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Article

A Right Distorted? The Reconfiguration of Social Housing Policy under Portugal's 1st Right Programme

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional drift of the *1st Right*, Portugal's main housing programme, originally designed to guarantee the right to adequate housing for families in situations of severe deprivation. Taking the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) as a critical case, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining policy and discourse analysis, financial data, and territorial mapping of local implementation. The results reveal three interlinked forms of policy deviation: (i) territorial deviation, driven by unequal municipal capacities and resource absorption; (ii) instrumental deviation, resulting from the prioritisation of rehabilitation pre-existent public housing stock over the provision of new housing; and (iii) social deviation, marked by the expansion of eligibility criteria that extend benefits to middle-income groups. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how a social rights-based housing policy can be reshaped when integrated into a financial recovery framework, such as the EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). The article contributes to international debates on housing governance by showing how multilevel financing mechanisms can reinforce territorial inequalities, reorient policy instruments, and dilute redistributive objectives. It concludes by advocating for stronger social monitoring, differentiated instruments for distinct target groups, and better temporal alignment between social policy objectives and EU funding cycles.

Keywords: housing policy; right to housing; Lisbon Metropolitan Area; policy drift; Recovery and Resilience Plan

1. Introduction

The housing crisis has emerged as one of the most dramatic social challenges in Europe, exposing the inability of rental and property markets to meet the needs of vulnerable populations (Delclòs & Vidal, 2023; Listerborn, 2023). In response, several Member States have included housing in their Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs), instruments created to support the relaunch of national economies, marking an unprecedented recognition of housing as a strategic pillar of EU cohesion and green transition policies. However, this inclusion has also created structural tensions because, although the RRP's address severe housing exclusion, they are simultaneously shaped by the financial and time constraints of European funding mechanisms, which prioritise rapid implementation and measurable results over long-term social outcomes (Jorge & Varea Oro, 2025).

The Portuguese case offers a revealing example of the contradictions between social objectives and financial constraints. This case is particularly significant because it incorporates the structural characteristics of what several authors identify as a southern European model of financialised welfare (Tulumello, 2023; Mendes, 2021). Historically, Portuguese housing policy has been marked by residualism, reflected in a very limited public housing stock, strong cultural and fiscal prejudice against home ownership, and chronic underinvestment in rental supply. These characteristics were reinforced during the post-2011 austerity period, when fiscal consolidation measures and external

financial conditions limited public spending and incorporated a logic of administrative efficiency into the design of social policies.

In this context, housing ceased to be treated as a redistributive good and increasingly became an instrument of urban regeneration and economic recovery. The subsequent integration of social policy into financialised governance instruments, first through public-private partnerships and later through the EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), thus represents not a break but a continuation of this residualist trajectory under new institutional forms. In this sense, Portugal's *1st Right* programme offers a critical lens through which to observe how southern European welfare states are adapting to post-crisis European governance, translating social rights into performance-based instruments with financial constraints. This convergence between the retreat of welfare, fiscal difficulties and the Europeanisation of policies places the Portuguese experience as an advanced illustration of the institutional tensions that currently shape housing governance across southern Europe.

Understanding this institutional trajectory is therefore crucial to assess how social rights-based housing policies can survive, and potentially transform, within the fiscal and temporal constraints of European recovery instruments. After decades of reduced public investment and dependence on market-based instruments, the launch of the *1st Right - Programme to Support Access to Housing* (Decree-Law No. 37/2018, of 4 May) symbolised the return of the State as a direct actor in the provision of housing (Jorge, 2025). Designed as a rights-based policy, it targeted families in situations of severe housing deprivation, social vulnerability, and financial need (Jorge, 2022). However, its subsequent incorporation into the RRP in 2021 (which provided the *1st Right* Programme with almost half of the total amount it had for the national housing component) profoundly reoriented its priorities. The programme became subject to strict deadlines (completion by mid-2026) and quantitative targets (at least 26,000 families to be assisted), aligning its implementation logic with this financial instrument.

As a result, the *1st Right* was caught between two competing rationalities. On the one hand, the logic of social policy to guarantee the right to adequate housing and, on the other, the financial-administrative logic of rapid budget execution. Although the RRP guaranteed unprecedented funding, it also favoured rapid and easily certifiable interventions, such as the rehabilitation of pre-existing housing stock, to the detriment of slower processes of new construction or rehousing of the most vulnerable households. The result is a gradual reconfiguration of the programme's mission, shifting from addressing extreme housing deprivation to increasingly serving the middle-class households and responding to urban regeneration priorities through surface-level interventions.

This article therefore explores the hypothesis that the *First Right* programme underwent a process of political deviation, that is, a progressive reorientation of its original redistributive objective, without any formal change to its stated objectives. Using the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) as a critical case, the study investigates how this deviation manifests itself in three dimensions: (i) territorial, through unequal municipal capacities and absorption rates; (ii) instrumental, through the prioritisation of rehabilitation pre-existent public housing stock over the provision of new housing; and (iii) social, through the broadening of eligibility criteria that stretch the programme to reach middle-income groups.

It is also important to emphasise that this work aims to situate the reconfiguration of the 1st Law Programme within the broader debate on social sustainability, understood as the capacity of housing policies to ensure social inclusion, equity and long-term resilience in urban systems. For this reason, the analysis focused on understanding how the integration of national housing programmes into the EU's financial frameworks affects the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 11.1 - "access to adequate, safe and affordable housing for all" - and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the research design and analytical strategy, describing the multi-method approach used to combine documentary, discursive and empirical data. Section 3 establishes the conceptual framework, drawing on the literature on policy drift, mission creep, middle-class capture and multilevel governance. Section 4 traces the legislative trajectory of

the *1st Right* and its integration into the RRP. Section 5 examines the implementation of the programme in the LMA, identifying patterns of drift in the three dimensions. Section 6 discusses the institutional reconfiguration of the right to housing and its implications for housing governance. Finally, Section 7 concludes with lessons for the design of public housing policies within European funding schemes.

2. Methodological Approach and Analytical Framework

A mixed-method research design is adopted here, combining documentary and legislative analysis, discourse analysis, quantitative evaluation of programme implementation, and territorial comparison across the entire Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA). Together, these complementary dimensions form a multilevel analytical framework that allows for a comprehensive analysis of how the *1st Right* programme has undergone institutional change and policy change since its integration into the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP).

