, Ana Isabel Queiroz, Inês Gomes and Filipa Soares

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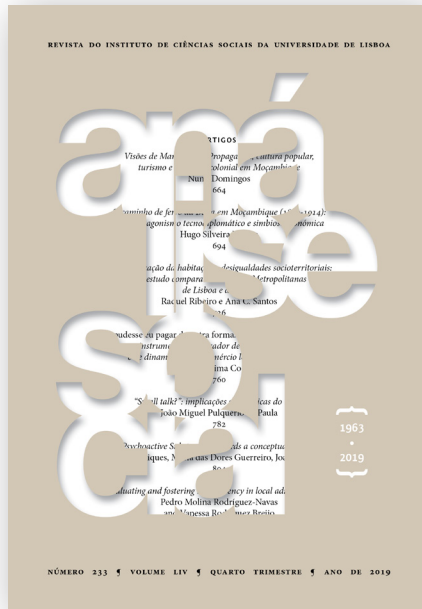
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## ENTREVISTA

*Disasters, environmental changes,  
and migration in historical perspective,  
entrevista com Uwe Lübken,  
by Ana Isabel Queiroz, Inês Gomes,  
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Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9  
1600-189 Lisboa Portugal — [analise.social@ics.ul.pt](mailto:analise.social@ics.ul.pt)

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## Disasters, environmental changes, and migration in historical perspective

*An interview with Uwe Lübken,*

*by Ana Isabel Queiroz, Inês Gomes, and Filipa Soares*

**U**we Lübken is professor of American History at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, in Munich. He has held teaching and research positions at the universities of Cologne, Munich, Münster, and the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC. He has published several monographs, edited volumes, special issues, and articles on (American) Transnational History and the “History of Natural Hazards and Catastrophes”. His current work explores the intersections of mobilities and the environment. In May 2019 Uwe Lübken was in Lisbon for a cycle of workshops and conferences about the “History of Poverty and Hunger”, organized by the Institute of Contemporary History (IHC, NOVA, FCSH).<sup>1</sup> This conversation took place one day after he delivered his talk. We first met him downtown and walked in the direction of the river Tejo. While we walked and visited some landmarks related to disasters (e.g., Igreja de São Domingos, Chiado, Convento do Carmo’s ruins), we evoked the great earthquake of 1755 and talked about flammable cities, disaster memory, and city-river relationships in historical perspective. We finished our trip on the south bank of the river, in Cacilhas (Almada), where we conducted this interview, having Lisbon in the background.

\*

1 See the complete program in: [http://fabricadesites.fcsH.unl.pt/ihc/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/03/HPF\\_programa-1.pdf](http://fabricadesites.fcsH.unl.pt/ihc/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/03/HPF_programa-1.pdf).

INTERVIEWERS (INT) *By way of introduction, could you briefly explain what sparked your interest in the topic of Environmental History within (American) Transnational History, namely natural hazards and catastrophes?*

UWE LÜBKEN (UL) I came to American History almost by accident. I wanted to study either History or Economics at Cologne University. That was something I knew already. I noticed that at Cologne one could study both at the same time, so I chose History as my major and Economics as my first minor.<sup>2</sup> As I needed a second minor, I went through the list of programs that Cologne University offered. Since I had just been to the United States for the first time to visit relatives, I found “Anglo-American History” somehow appealing and I decided to go for it. It turned out that I chose not just a very interesting field of study but also a very good, albeit small, institute: the Anglo-Amerikanische Abteilung of the History Department. After a few semesters, I switched to “Anglo-American History,” as it was called, as my major and stuck with it ever since.

I worked on quite different topics. For example, my master thesis dealt with American oil import regulations in the 1950s, while my dissertation was about what us Americans thought about the National Socialist menace to Latin American. When it came to finding a new subject for the second book, Christof Mauch<sup>3</sup>, who was teaching at Bonn University at that time, and I decided to develop a project together. Christof was already involved in Environmental History. My interest, however, was more in what could be accidental history, i. e. in chance events that had not been planned but just happened. So, a research project on the History of natural catastrophes and natural hazards in the United States and Germany seemed to be the perfect fit.<sup>4</sup>

INT *Recent literature about environmental humanities address their peers in academia and society and the way their practitioners are making themselves relevant contributing to social challenges. As Marco Armiero puts it, “we need the environmental humanities because we need new narratives to understand the present*

2 During their undergraduate studies, students can choose an academic major, which is the main academic discipline to which an undergraduate student formally commits. An academic minor is a secondary academic discipline.

