

Written summary of the event

Site visit on energy poverty in Cañada Real

15 September 2022, Madrid, Spain.

FEANTSA – ECODES – Plataforma Luz

On 15 September 2022, FEANTSA, ECODES, and Cáritas Española and Plataforma Luz organised a visit to the Cañada Real site to better understand the concrete impact of energy poverty on the lives of its inhabitants.



The region of Madrid is the richest in Spain but of its 7 million inhabitants, 1 million are poor or at risk of poverty. Cañada Real is a 14-kilometre-long area located in a former cattle way belonging to the State and occupied by unauthorised constructions. The area covers several municipalities in the outskirts of Madrid city. It is one of Europe's largest shanty towns and the most striking example of inequalities and energy poverty in the region. Cañada Real is divided into sectors numbered from 1 to 6, with very diverse situations and backgrounds. Power outage first occurred in the poorest sectors 5 and 6 in October 2020, but from March 2022, it has extended to other sectors intermittently. Around 4,000 families and 2 548 children will have been living there without electricity for two years by now.

In 2009, State and regional levels decided to put an end to the official reservation of the area for cattle movements. In 2017, a regional pact was signed between the different authorities having a stake on the issue and all political parties to find solutions to a very complex reality based on a broad consensus, transparency and taking account of the interests of all the persons affected.

Pressure is put on residents to leave, but they organise and resist, demanding the right to pay for electricity. We gathered from informal discussions that the neighbourhood association and the ONGs active in the area do not all have concurrent views on whether the best way forward for the population is to insist on a connection to the grid (which is seen by some as a first step facilitating the legalisation of dwellings in the area) or to accept being installed in other areas offering better services. Public investments are being carried out at regional and local level to offer relocation possibilities to families in social dwellings in other areas of the region.



On 15 September 2022, FEANTSA and the civil platform "Light for Cañada Real" organised a visit on energy poverty and its impact on the living conditions in Cañada Real.

The visit welcomed 20 European experts and policy makers working on the issue of energy poverty in the context of rising energy prices. They met and discussed with inhabitants, representatives of inhabitants' associations, doctors, and activists to understand the impact of energy poverty on the lives of the people of Cañada Real, their health, and to understand their struggle for the right to pay for electricity and the respect of human rights.

The power cuts have a direct impact on the inhabitants' daily lives. They were not warned before the cuts, and no house was ready for this. These cuts do not only hinder from accessing light, but it is also a problem for heating the house, cooking, or refrigerating food or medicines for example.

Children in Cañada Real were highly impacted by the cuts. The lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis was still in effect during the initial power cuts, while schools were still closed. Many children fell behind in their studies due to the lack of light, which did not allow them to do their homework at home or follow online lessons (they couldn't work or recharge the tablets for school for example). Some of them felt stigmatised at school by their teachers and other families.

Energy poverty in Cañada Real has a clear and direct impact on people's mental and physical health. More teenagers show signs of anxiety, and people are in situation of shock. A higher number of women suffer from depression. The crisis has had a disproportionate effect on women, who do most of the family work and who sometimes suffer from gender-based violence because of their engagement as leaders in the combat. More cases of bronchitis, pneumonia, and dehydration have been reported since the cut took place. As insulin cannot be cooled, the energy cut has strongly affected people with diabetes. Carbon monoxide intoxications have also been documented because people brought fossil fuels boilers and

wood-burning stoves inside their homes for heating. The COVID-19 vaccine campaign also started late, and the power cuts made it difficult to respect the mandatory sanitary protocols in time of pandemic. It was not possible to isolate when people needed to gather around the only source of heat at home. Due to the digitalisation of health services (safety card, doctors' appointment, etc.) it is even more difficult to follow up the diagnoses of patients or schedule vaccines for children. The area lacks health infrastructures. Two doctors cover the area working in a van, and struggle to be present everywhere when needed. They attest that people living in Cañada Real always had bad health conditions but that they have worsened after the cuts, and particularly for new-borns and seniors.

Living conditions have worsened since the cuts, with the impact of climate aggravating energy poverty. The first power cuts were followed by the biggest ever winter storm in Madrid (Filomena). The summer of 2022 was also one of the hottest in Spain's history, which amplified the effects of energy poverty on people's lives.

As the situation has not changed over the last 2 years, some inhabitants have found coping strategies. Many households are now working with solar energy, but the installation is very costly (between 6000-7000€ for a day-to-day life). Some organisations helped them with the financing, but the assistance is not maintained in time and difficult to access.

Inhabitants maintain a complex relationship with the regional and local authorities and the problem is politicised. The energy company cutting supply relied on the fact that only a handful of dwellings in the area had entered a contract for supply. The justification used by the government for the cuts was that there was an overcharge in the area due to marijuana production, and that the grid could not handle it. The inhabitants question the fact that no one was arrested for illegal action following this measure, and that other areas in Madrid face the same situation without suffering power cuts. The residents referred to the regional pact that was signed by all political parties in 2017 stating that until the Cañada Real issue is resolved, all housing should be maintained with all supplies. However, since the cuts in 2020, it has not been implemented.

People in Cañada Real suffer from a bad reputation in Spain. **Inhabitants suffer from a negative public opinion, as most people identify Cañada Real as a place of crime and narcotraffic.** The inhabitants claim that this is not true for most of the area. They present themselves as "a big family of people from different religions and cultures who want to fight to have energy and to pay for it." It is because of this stable community and presence of their families for several generations that people don't want to leave.