2.1. Documentary and Legal Analysis

The first component concerns a systematic review of legal, regulatory and programmatic documents related to the *1st Right* from 2018 to 2025. This includes decrees and amendments, operational guidelines, RRP documentation and monitoring reports. The documents were coded thematically according to a deductive analytical framework based on the theories of *policy drift, mission drift and multi-level governance*. Particular attention was paid to changes in eligibility criteria, income limits, beneficiary types, funding rules and implementation instruments, as well as the political and administrative reasons behind these changes. This analysis seeks to trace the institutional and legislative evolution that redefined the entire operational logic of the programme.

2.2. Discursive and Narrative Analysis

This second dimension focuses on the discursive restructuring of the programme's objectives and beneficiaries. To understand how the meaning and purpose of the *1st Right* have evolved over time, the research analyses official press releases, speeches and public communications issued by successive governments and the Institute for Housing and Urban Rehabilitation (IHRU) between 2018 and 2025. The aim is to identify narrative changes, from an initial rights-based discourse focused on severe housing deprivation to broader frameworks such as "housing for all" and explicit appeals to middle-income groups. These discursive shifts are decoded through the conceptual lenses of policy drift, mission drift and middle-class capture, revealing how symbolic reformulation accompanied and even justified institutional and financial reconfiguration.

2.3. Empirical and Territorial Analysis

The third dimension focuses on the empirical assessment of local implementation. The 18 municipal Local Housing Strategies (LHS) of the LMA serve as the main source for understanding local operationalisation. Each LHS was analysed according to identification of families in situations of severe housing deprivation, priority types of intervention (rehabilitation, construction, acquisition), expected results, and investment volumes. This information was supplemented with financial execution records and official RRP monitoring indicators, allowing for the recognition of signs of territorial, instrumental and social deviation. Discrepancies between local housing strategies and RRP monitoring data were adjusted through cross-validation between IHRU records and municipal reports (2023–2025). The comparative analysis between municipalities highlights differences in technical and administrative capacity, land availability and strategic orientation, which together explain the uneven absorption of RRP funding and the variable social impact of the *1st Right*. The integration of these data sets allows for the establishment of a link between institutional design

and the results of local implementation, thus operationalising the concept of policy deviation in a context of multilevel governance.

2.4. Analytical integration

The three dimensions outlined above were linked through triangulation between cases, combining qualitative insights from discourse and document analysis with quantitative indicators of funding allocation and execution. This methodological strategy uncovered causal links between institutional changes, administrative capacity, and social outcomes, while remaining sensitive to the specificities of local contexts.

Overall, this design supports a dynamic interpretation of the *1st Right* programme as a policy of incremental institutional deviation, not through explicit policy reform, but through the cumulative effects of adjustments in funding mechanisms, administrative adaptation, and narrative manipulation.

3. Transformative Dynamics in Housing Policy

The study of housing policy in Portugal has gained renewed academic attention over the last two decades, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis and its consequences on access to housing (Mendes, 2021). During this period, the right to housing has re-emerged as a central axis of public policy, not only as a social right, but also as a tool for territorial cohesion and urban governance. However, the realisation of this right continues to reveal deep tensions between social rationalities and economic rationalities, which profoundly shape the design and implementation of public programmes. This literature review situates these tensions within a broader international context, drawing on recent scholarship (2015-2025) that examines housing policies for vulnerable populations across diverse European contexts.

3.1. Policy Drift and Institutional Adaptation

The concept of policy drift offers a critical tool for understanding how these tensions materialise. It refers to the processes through which a policy formally maintains its objectives but gradually deviates from its original purpose due to shifts in institutional, political or economic contexts (Hacker, 2004; Béland, 2007). Drift often occurs not through explicit and debated reforms, but rather through incremental adjustments that cumulatively transform policy outcomes. In the realm of social and redistributive policies, these adjustments are typically motivated by pressures for financial sustainability, administrative efficiency, or compliance with budgetary constraints, pressures that can progressively erode a programme's original redistributive orientation.

Recent empirical evidence from across Europe confirms the prevalence of policy drift in social housing systems. In Denmark, Kolstad and Larsen (2025) document a fundamental transformation of public housing from a universalist welfare instrument serving broad segments of society to a selective support mechanism targeting only the most marginalised groups. Through longitudinal analysis of legislative changes, construction data, and resident registers, they demonstrate how progressively tightening access criteria and declining shares of new construction have effectively dismantled Denmark's historically robust social housing sector. This "almen afvikling" (public housing dismantlement) illustrates how policy drift operates through cumulative administrative adjustments rather than overt policy reversals.

Similar dynamics are evident in Finland, where Hyötyläinen (2020) identifies a process of "specialisation" whereby social housing increasingly targets special-needs groups rather than serving as general rental provision. This sectoral shift, driven by deinstitutionalisation policies and welfare retrenchment, represents a form of mission drift that fundamentally reconfigures who social housing serves. The majority of new social rental housing in Finland is now designated for special groups, marking a structural transformation in supply composition that occurs largely beneath the radar of public debate.

In the housing sector, policy drift manifests itself through a reconfiguration of instruments and beneficiaries. Programmes initially designed to address severe housing insecurity may evolve to favour less vulnerable segments, namely middle-income groups whose political visibility and representational power are greater (Desmond, 2016; Aalbers, 2020). This dynamic, often described as middle-class capture (Malpass, 2008; Madden & Marcuse, 2016), illustrates how the reduction of the welfare state and the financialization of housing together reorient social policy towards politically safer but socially more restricted groups.

Ireland provides a particularly stark example of this trajectory. Hearne and Murphy (2018) demonstrate through participatory research with homeless families how market-oriented housing supports, including rent supplement, the rental accommodation scheme, and the housing assistance payment, have proven costly yet ineffective at delivering durable housing security. Their empirical findings reveal that these voucher-style interventions, while maintaining the formal rhetoric of housing rights, fail to provide the ontological security that direct social housing provision offers. Finnerty et al. (2016) extend this analysis, showing how Ireland's post-2008 policy responses increasingly favoured tenure neutrality and private delivery, thereby diluting social housing's protective and redistributive functions, a clear instance of mission drift.

Germany presents a more complex picture of post-welfare transformation. Schönig (2020) analyses how national retrenchment has narrowed social housing to crisis-response functions, yet local policies vary considerably in implementation. Her comparative city-level cases reveal similar spatial forms but differing local governance strategies, highlighting the interplay between national regime change and local entrepreneurial urban politics in shaping mission drift. This finding underscores that policy drift is not uniform but mediated by local institutional capacities and political orientations.