3 Christof Mauch is Director (jointly with Helmuth Trischler) of the Rachel Carson Center as well as the Chair in American Culture and Transatlantic Relations (currently on leave) at LMU Munich. He is also an affiliated professor in the History Faculty of LMU Munich and is an Honorary Professor at Renmin University in China.

4 Cf. Lübken, U. and Mauch, C. (2004), “Natural disasters in transatlantic perspective: river floods in German and us history”. *GHI Bulletin*, 35, pp. 99-111.

and imagine alternative futures".<sup>5</sup> What do you think is or should be the role of *Environmental History*?

UL I think that all kinds of historical research are political in a certain way. No matter what your research is about, it always involves questions of social justice, like the marginalization of certain communities, power relations, etc. Nevertheless, I am a bit hesitant to say that historians and other scholars in the humanities should play specific roles in society. I think this is up to a personal choice. Research in the social sciences and humanities is in itself relevant in many different ways. It is something different from its very basic outlines compared to what natural scientists do. There are many ways to take part in political discussions, making recommendations, protesting against certain things, and so on, but I don't think it should be a mandatory thing for scholars to do. The reason why I am saying this is because I fear that if you make it mandatory, this kind of activism influences your basic research in a certain way and this is something I would like to avoid.

INT *But do you think Environmental History can enable environmentally just practices? Is Environmental History a kind of an 'object lesson', in Cronon's words,<sup>6</sup> reinforcing the memory of calamities, fostering learning processes and decreasing, thus, the risk and the vulnerability?*

UL Absolutely! It is one thing to say that we should learn from the past, that History is a kind of teacher. It is not! It is another thing to highlight the importance of History to give orientation. In Germany, History is often labelled as *Orientierungswissenschaft*, i.e. a discipline that gives guidance, that informs you about choices. History does not teach one specific lesson or leads in a certain direction; but it can help to inform society about decision-making processes, as well as to highlight things that did not go so well in the past. I have written an article<sup>7</sup> that deals exactly with the question of why we do not learn from History, especially as far as natural catastrophes are concerned. If we have a very clear focus on what we want to learn, for example how to avoid a flood in a certain segment of the river, then of course we can learn from

5 UAB Divulga, 21/12/2017, <https://www.uab.cat/web/news-detail/8220-we-need-the-environmental-humanities-because-we-need-new-narratives-to-understand-the-present-and-imagine-alternative-futures-8221-1345680342044.html?noticiaid=1345740461646>.

6 "Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world", Cronon, W. (1992), "A place for stories: nature, history and narratives", *The Journal of American History* (March), pp. 1347-1376.

7 Lübken, U. (2014), "*Historia Magistra Vitae*, as the saying goes. Why societies do not necessarily learn from past disasters". In H. Egner, M. Schorch, M. Voss (eds.), *Learning and Calamities. Practices, Interpretations, Patterns*, New York, Routledge, pp. 112-122.

History how the river has behaved in the past and what it takes to prevent a flood. But beyond such very specific questions, learning is closely associated with goals and motives. Ecologists have a very different take on flooding, for example, than economists. While the latter see floods as damaging and destructive events, the former look at them as more or less natural phenomena and sometimes rejoice when the river takes back control. It is very difficult to say that History teaches us lessons, because it does not. It depends fully on our choices, on our intentions, on our goals. Only once a society or a group has defined what it wants can we look at History in order to get a clearer picture, to understand where we are, where we come from, why we have certain problems. This is why History is important, because without it we cannot make choices. Well, we can, of course, but those choices are less well-informed, I would say.

