



# Prospects for increased social protection for informal carers in Portugal

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*Various policy developments since 2016 have opened up prospects for increased social protection for informal carers in Portugal, taking advantage of a favourable moment of political consensus. Although its final scope is still unclear, the process currently underway is designed to provide a framework and to result in profound changes for this group who currently receive insufficient support.*

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## Description

In recent years there has been growing concern about the need to develop support measures for informal carers. In mid-2016, various parliamentary groups issued and adopted Parliamentary Resolutions recommending support measures in favour of informal carers and/or the creation of a new status for them.

In January 2018, the working group created to study the establishment of a new status for informal carers delivered its report to the Parliament's Commission for Labour and Social Security. The report summarises much of the discussion on the subject and identifies two overall aspects to take into consideration, i.e. that measures should take into account the wish and availability of the person to become an informal carer, and should be irrespective of the age of the person cared for. Based on these overall aspects, it draws up a set of recommendations for supporting carers. These comprise: i) a support plan including respite and training; ii) leave and social benefits and/or financial support making up for possible income loss; and iii) the reconciliation of care with professional life.

In March 2018, following discussion of the report, the Parliament scheduled a joint discussion of five documents: a

petition, two draft Parliamentary resolutions and two draft laws.

The draft laws were presented by the left-wing Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and Left-Wing Bloc (BE), both of which signed a parliamentary agreement with the government. The right-wing Social Democrat Centre (CDS-PP) and the centre People-Animals-Nature Party (PAN) presented the draft resolutions.

The PAN's draft resolution and the draft law presented by the PCP call for enhanced support to dependent people and to their informal carers, but not for a specific status.

The Petition, submitted by a group of informal carers, calls for the creation of a status of informal carer for those looking after people with Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. However, the CDS-PP draft resolution and the BE draft law aim to create a status of informal carer without specifying the illness of the dependent person.

In its proposal, the PCP advocates the establishment of a support network for informal carers, the promotion of training, capacity building and counselling for informal carers, a recognised entitlement of informal carers to psycho-social support and the reinforcement of their labour and social protection.

The BE proposes that informal carers be recognised as such and integrated into the National Network for Integrated Continuous Care. Other BE proposals include the possibility to work part-time or with flexible working hours, as well as the fact that caring time should result in the accumulation of pension credits and in a right to 30 days of justified absence from work, 11 consecutive days of holiday and at least four respite days per month. During respite, care should be provided by home-based institutional services or the person cared for could be admitted for a short-term period to an inpatient unit. Additionally, the BE proposes an enhancement of existing social benefits, namely of the Dependent person's supplement and the Constant attendance allowance.

## Outlook & commentary

The approval of a status for informal carers and of support measures is undoubtedly important from a social protection standpoint.

According to the latest edition of the National Health Survey, in 2014 around 1 million people aged 15 years or more (i.e. 12.5%), mostly women, provided informal care or assistance to relatives or other non-family members (INE, 2016). In 2015, Portugal had the highest rate of informal home care in Europe, as well as the lowest rate of non-home-based care and one of the lowest coverage rates of formal care (ERS, 2015).

Studies have pointed out that without informal carers, around 80% of elderly and dependent people could be institutionalised. The work carers perform is estimated to represent almost 4 billion euros per year (Teixeira et al., 2017), i.e. approximately 2% of the Portuguese GDP if the two figures are compared.

Studies have also identified several vulnerabilities affecting informal

carers such as anxiety and depression, exhaustion, isolation, increased risk of poverty and difficulties to remain in the labour market. These risks have not been sufficiently tackled so far even if training and empowerment of informal carers is included in the National Programme for Health, Literacy and Self-care.

The moment for discussing increased social protection for informal carers is rather favourable, as the will to support them more effectively is gathering political consensus.

The programme of the Socialist Party (PS), currently in office, includes the objective of recognising and supporting informal carers. The right-wing parties, currently in the opposition, have also accepted the importance of the theme. The centre-right Social Democrat Party (PSD) has been reiterating the need to publicly discuss the issue, paving the way for the approval of a new status. The Social Democrat Centre (CDS-PP) decided not to present any draft law as it considers this to be a government task, but decided to present a new draft resolution.

As mentioned above, the left-wing parties PCP and BE presented draft laws. The PCP considers that the State can no longer neglect its responsibilities while the BE considers that the government is postponing the issue due to the costs for the Social Security system and also in order to avoid conflicts with employers.

The various proposals still under discussion in a Parliamentary Committee differ in scope and ambition. However, overall, they are relevant and needed. Although the outcome of this process is still unclear, the approval of a status and/or policy measures will mean a decisive step away from the current almost non-existent recognition of and support to carers, and will enable an approximation to standards already in place in other European countries.

## Further reading

Baptista, I. and Perista, P. (2018), ESPN Thematic Report on Challenges in long-term care - Portugal, Lisboa, CESIS/LISER/APPLICA/OSE/DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

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Reis, M. and Alvarez, C. (2017), "O Estatuto do Cuidador Informal. A importância da valorização de quem cuida das Pessoas com Demência: o que falta para a criação do Estatuto do Cuidador Informal em Portugal?" [Status of Informal Carer. The importance of valuing the carers of people with dementia: what is missing for the creation of a status for informal carers in Portugal?], Cidade Solidária nº 37, Lisboa, Centro Editorial da Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa.

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