Finally, comparative research by Lima and Xerez (2022) on Ireland and Portugal reveals convergent moves toward financialization and retrenchment despite divergent welfare legacies, supporting claims of systemic policy drift across varied contexts. Their analysis demonstrates that even countries with different housing regime traditions face similar pressures that push social housing toward market-based delivery and selective targeting, suggesting that policy drift is a structural phenomenon rather than an isolated national anomaly.

3.2. Mission Drift and Symbolic Expansion

A related concept is that of mission drift, which describes the incremental expansion of a policy's scope beyond its initial mandate (Freeman, 2017; Howlett & Migone, 2019). While policy drift concerns functional reorientation, mission drift emphasises symbolic and discursive expansion as policies incorporate new objectives and target groups to maintain legitimacy or institutional continuity. In the Portuguese case, this is evident in the gradual transformation of the rhetoric of the *1st Right*, which has moved from a programme focused on "severe housing deprivation" to a programme framed as "housing for all". This discursive expansion legitimises the inclusion of middle-income groups, while diluting the focus on extreme vulnerability.

However, this process is not merely rhetorical. It reflects the interaction between political communication and institutional design: by invoking universalist language, policymakers can justify reallocations of funding and changes in priorities without formally revising legislation. In doing so, the symbolic identity of the programme as a social rights policy remains intact, even as its operational logic increasingly aligns with financial and administrative imperatives.

The tension between symbolic universalism and practical selectivity is documented across other European contexts. In Spain, Quintiá Pastrana (2022) examines how constitutional and autonomous legislation has expanded formal housing rights protections for vulnerable groups through novel administrative instruments and horizontal application of rights. Yet doctrinal analysis reveals tensions between national constitutional jurisprudence and regional competences, indicating that symbolic legal advances do not automatically translate into effective implementation. This gap

between rights discourse and practical enforcement exemplifies how mission drift operates through discursive expansion that outpaces institutional capacity.

Italy's housing policy trajectory illustrates similar dynamics. Vitale et al. (2024) propose decommodification strategies and policy reforms to revive the right to housing, arguing that Italy's owner-occupation bias and minimal public housing expenditure necessitate increased public investment, clearer social-rental definitions, and preventive measures. Their policy briefing synthesises national indicators to justify a multifunctional housing fund and regulatory reforms, yet acknowledges that translating rights claims into actionable institutional redesign remains politically contentious. The persistence of owner-occupation ideology despite formal commitments to housing rights demonstrates how mission drift can preserve symbolic policy objectives while operational priorities remain unchanged.

3.3. Multilevel Governance and Europeanisation

The transformation of the *1st Right* also needs to be understood within the broader framework of multilevel governance, particularly in the context of Europeanisation. The implementation of the programme depends on coordination between the national (IHRU and central government), local (municipalities) and supranational (EU funding) levels. Research on multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Piattoni, 2010) shows that such architectures tend to generate technocratic decision-making, where the fulfilment of financial and time targets often takes precedence over social objectives.

Recent scholarship has intensified attention to how EU-level instruments shape national housing policies, revealing both enabling investments and institutional constraints. Delclós and Vidal (2023) argue that EU programmes such as the Renovation Wave, Affordable Housing Initiative, and Next Generation EU open space for renewed public investment yet risk entrenching market biases unless programmes pursue tenure and cost neutrality alongside climate goals. Their policy commentary links EU budgetary shifts to potential increased renovation spending but warns that without normative redesign, these investments may reinforce existing inequalities rather than address them. This analysis highlights a fundamental tension: EU funding can enable investment but cannot guarantee redistributive outcomes.

The integration of the *1st Right* into the RRP intensified this trend. The EU framework's emphasis on performance indicators and expenditure deadlines redefined the programme's temporal logic and operational priorities. As a result, interventions that could be implemented quickly, such as the rehabilitation of existing public housing stock, were valued over complex and time-consuming rehousing processes for vulnerable groups. This Europeanisation of temporalities exemplifies how supranational financing instruments can indirectly distort the social function of national housing programmes.

At this level, Flynn and Montalbano (2024) provide comparative evidence of a policy paradigm crisis across the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany, arguing that while neoliberal tenets persist, financialization has provoked state re-engagement and potential re-embedding of housing policy. Their analysis suggests that EU-level interventions occur within a contested paradigmatic space where the crisis of neoliberal housing policy creates opportunities for alternative approaches, yet path dependencies and institutional inertia constrain transformative change. This finding underscores that Europeanisation is not a unidirectional process but a site of political contestation.

The interplay between national constitutional frameworks and EU norms adds further complexity. Quintiá Pastrana's (2022) analysis of Spain demonstrates how trends in constitutional and human-rights interpretation enable novel administrative instruments and horizontal application of rights, yet national jurisprudence limits some regional competences. This multi-level legal dynamic illustrates how Europeanisation operates through normative diffusion and legal interpretation rather than direct policy imposition, creating varied implementation pathways across member states.

Lima's (2023) examination of pandemic-era housing policies across OECD countries reveals how multilevel governance structures shaped emergency responses. Governments demonstrated capacity

for rapid, temporary protections but largely failed to address structural inadequacies for precarious populations such as refugees. Comparative analysis shows differential treatment of insiders versus those in inadequate or no housing, exposing how multilevel policy frameworks can reproduce existing exclusions even during crisis moments that ostensibly prioritise universal protection.

Municipal-level dynamics constitute a crucial yet often underexamined dimension of multilevel governance. Systematic reviews demonstrate consistent exclusionary effects of local policies across contexts, distinguishing planned exclusion from unintended outcomes (Lima et al., 2023). Cities use housing policy to include or exclude vulnerable groups through gatekeeping mechanisms, eligibility criteria, waiting list management, spatial allocation decisions, that operate within national and EU frameworks but reflect local political economies and demographic pressures. This meso-level arena is where Europeanisation intersects with local politics, producing varied outcomes even within the same national context.

3.4. Financialization of Housing and Middle-Class Capture

A critical dimension of contemporary housing policy transformation concerns the financialization of housing, the process whereby housing becomes an investable asset class subject to financial market logics. Recent research interrogates how this transformation reshapes provision, policy responses, and political mobilisation, combining financial, survey, and political data to show varied outcomes and limits.