INT *This brings us to the question of ignorance, particularly about the environment, which is a fascinating topic. As you and Uekötter put it in the introduction to your co-edited book<sup>8</sup>, it contends with our academic (and somehow arrogant) thinking: if we study, if we research, we can put an end to the unknown/ignorance. It is, then, difficult to understand this environmental agnotology, in some way counterintuitive to our “self-proclaimed knowledge society”.<sup>9</sup> In order to clarify the relationships between information, knowledge and action, we prepared six cards with sentences retrieved from the book. We would like to ask you to pick one and discuss it.*

UL I chose “Ignorance not only constrained action but also encouraged it in some regards: the liberating powers of ignorance.”<sup>10</sup> It is interesting in this regard to compare the German and English meanings of the word *Ignoranz* or ignorance, respectively. The German term *Ignoranz* implies a certain arrogance. Ignorant people are those who refuse to accept other people’s knowledge, other people’s attitudes because they think they know better. Taken together

8 Uekötter F. and Lübken, U. (2014), “Introduction. The social functions of ignorance”. In F. Uekötter and U. Lübken (eds.), *Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, pp. 1-11.

9 Ibid., p. 1.

10 The other options were: “Ignorance was not simply about a lack of information but also about the lack of paths to make sense of information”; “The paradoxical co-existence of knowledge and ignorance”; “Agnotology may open the door for a new history of resources that includes both the material history and the social construction of resources, and analyzes them as two sides of the same coin even when they look vastly different”; “Ignorance is not necessarily about an actual dearth of information and may indeed exist in the presence of a substantial body of knowledge”; “We simply should not conceive resource exploitation and ignorance about resource exploitation as two separate issues any longer”.

with the meaning of the term in the English language, which focuses much more on the lack of knowledge, this is an interesting combination. For example, many Euro-American settlers ignored the knowledge of native societies about a river's behavior when it came to deciding where a settlement should be set up. Near Marietta, Ohio, Native Americans, who had been living in the Ohio Country for quite a long time, alerted early settlers to the risk of flooding and remarked that they had in the past fastened their canoes up in the higher branches of the trees, basically saying: "This is not a good place for you to found a settlement." But settlers more or less ignored these kinds of warnings until they found out that they contained more than just a kernel of truth. For many settler societies, indigenous knowledge was not considered as knowledge at all. Then again, speaking of the "liberating powers of ignorance", the ignorant and arrogant attitude of many settlers freed them to make a decision, to take action, to found settlements in a place even if this was a dangerous place. So, from this perspective, ignorance encouraged action to some degree, although it might have encouraged the wrong action.

INT *We can also go for another example from the same book: the case of "Petroknowledge" in the Western World from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> People keep using fossil fuels. It is not a lack of information...*

UL No, it isn't. It is a lack of rigor which affects all of us. I came here by plane<sup>12</sup> and [I am aware that I] wasted a lot of kerosene. We are all involved in this, all of us, by our unsustainable lifestyles. It is very hard to live in a way that is sustainable, it might even be impossible under the current conditions, which brings us to the question of how far should we go individually while others continue to live in the way they are living? There are basically two ways in which people have reacted to this dilemma. One has been to look for the technological fix: the hope that one day, hopefully sooner than later, scientists will come up with a new source of energy that will solve our current problems. For a long time,

11 Graf, R. (2014), "Expert estimates of oil-reserves and the transformation of 'petroknowledge' in the Western World from the 1950s to the 1970s". In F. Uekötter and U. Lübken (eds.), *Managing the Unknown: Essays on Environmental Ignorance*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn, pp. 140-167.

12 A small but growing minority of academics are cutting back on their air travel because of climate change and their "climate footprint". A few Earth scientists launched the "No Fly Climate Sci" in 2017. They claim that "in an era of obvious climate change, (...) it's important to align our daily life choices with that reality" and that "actions speak louder than words" (<https://noflyclimatesci.org/>). Likewise, Katie Langin ["Climate Scientists say no to flying", *Science* (May 2019) 364 (6441): 621] advocates limiting air travel to reduce carbon footprint, an option in which "not all are on board".



people hoped that nuclear energy would solve energy problems, which has not proven to be true because of all the problems of this source of energy – from the catastrophic impacts of nuclear accidents to the (still unsolved) problem of where and how to deposit nuclear waste. The hope for a technological fix is one reason why people do not adapt or change their lifestyle. The other reason, one could argue, is that we are living in a risk society in which many people do not really feel the changes coming with climate change, yet. Climate change, you could argue, is a piecemeal process, a slow process, a slow kind of violence, as Rob Nixon<sup>13</sup> would say, that affects us all. But it is difficult to make big decisions when we don't feel immediate impacts in our society today – although this might be changing right now. Only when specific disasters such as hurricane Katrina in 2005 happen, do politicians feel the need to respond, although in this case, of course, the reaction by US disaster relief agencies was scandalously slow if it existed at all.

INT *In your work you also highlight that is important to look at the so-called natural disasters not as singular, isolated, and extraordinary events but as a norm, as something that has always happened (and will continue to happen), with more or less intensity and impact, shaping environments, societies, and cultures. In this context, deeper historical insights into the consequences of disaster experiences in terms of society and its inequalities, politics and power, and knowledge production, make people more aware of the so called “natural hazards”?*

UL It depends a lot on how you define natural disasters or catastrophes. There are, for example, various kinds of floods, which is my field of research: there are normal floods that happen every three or four years or so, and which do not do big damage; there are obviously extraordinary floods; and then there is the “flood of the century” or the “flood of the millennium”, so to speak. These different kinds of floods create different kinds of reactions. It is important to look at natural disasters as both extraordinary events and normal events. I think it is also important to look at what happens between disasters – during, for instance, long periods of 50 or 60 years or more, when nothing happens. This is exactly the time when vulnerability is being built up, when disaster knowledge erodes, when people start moving into floodplains, for example,

13 Nixon, R. (2011), *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. “Rob Nixon has shown us that oil spills, toxic drifts, and climate change have created violence around the globe. He calls it “slow violence” because it is often invisible and develops slowly and gradually. Nixon argues that we should be more attentive to the damaging impact that environmental change has for people who are vulnerable, poor, and disempowered.” In Mauch, C. (2019), *Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear*, Munich, RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society 2019, n.º 1, p. 20.

or when earthquakes are forgotten because there are no “incentives” or occasions to remember catastrophes of the past. This is also the reason why, I think, you cannot write the History of natural disasters as isolated events; you have to embed them in the long-term history of hazard perception, disaster consequences, creation of vulnerability, and the processes of disaster memory - and more, importantly, disaster forgetfulness.

INT *The definition of natural or human induced disasters is also controversial. Do you agree there is no such thing as natural disaster?*

UL I understand why people argue that “there is no such thing as a natural disaster”<sup>14</sup> and where this idea comes from. It is a response to looking at natural catastrophes as isolated events, as totally detached from social, cultural, and economic circumstances, as basically acts of God that just happen.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly not the case. It is very important to highlight the “unnatural” aspects of disasters, especially the inequalities that are at the heart of how a certain disaster unfolds in terms of vulnerabilities and resilience (or lack thereof). Nevertheless, as important as this view is, it is in my view not sufficient to say that disasters are totally unnatural because it underestimates the agency of natural processes! The unpredictability of rivers in terms of flooding, for example, poses a huge challenge for many societies, the consequences of which cannot be reduced entirely to the social construction of catastrophe.

INT *And what exactly is vulnerability? Is it a “natural” characteristic of certain communities or does a community become vulnerable under certain circumstances?*

UL Greg Bankoff has argued that vulnerability to natural hazards has replaced poverty as the new “dangerous condition”, as he called it.<sup>16</sup> He also pointed out that this vulnerability is not endemic to countries in the Global South. The evolution of the German North Sea coastline since the 14<sup>th</sup> century is a case in point. It is obvious that large parts of the land and many islands have been swallowed by the Sea as a result of several devastating storm surges in the mediaeval era and in early modern times. Today, the tiny islands in the German Bay – the so-called Halligen – are being protected not only as a cultural landscape, but

14 See, for instance, Smith, N. (2006), “There’s no such thing as a natural disaster”, <http://forums.ssrc.org/understandingkatrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/>.