Goulding's (2024) examination of real estate investment trusts and investment funds entering England's supported housing sector details governance risks from leaseback and investor models. His qualitative evidence identifies controversial financing arrangements and at least one near-bankruptcy of a housing association linked to investor pressures, unpacking risk governance under financialization and suggesting limits to marketizing vulnerable-sector housing. This analysis reveals tensions between housing's commodified asset role and its social reproduction functions, producing risks such as unsustainable rents and provider insolvency that undermine the ostensible efficiency gains of financial market participation.

The political consequences of financialization extend beyond service delivery to reshape political mobilisation and policy demands. Dancygier and Wiedemann (2023) link cross-national measures of housing financialization with political backlash exemplified by support for expropriation in Berlin. Their geo-coded transaction data, surveys, and experiments show that neighbourhood exposure to financialization plus framing about corporate landlordism increase support for expropriation and housing socialism. This finding demonstrates that financialization fuels normative rejection of housing-as-asset and mobilises diverse constituencies for redistributive political action beyond rent impacts alone, suggesting that financialization may generate its own political opposition.

Yet financialization is not deterministic. Alexandri and Janoschka (2024) examine specifically Barcelona's municipal innovations that attempt to challenge financialization by prioritising social criteria in housing allocation and development. Their desk research and expert interviews reveal investor responses and policy finance interactions showing potential local countervailing effects. This analysis indicates that local institutional frameworks privileging social objectives can alter investor strategies and change financialization dynamics, suggesting financialization's contingency and the possibility of political intervention.

Wehrhahn (2019) situates contentious urban housing politics across European metropolises as reactions to dispossession produced by deregulation and financialization, linking protest movements and policy innovations aimed at limiting capitalist extraction. His emphasis on combined structural and agency approaches for studying eviction, dispossession, and practices of re-possession highlights that financialization generates not only market transformations but also political contestation and institutional experimentation. The proliferation of tenant movements, municipal housing activism, and regulatory innovations across European cities demonstrates that financialization is a contested process rather than an inevitable outcome.

In turn, the concept of middle-class capture provides an analytical lens for understanding how financialization interacts with policy drift. As housing becomes financialised and social housing provision contracts, remaining public resources increasingly serve middle-income groups with greater political voice and capacity to navigate bureaucratic systems. This dynamic is evident across contexts: Ireland's market-oriented supports disproportionately benefit those with stable incomes (Hearne & Murphy, 2018), Finland's specialised social housing serves organised special-needs groups rather than dispersed precarious households (Hyötyläinen, 2020), and Denmark's tightening eligibility criteria effectively exclude marginal populations while preserving access for established residents (Kolstad & Larsen, 2025). Middle-class capture thus operates as a mechanism linking financialization, welfare retrenchment, and policy drift.

3.5. *Housing Insecurity and Urban Vulnerability*

Finally, the literature on urban vulnerability and housing exclusion (UN-Habitat, 2019; Musterd et al., 2020) emphasises that housing insecurity should be understood as the result of multiple factors, encompassing economic, spatial, institutional and environmental dimensions. Effective responses require territory-sensitive instruments capable of addressing localised forms of deprivation, a particularly challenging task in metropolitan areas such as Lisbon, characterised by acute market pressures, land scarcity and structural income inequalities.

Recent scholarship emphasises systemic deadlocks, pandemic exposures, and grassroots innovations in addressing housing insecurity. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified housing vulnerabilities while revealing state capacities for rapid intervention. Lima's (2023) review of pandemic-era housing policies across OECD countries argues that temporary mitigation measures, eviction moratoria, rent freezes, mortgage payment holidays, were effective as emergency protections but insufficient to reform underlying housing systems. The speed and temporariness of interventions left gaps in durable protections for precarious populations, particularly refugees, undocumented migrants, and those in informal housing. Yet Lima suggests pandemic responses could catalyse longer-term investments if political will persists, indicating that crisis moments create windows for institutional change that may or may not be seized.

The differential impact of pandemic policies on vulnerable groups reveals how existing exclusionary mechanisms shape crisis responses. Lima et al.'s (2023) comparative analysis of measures across Greece and other OECD countries shows differential treatment of insiders versus those in inadequate or no housing, exposing policy ambiguities in defining who merits protection. These findings demonstrate that housing insecurity is not merely an economic condition, but a political status shaped by deservingness discourses and institutional gatekeeping.

Deservingness discourses and restrictive access criteria constitute key mechanisms exacerbating family vulnerability. Qualitative research from Slovakia and Ireland reveals prevalent discourses of merit and transitional housing that limit access for homeless families and multi-child households (Lima et al., 2023; Hearne & Murphy, 2018). Social housing systems increasingly operate through moral evaluations of applicant behaviour, housing history, and family composition, effectively excluding those deemed insufficiently deserving even when they meet formal eligibility criteria. These gatekeeping practices reflect broader welfare state transformations emphasising individual responsibility and conditional entitlements.

Grassroots innovations and community responses partially fill gaps left by inadequate policy responses. García and Vicari Haddock's (2016) collection of social innovation examples during austerity crises highlights bottom-up practices addressing unmet housing needs - cooperative housing initiatives, community land trusts, squatting movements, and mutual aid networks. These practices reveal alternative governance capacities at city scales, yet their proliferation also signals the retreat of state provision and the downloading of social reproduction responsibilities onto civil society. While social innovation demonstrates community resilience, it cannot substitute for adequate public housing investment.

The literature robustly links austerity, commodification, and local exclusionary practices to increased insecurity, yet cross-national causal generalisations about which interventions most effectively reduce vulnerability remain dispersed across methodological approaches. Insufficient evidence exists to declare uniform best-practice interventions across all contexts. What emerges instead is recognition that housing insecurity results from intersecting political-economic structures, institutional arrangements, and local practices that vary considerably across contexts. Effective responses therefore require multi-scalar interventions addressing structural conditions (financialization, welfare retrenchment), institutional arrangements (eligibility criteria, allocation mechanisms), and local implementation (municipal capacity, civil society engagement).

3.6. Conceptualising Institutional Change

By situating the *1st Right* programme within this theoretical framework, the article conceptualises institutional change as a process of drift, expansion and adaptation. The combined dynamics of policy drift, mission drift, middle-class capture and multi-level governance provide the analytical grid through which the subsequent sections examine how a programme designed to guarantee the right to housing was progressively transformed into a financialised instrument of urban management.

The international literature reviewed here demonstrates that the Portuguese case is not exceptional but exemplary of broader trends reshaping social housing across diverse contexts. Several convergent dynamics emerge.

First, policy and mission drift operate through incremental adjustments that cumulatively transform programme objectives and beneficiary populations. These processes are evident across welfare regimes, from Nordic universalism (Denmark, Finland) to liberal residualism (Ireland, UK) to Southern European familialism (Spain, Italy, Portugal), suggesting structural pressures transcending regime typologies.

Second, financialization reshapes both housing provision and political contestation, creating tensions between housing's commodity and use-value functions while generating new forms of political mobilisation. The penetration of financial actors and logics into social housing occurs through varied mechanisms, real estate investment trusts, public-private partnerships, securitisation, leaseback arrangements, but consistently prioritises financial returns over social objectives.

Third, multilevel governance structures produce technocratic decision-making that privileges financial performance indicators over redistributive outcomes. EU funding mechanisms, while enabling investment, impose temporal and operational constraints that can distort programme implementation. Local governments emerge as crucial mediators, with municipal policies and practices determining whether national and supranational frameworks produce inclusive or exclusionary outcomes.

Fourth, housing insecurity results from intersecting political-economic structures, institutional arrangements, and deservingness discourses that systematically exclude the most vulnerable populations. Effective responses require multi-scalar interventions addressing structural conditions, institutional design, and implementation practices, a coordination challenge that few jurisdictions successfully navigate.

Fifth, crisis moments, financial crashes, pandemics, expose housing system inadequacies and reveal state capacities for rapid intervention, yet temporary emergency measures rarely translate into sustained institutional reform. Path dependencies, political-economic constraints, and ideological commitments to market-based provision limit transformative change even when crisis conditions create political openings.

These dynamics provide the conceptual framework for analysing the *1st Right* programme's trajectory. The subsequent empirical sections examine how policy drift, mission drift, financialization, multilevel governance, and vulnerability dynamics manifest in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area context, demonstrating how a programme designed to guarantee housing rights was progressively reconfigured through its integration into the EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan.

The international literature establishes that such transformations are neither accidental nor unique but reflect systematic tensions between social rights commitments and financial imperatives that characterise contemporary housing governance across diverse contexts.

4. Legislative Trajectory and Implementation of the 1st Right Programme

The *1st Right* - Housing Access Support Programme was launched in 2018 as one of the central pillars of the New Generation of Housing Policies (NGPH), marking a paradigm shift in Portuguese housing policy. Among the main goals of the NGPH is precisely the increase in the share of publicly supported housing, from 2% to 5% at the national level, representing an additional 170,000 dwellings. After decades of market-oriented approaches and incipient state intervention, the *1st Right* represented a serious commitment to fulfilling the right to housing, explicitly targeting situations of severe housing deprivation (Jorge, 2022). The programme's legal framework (Decree-Law No. 37/2018 of 4 May) defined a double eligibility criterion: (i) the existence of indecent or precarious housing conditions and (ii) the verification of financial need based on legally established income limits. Initially, the focus was restricted to families in situations of extreme vulnerability.

4.1. Legislative Evolution and Expanding Eligibility

From 2018 to 2025, the *1st Right* underwent several legislative revisions that progressively expanded its scope of application. The 2021 and 2022 amendments raised the maximum income limits for eligible households from an initial limit of approximately €1,700 to a maximum of €4,500 per month and introduced new forms of housing unfitness, including excessive housing costs (above 40% of household income). These adjustments were justified by policymakers as a reflection of the 'social reality' of widespread affordability pressures. However, they effectively broadened the programme's reach to middle-income groups, contributing to what this study calls social drift, i.e., a dilution of the original target group and a partial redefinition of the *1st Right* as an instrument of affordable housing rather than a policy aimed at the most vulnerable households.

4.2. Integration into the Recovery and Resilience Plan

The integration of the *1st Right* into the EU-funded Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) in 2021 marked a turning point in its institutional trajectory. As the main channel for the housing component of the Portuguese RRP, the programme received more than €1.2 billion in non-repayable grants, an unprecedented allocation for public housing in Portugal. However, this funding came with strict implementation deadlines (projects to be completed by mid-2026) and quantitative milestones (at least 26,000 families to be assisted), thus aligning *1st Right* with the performance-oriented logic of European funding frameworks.

Although the RRP secured financial resources, it also redefined the programme's priorities. The rehabilitation of pre-existing social housing stock became the dominant form of intervention due to its faster implementation and compatibility with EU reporting requirements. On the other hand, the construction and acquisition of new housing, essential tools for combating severe deprivation, declined sharply. This functional reorientation exemplifies instrumental drift, as the *1st Right* shifted from expanding housing supply to managing and improving existing assets.

4.3. Discursive Reframing and Policy Narratives

Official communications further reinforced this reorientation. Between 2018 and 2019, public statements by the government and the IHRU described the *1st Right* as an instrument aimed at combating severe housing deprivation. From 2020 onwards, this language gradually weakened, being replaced by broader references to 'housing for all' and, later, by explicit appeals to the middle class. Between 2023 and 2024, the discourse crystallised around guaranteeing access to housing for 'young families and the middle class', signalling a rhetorical expansion consistent with the drift of

the mission. This narrative shift reflected the institutional logic of the RRP, which prioritised measurable investment outcomes over redistributive outcomes.

4.4. Institutional Implications

Taken together, these developments reveal a structural tension between the logic of the programme's social policy and the financial and administrative logic of the RRP. Although the *1st Right* maintained its formal commitment to the right to housing, its operational priorities became increasingly defined by metrics of efficiency and absorption capacity. In practice, this has resulted in the concentration of resources in municipalities with stronger administrative and technical capacities, such as Lisbon, Oeiras and Setúbal, to the detriment of areas with greater housing needs but weaker institutional capacities.

This trajectory exemplifies the central argument of the article: the *1st Right* was not explicitly readjusted or revoked, but rather subjected to a process of political drift.

Through cumulative adjustments to eligibility, implementation tools and institutional narratives, a programme originally conceived as a social rights policy has been reconfigured into a financialised instrument of urban management, more attuned to the requirements of EU funding than to the structural causes of housing deprivation.