15 For a critical analysis of this view from a historical perspective, see Steinberg, T. (2000), *Acts of God. The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

16 Bankoff, G. (2003), *Cultures of Disaster. Society and Natural Hazards in the Philippines*, London, New York, Routledge, p. 13.

also as a protective device for the mainland because the German state has sufficient resources to do so. If this wasn't the case, these islands would have been washed away a long time ago. So, vulnerability to natural hazards is not a matter of endemic reasons but of cultural, social, and economic resources.

INT *This question of remembering (and forgetting) disasters is quite relevant. How are disasters remembered and why have they played such a subordinate role in collective memory?*

UL Disasters are remembered in various ways. There are, for example, commemorative events and publications on the anniversary of a certain event: books, special issues of newspapers, speeches, etc. This is the most obvious form of disaster memory. However, one could also look at more material ramifications of past disasters, like a flood wall that has been erected as a result of a certain flood. This is also part of how a past event is still visible in the landscape (if one wants to see). Then there is inter-generational knowledge, i. e. disaster memory passed from one generation to the next by personal accounts, story-telling, or myths. However, in terms of its social impacts, forgetting disasters of the past is arguably more important than remembering them. I think one of the reasons why it is so difficult to remember such events is that they occur in no regular fashion. They do come back, but nobody knows when. Look at Lisbon and the 1755 earthquake, for instance. It was horrible but it is not that present in the city, as far as I can judge.

INT *Sure! Despite those ruins we visited – the arches of the Convento do Carmo – the inhabitants and the visitors don't remember that in their daily life.*

UL Why should they, if it happened more than two centuries ago? The very fact that nothing has happened since seems to justify this kind of neglect.

INT *Speaking of the Lisbon earthquake, why is it that some disasters have achieved an almost iconic status while others have been forgotten?*

UL The Lisbon earthquake is a good example. It was not just a disastrous event; it also has a cultural significance. It is often interpreted as an event that triggered the rising importance of the natural sciences and the decline of religious explanations of disasters, that gave birth to modern city planning, sometimes as the origin of modernity itself. The story is much more complicated, but it has acquired a specific meaning in many historical narratives, much like hurricane Katrina is being remembered not just as a terrifying hurricane, but also as a reminder of social inequalities and racism in US society. I think it is fair to predict that Katrina will also be remembered for quite a long time. Other disasters, such as the Galveston hurricane in Texas in 1900, when 6,000 people

died, is well remembered in the US but not so much in other parts of the world because it doesn't have this specific significance.

INT *Is it the number of deaths which influences the way people remember past disasters?*

UL Yes, but not exclusively, as the Galveston example shows. It also depends on whether or not the disaster in question has a certain "iconic" status. Also, "western" disasters usually receive more attention than extreme events in other parts of the world. Media attention in particular is highly uneven in this regard. I would also argue that remembering and forgetting natural catastrophes is not a passive but an active process. After Katrina, for example, many cities became much more interested in their own disaster History, in local flood histories, etc. One could even argue that disaster memory needs more recent events to be (re)activated.

INT *You also support the need to bring materiality into historical environmental studies.<sup>17</sup> Can you explain what you mean by materiality, which has not only an economic sense, we presume, but as D. Worster said "a visceral body sense"<sup>18</sup>?*

UL In a general sense, I think that looking at the materiality of History is becoming more and more important and can be seen as kind of a response to the dominance of cultural perspectives over the last 20, 30 years or so, when historical developments, structures and events were regarded as more or less culturally, socially, and economically constructed. This predominance of constructivist perspectives has largely ignored the fact that we are living in a material world, that we are part of this world with our bodies, and the many interchanges between nature and society. This is often forgotten in cultural analyses.

INT *Some authors have argued that rivers have their own "ecobiographies"...*

UL Ecobiography is a concept that has been coined by Mark Cioc in his book on the history of the Rhine River<sup>19</sup>. I think it is an important conceptual tool that gives us an understanding of the interactions between society and the river. At the same time, it is also a rather anthropocentric concept, in the way that we

17 E.g. "Scholars in this field have to be aware that the coevolution of cities and rivers is an inextricably interwoven process, a complex assembly of human and nonhuman actors, and an arena where material and symbolic worlds merge". In Knoll, M., Lübken, U. and Schott, D. (2017), "Introduction". *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations*, Pittsburgh, PA, Pittsburgh University Press, p. 22.