5. The Case of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area

The Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) is a critical case study for analysing how the *1st Right* has been reconfigured under the RRP. The LMA accounts for most of Portugal's housing needs, combining acute market pressures and persistent urban precariousness. It is also responsible for the highest concentration of housing investments financed by the RRP (Jorge & Varea Oro, 2024), making it an ideal setting for analysing how administrative capacity, institutional design and financial imperatives interact to produce patterns of territorial, instrumental and social drift.

In absolute terms, the LMA concentrates the majority of nationally reported housing needs, about 60% of cases identified in the National Survey of Rehousing Needs (IHRU, 2018) and more than half of those included in the LHS approved up to 2022 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Households identified in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, by municipality, and dwellings financed under the RRP.

Municipality	A. No. of households in housing need signalled in LHS	B. Private households (total)	% housing indignity (A/B)	Total investment under <i>1st Right</i> (RRP)	No. of dwellings financed (RRP)
Alcochete	176	7437	2.37	€4038598.66	28
Almada	2927	75692	3.87	€15640513.29	159
Amadora	5722	73539	7.78	€7900205.07	588
Barreiro	737	34366	2.14	€8256089.41	124
Cascais	4085	86484	4.72	€44723231.75	849
Lisbon	11593	242571	4.78	€232386570.72	1845
Loures	3804	81702	4.66	€61368098.65	1188
Mafra	452	33209	1.36	€29485417.58	180
Moita	1187	27506	4.32	€199131.41	5
Montijo	1039	22155	4.69	€2789552.27	110
Odivelas	1328	60139	2.21	€17745427.06	112
Oeiras	5554	73026	7.61	€149621390.56	2017
Palmela	257	26778	0.96	€3644491.98	29

Seixal	1830	67669	2.70	€43718347.64	375
Sesimbra	523	20564	2.54	€16785482.87	148
Setúbal	4609	51229	9.00	€132332939.63	1511
Sintra	4433	153222	2.89	€33495805.06	804
Vila Franca de Xira	161	55696	0.29	€32329252.06	183
Totals	50417	1192984		€836460545.7	10255

Source: Local Housing Strategies and 'O Contador' (www.ocontador.pt).

5.1. Territorial Drift: Uneven Implementation Capacities

An analysis of financial and implementation data reveals that municipalities with greater technical and institutional capacity, such as Lisbon, Oeiras, and Setúbal, absorbed RRP funds more efficiently and quickly. These municipalities have well-equipped planning and urban development departments, dedicated housing units, and experience with European funding mechanisms. In contrast, smaller or less resourceful municipalities (e.g., Moita, Montijo, Alcochete) faced administrative obstacles, project delays, or even partial exclusion from funding opportunities.

This uneven distribution of implementation capacity exemplifies territorial drift, where the ability to execute a social policy becomes a function of institutional strength rather than social need. As a result, resources flow disproportionately to municipalities that are already better equipped to manage complex funding frameworks, reinforcing existing territorial inequalities rather than mitigating them. The result is a form of institutional bias in which efficiency replaces equity as the main allocation criterion.

The Local Housing Strategies for the LMA show a clear predominance of interventions aimed at rehabilitating the public housing stock rather than expanding it (see Table 2).

Table 2. Types of interventions financed under *1st Right* within the RRP (by municipality).

Municipality	No. of dwellings financed	Acquisition & Construction				Rehabilitation (no. dwellings)
		Acquisition (no. dwellings)	Construction & Rehabilitation (no. dwellings)	Construction (no. dwellings)	Rehabilitation (no. dwellings)	
Alcochete	28	0	22	0	6	0
Almada	159	24	0	0	95	40
Amadora	588	0	0	0	0	588
Barreiro	124	30	0	2	0	92
Cascais	849	30	0	3	36	780
Lisboa	1845	16	18	30	1294	487
Loures	1188	0	0	0	216	972
Mafra	180	9	104	8	44	15
Moita	5	0	0	0	0	5
Montijo	110	0	0	0	10	100
Odivelas	112	11	0	11	61	29
Oeiras	2017	0	0	0	581	1436
Palmela	29	26	0	3	0	0
Seixal	375	0	0	211	0	164
Sesimbra	148	88	0	0	0	60
Setúbal	1511	0	0	0	0	1511
Sintra	804	22	0	0	100	682

Vila Franca de Xira	183	0	0	130	34	19
Totals	10255	256	144	398	2477	6980

Source: Local Housing Strategies and 'O Contador' (www.ocontador.pt).

According to available data, approximately 68% of planned solutions across LMA municipalities correspond to rehabilitation of existing public housing stock; 24.2% to new construction; 3.9% to acquisition and rehabilitation of dwellings available on the market; 2.5% to acquisition of ready-to-occupy dwellings; and 1.4% to purchase of land for construction. This predominance is explained by the quicker execution time of rehabilitation works and their greater compatibility with RRP deadlines (completion by mid-2026). Nonetheless, it carries a structural consequence: *1st Right* ceases to function primarily as a mechanism for expanding the public housing stock and becomes mainly an instrument for upgrading existing assets.

5.2. Instrumental Drift: Rehabilitation over Expansion

Empirical data from the LMA indicate a clear predominance of rehabilitation projects in interventions financed by the RRP under the *1st Right*. Approximately two-thirds of all planned projects involve the rehabilitation of pre-existing public housing stock, while only about a quarter correspond to new construction. Acquisition and acquisition-rehabilitation projects represent marginal shares.

However, the emphasis on refurbishment has structural consequences. It transforms the *1st Right* from a programme aimed at expanding the public housing stock into a programme focused on the management and improvement of existing assets. While improving the quality of housing is important, it does little to increase supply or reach families in extreme deprivation. Municipalities such as Lisbon, Oeiras and Setúbal have prioritised large-scale refurbishment projects, while those with limited public housing stock have struggled to identify eligible interventions. Thus, the instrumental deviation reorients the programme from a needs-based response to deprivation to the fulfilment of investment-based targets.

5.3. Social Drift: Broadening of Beneficiary Groups

In parallel with territorial and instrumental changes, the *1st Right* also underwent a social change through the progressive relaxation of eligibility criteria. Legislative changes between 2021 and 2025 broadened the definition of housing unfitness to include excessive financial burdens and increased income limits, thus opening up access to middle-income families. Although these changes were presented as socially inclusive, they diluted the programme's original focus on extreme vulnerability.