18 KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory VIDEO-Dictionary <https://www.kth.se/en/ab/e/inst/philhist/historia/ehl/ehl-dictionary/environmental-history-donald-worster-1.499857>.

19 Cioc, M. (2006), *The Rhine: An Ecobiography, 1815-2000*, Seattle, University of Washington Press.

apply human notions of birth, youth, and in the end death to a non-human system. Rivers, of course, don't live like that.

INT *Your current work explores the intersections of mobilities and the environment. In the Introduction to the special issue of *Global Environment*, "Environmental Change and Migration in History"<sup>20</sup>, you mention that "Environmental migration is not a ghost; rather, it is a chameleon."<sup>21</sup> Could you explain what you mean by this metaphor?*

UL Environmental migration has a ghostlike character because everybody claims to know what it is but nobody has really seen it yet. I brought up the chameleon metaphor as environmental migration, too, comes in many different forms and varieties. It consists not just of the often dreaded "big wave" of climate refugees (or flood refugees) who are being displaced spontaneously and who travel for miles and miles to different countries. This is a scenario we are very familiar with today (as wrong as many of its components are), but environmental migrations involve many different processes: from people who just walk a few yards to their relatives next door or high up the hill where they are safe from a certain flood, all the way down to people who cross international boundaries, fleeing a drought, a typhoon, or whatever. We could include resettlement policies of a certain state or region, the subtle changes in the composition of a city after disasters... It is not just one phenomenon, but a variety of phenomena that we have to consider when we talk about climate change and migration. This is why I use the term "chameleon".

Certainly, people are already leaving because of environmental and climate change. For example, if the sea level rises, some people don't have a choice but to leave their home and try to settle somewhere; others, however, might be able to adapt. The question is: what kind of environmental change is related to climate change, and what kind of environmental change has other reasons? These two often go together. For those who deny the existence of climate change, it is easy to say that this is not climate change related migration; for those who want to focus on the importance of climate change, it is a bit difficult to point out that climate change has not a part in this.

INT *It can be said that they are moving because of their poverty, and in this sense they are not climate refugees/environmental migrants. The wealthy people can find alternatives or rebuild their houses in other places...*

20 Lübken, U. (2012), "Chasing a ghost? Environmental change and migration in history". *Global Environment*, v, pp. 5-24.

21 Ibid., p. 22.

- UL Of course! If a community that is affected by sea level rise is very rich, it probably has the resources to build a very high dike or flood wall and be protected for the next 50 or 100 years, which is something that is being done around the world. The Netherlands is the prime example of flood resilience. They have a lot of experience as a result of past experience. Clearly, power and social inequalities play a huge role in the question of who is affected by these changes and who is not.
- INT *The refugee problem constitutes nowadays one of the biggest social and political challenges, particularly in Europe. How does climate change contribute to this problem?*
- UL We could ask, for example: did climate change contribute to the crisis and the ensuing displacements in Syria? For all we know, climate change has played a part but it certainly wasn't the prime reason why we have these conflicts. There are so many factors involved that it is difficult to say that this is a climate-related crisis, although droughts certainly played a role. But, as always, it is difficult to say what factor was the most important.

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Ana Isabel Queiroz » queirozanaisabel19@gmail.com » CIDEHUS – Centro Interdisciplinar de História, Culturas e Sociedades da Universidade de Évora » Palácio do Vimioso, Largo do Marquês de Marialva, n.º 8, Apartado 94 — 7000-809 Évora, Portugal » <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0246-2626>.

Inês Gomes » gomes.ida@gmail.com » Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa » Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt 9 — 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal » <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9210-9959>.

Filipa Soares » filipafs@gmail.com » CRIA – NOVA FCSH » Colégio Almada Negreiros, Campus de Campolide — 1099-085 Lisboa, Portugal » <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4678-1995>.

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