In municipalities such as Lisbon and Cascais, a significant portion of RRP investments supported *affordable* or *cost-controlled* housing projects targeting middle-income groups. Meanwhile, highly deprived neighbourhoods such as Segundo Torrão (Almada) or Santa Marta (Seixal) continue to face limited or delayed interventions, at a time when the so-called 'bairros de barracas' (informal settlements) are re-emerging across the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. This dynamic exemplifies how discursive and legislative expansion can divert resources from the most vulnerable groups to politically more visible groups, consolidating the capture of the middle class.

5.4. Converging Dynamics and Empirical Evidence

The convergence of these three dimensions – territorial, instrumental and social – produces a cumulative transformation in the housing landscape of the LMA. The operational results of the *1st*

Right increasingly reflect administrative feasibility rather than the redistributive objective. Municipalities with greater absorption capacity carry out most of the projects; rehabilitation dominates the typology of interventions; and middle-income families emerge as legitimate beneficiaries. Together, these dynamics constitute a multidimensional policy shift, in which the form of the programme remains intact, but its substance evolves towards financial and managerial objectives. Table 3 seeks to systematise the distortions identified.

Table 3. The three axes of distortion of *1st Right* in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area.

Dimension	Observed evidence	Consequence
Territorial	Concentration of implementation in municipalities with higher technical and financial capacity.	Resources diverted from more vulnerable territories to more institutionalised ones.
Instrumental	Predominance of rehabilitation of public housing stock over construction/acquisition of new dwellings.	Consolidation of existing stock without significant expansion of supply.
Social	Broadening of eligibility criteria and entry of the middle class.	Dilution of the vulnerable target group and redefinition of the programme as an “affordable housing” instrument.

This empirical evidence reinforces the article's central argument that integrating social rights housing policies into financialised recovery structures such as the RRP may inadvertently reinforce territorial inequalities and dilute redistributive objectives.

6. Institutional Reconfiguration of the 1st Right Programme: Evidence and Implications

Evidence from the LMA confirms the hypothesis that the *1st Right* underwent a profound process of institutional reconfiguration, an incremental transformation that altered its function without formally changing its objectives. The programme's founding objective, to combat severe housing deprivation, remains rhetorically intact. However, its operational implementation has become increasingly conditioned by financial, administrative, and political imperatives linked to the RRP.

The territorial drift identified and described compromises not only the programme's original redistributive intention, but also the social sustainability of metropolitan housing systems, as structural inequalities in access to adequate housing persist.

For this reason, this section interprets these transformations through the analytical lenses of policy drift, mission drift, middle-class capture, and multi-level governance.

6.1. Policy Drift and Functional Transformation

According to Hacker (2004) and Béland (2007), *policy drift* occurs when programmes adapt to new institutional and economic contexts without formal reform, gradually altering their outcomes. The *1st Right* exemplifies this mechanism. The integration of RRP funding introduced rigid time and financial frameworks, transforming the logic of programme implementation. While the original project prioritised social needs and long-term housing solutions, the RRP's focus on short-term financial absorption reoriented the programme towards measurable and certifiable outcomes. Rehabilitation projects and rapid interventions became privileged because they satisfied the performance indicators imposed by European funding cycles. The result is a policy that maintains its

symbolic identity as an instrument of social rights, while functioning operationally as an efficiency-oriented financial mechanism.

6.2. *Mission Creep and the Expansion of Objectives*

Parallel to this functional change, the *1st Right* shows clear signs of expanding its mission, such as the gradual broadening of its objectives and target population. Since 2021, government discourse has increasingly portrayed the programme as a service not only for vulnerable groups, but also for middle-income groups experiencing financial difficulties. The rhetorical evolution from ‘combating severe housing deprivation’ to ‘ensuring housing for all’ reflects a deliberate strategy of symbolic inclusion. This discursive expansion underpins political legitimacy and institutional visibility but blurs the distinction between redistributive policy and accessibility policy. The broader the target population becomes, the weaker the programme's ability to focus on extreme vulnerability.

This symbolic expansion has been accompanied by institutional adjustments such as new eligibility criteria, more flexible income limits, and the introduction of “affordable rental” modalities under the umbrella of the *1st Right*. Such changes, although presented as socially progressive, effectively redirect the programme as a hybrid mechanism that serves both social welfare and middle-class housing stability. This evolution illustrates the compromise between political inclusion and distributive precision, a central feature of mission drift in social policy.

6.3. *Middle-Class Capture and Redistribution Dilution*

The inclusion of beneficiaries with average incomes in the *1st Right* corresponds to what Malpass (2008) and Madden & Marcuse (2016) describe as capture of the middle class. In contexts of housing crisis and political volatility, middle-income groups exert greater political visibility and demand political responses. By extending the coverage of the *1st Right* to these groups, policymakers mitigate social discontent and broaden political support, but at the cost of redirecting limited resources away from those in situations of severe deprivation. This dynamic transforms a targeted redistributive policy into an instrument of broad accessibility, further weakening its redistributive effectiveness.

In the LMA, this process is particularly evident: municipalities with greater purchasing power and administrative capacity (e.g., Lisbon, and Oeiras) attract larger shares of RRP funding and use it to support housing interventions for mixed-income or moderate-income segments. Meanwhile, territories with deep structural vulnerabilities remain underserved. The resulting pattern reinforces both territorial inequality and social stratification within metropolitan housing policy.

6.4. *Multilevel Governance and European Conditioning*

The reconfiguration of the *1st Right* cannot be understood in isolation from its European governance context. As demonstrated by Hooghe and Marks (2003) and Piattoni (2010), multilevel governance agreements distribute power between supranational, national and local actors, creating complex hierarchies of accountability. In the case of the *1st Right*, the European level, through the RRP, effectively set the pace and criteria for implementation. Compliance with European benchmarks and verification processes became more decisive than social orientation or local adaptability. This dynamic exemplifies a Europeanisation of housing policy, in which supranational financial logic overrides national redistributive intent.

Local governments, although formally autonomous, were constrained by accountability requirements and performance standards. Municipalities with greater administrative capacity managed to meet these standards, while others fell behind, deepening the geographical inequality of implementation. Thus, the vertical integration of governance produced a vicious cycle, as European conditionalities encouraged administrative efficiency but undermined the equity-based principles essential to the original policy.

6.5. *Broader Implications for Housing Governance*

The institutional reconfiguration of the *1st Right* reflects a broader European trend in which housing policies are being reformulated as instruments of investment and recovery rather than pillars of social welfare. Similar patterns have been observed in southern European countries (Cabré & Módenes, 2017; Tulumello, 2023), where programmes originally designed to combat exclusion have evolved into vehicles for urban regeneration and middle-class support. This convergence illustrates a structural shift towards the financialization of social policy, in which the logic of budget execution and measurable results overrides redistributive intent.

The Portuguese case therefore contributes to a broader debate on the governance of social rights in financialised regimes. It demonstrates that political drift does not require an explicit retreat to erode social functions; rather, it unfolds subtly through administrative adaptation, performance management and symbolic reformulation. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to rethinking how European funding structures can better align with social objectives, ensuring that the right to housing continues to be realised in a substantive, rather than merely formal, manner.

7. Conclusions and Implications for Public Policy

This article analysed how the *1st Right*, originally conceived in 2018 as an instrument to guarantee the right to housing for groups in situations of severe deprivation, was progressively reconfigured into an investment-oriented and financially driven programme under the RRP. Using the LMA as a critical case, the study identified how institutional, administrative, and financial mechanisms interact to generate three complementary forms of policy deviation: territorial, instrumental, and social. These forms converge in a broader process of institutional transformation, demonstrating how Europeanised funding logics can reshape the redistributive nature of national housing policies.

7.1. Summary of Key Findings

An analysis of the *1st Right* programme reveals a multifaceted process of transformation that unfolded in three interconnected dimensions: territorial, instrumental and social. Collectively, these dynamics expose how a policy initially conceived as a vehicle for realising the right to housing was reconfigured into a hybrid mechanism shaped by financial and administrative imperatives.

At the territorial level, the implementation of *1st Right* became markedly uneven across municipalities. Those with greater technical and financial capacities, often large urban centres, were able to absorb and execute RRP funds more effectively. In contrast, municipalities with fewer institutional resources and greater housing needs struggled to mobilise projects or meet procedural requirements. This imbalance means that institutional vulnerability has effectively translated into social vulnerability, as the places most in need of intervention are often those least able to carry it out.

In instrumental terms, the programme shifted from expanding the public housing stock to rehabilitating existing assets. The predominance of rehabilitation projects reflects a reorientation driven by the time and bureaucratic constraints of European funding. As rehabilitation is quicker to implement and easier to certify, it became the preferred mode of intervention. However, this focus on quantifiable short-term results has diverted the programme's original ambition to address structural housing deficits through new construction and long-term provisions.

Finally, the *1st Right* has undergone a social drift. Successive legislative changes and political narratives have progressively broadened eligibility criteria, extending support to middle-income groups. Although this evolution was justified as socially inclusive, it diluted the programme's redistributive objective. A measure that was previously intended for people in situations of extreme housing deprivation now also serves as a tool to promote affordable housing and stabilise middle-class access to the market.

Together, these three forms of drift – territorial, instrumental, and social – illustrate a broader institutional transformation. What began as a rights-based housing policy aimed at combating severe deprivation has evolved into a financial-administrative framework in which efficiency and compliance take precedence over equity and redistribution. This metamorphosis captures the central

tension of contemporary welfare governance: the struggle to reconcile social justice with the procedural logic of financial performance.

7.2. Broader Theoretical and Policy Implications

The case of the *1st Right* contributes to the broader debate on the Europeanisation and financialization of social policy. It highlights how integration into supranational financing structures can trigger processes of institutional adaptation that alter political trajectories without formal reforms. In this sense, policy drift functions as a subtle but powerful mechanism for transforming welfare, shaping outcomes through deadlines, indicators, and procedural constraints.

For European housing governance, this case underscores the need to rebalance social and financial rationalities. When recovery instruments such as the RRP impose rigid time and quantity constraints, they risk displacing the distributive logic of social programmes. On the other hand, policies that prioritise social objectives must be designed to accommodate the administrative and time constraints of multi-level financing.

7.3. Recommendations for Policy Design and Governance

The empirical and institutional analysis of the *1st Right* points to the need for a profound recalibration of housing policy design within multilevel governance frameworks. The findings suggest that, while European funding mechanisms can provide unprecedented resources, they also risk distorting policy objectives when financial performance becomes the dominant evaluation criterion. Preventing such distortions requires not only legislative or administrative adjustments, but also a redesign of the institutional architecture governing how social objectives are operationalised. The following recommendations aim to address these challenges by strengthening the redistributive coherence, administrative balance and temporal adaptability of housing policy implementation:

i. Strengthen social monitoring mechanisms – Financial execution should not replace redistributive assessment. Real-time monitoring systems are needed to assess who benefits from public housing investments and whether they effectively reach vulnerable groups.

ii. Differentiate instruments by target group – There should be distinct institutional designs for programmes addressing extreme vulnerability and those promoting accessibility for middle-income groups. Merging divergent objectives into a single framework leads to policy dilution.

iii. Strengthen capacity building for weaker municipalities – Technical and administrative support should accompany the allocation of funding to ensure that territorial inequalities are not perpetuated by unequal absorption capacity.

iv. Reconsidering temporal alignment – Social policies require continuity and flexibility. The rigid deadlines typical of EU funding cycles (such as the 2026 horizon of the RRP) are incompatible with the complex processes of rehousing and social rehabilitation.

v. Reaffirm the social function of housing – housing must be recognised as a right, not just an investment asset. Policies must reaffirm this principle by linking financial mechanisms to clear redistributive objectives.

7.4. Final reflection

From a sustainability perspective, the reconfiguration of the First Right Programme raises crucial questions about the long-term coherence between social rights and environmental imperatives. Although rehabilitation may offer short-term administrative advantages and potential energy efficiency gains, there is a risk of perpetuating spatial inequalities if it is not accompanied by an effective expansion of affordable housing stock. The integration of housing policy into a broader sustainability agenda therefore requires multidimensional assessment frameworks that balance social inclusion, territorial cohesion and environmental efficiency.

The trajectory of the *1st Right* summarises also a fundamental tension at the heart of contemporary social welfare governance, namely the coexistence of the discourse of social rights and

the logic of financial performance. Although the formal objectives of the programme remain socially oriented, its operational practice increasingly reflects a technocratic requirement to spend, report and present quantifiable results. The lesson from Portugal's experience is clear, pointing to the safeguarding of the right to housing within the scope of European funding programmes, which requires institutional designs capable of reconciling efficiency with equity. Without this recalibration, social rights run the risk of being affirmed in principle but emptied of meaning in practice, that is, a right that is proclaimed but only partially realised.

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