

CAIS Recicla is a creative workshop in which beneficiaries of CAIS transform industrial waste created by companies into eco-friendly stationery products. In this article Nuno Carmo explains how the social economy of CAIS Recicla responds to more than one pressing issue and how the project can help those who have been out of the job market for a while to (re)gain skills and confidence.

CAIS RECICLA: WE TRANSFORM EVERYTHING - LIVES, FIRST OF ALL



By **Nuno do Carmo**, Coordinator of Centro CAIS Porto and manager of CAIS Recicla

CAIS Recicla is a transformative workshop that reduces waste and transforms lives. We are a project of Associação CAIS, a portuguese NGO which has for 27 years aimed to contribute to the improvement of living conditions of citizens at risk of social exclusion, for human dignity, through training and employability.

At CAIS, our action falls under 3 main pillars: (1) **Training**, leading to (2) **employability**, while at the same time fostering (3) **reflection** within wider society on matters of poverty and exclusion.

Whilst our first and most known project has been our magazine, developed with the same philosophy of the UK's *Big Issue* magazine, where 70% of the sales' price reverts to the seller, we have for the past 10 years been developing social businesses, and CAIS Recicla is, today, our most established one.

The project started being developed when we noticed two main issues: that our partner companies often had large amounts of industrial materials going to waste, and that there was a lack of opportunities for people with low qualifications and in a situation of vulnerability.

The solution we found was a creative workshop that transforms industrial waste created by companies into eco-friendly stationery products - with these products being handcrafted by beneficiaries from CAIS and then being sold to companies or to the general public.

We therefore have two main objectives: one is environmental, to reduce the amount of materials going to waste, and the other is social, to train our beneficiaries and increase their likelihood of integrating into the job market in a successful manner.



One of the main difficulties we face when it comes to the employability of people in a situation of vulnerability is that there are no adequate projects through which people who have been removed from the formal job market for a long time can (re)gain skills and confidence. In addition to the loss of technical skills and routines that people may experience over a period of unemployment, they will face the additional challenge of readjustment that the transition to new employment can hold. For some of these people, starting a new job often leads to a drastic and unsustainable transition - sometimes the difficult part is not getting people to integrate into the job market, but making sure they can *sustain* that job.



We provide people in a situation of vulnerability with the means to develop and solidify their personal and professional skills and, consequently, increase the likelihood of a successful, sustainable integration in the formal job market. We develop specific paths according to the different beneficiaries of the project, adapting schedules and workloads. We also adapt our creative processes to the beneficiaries. Cutting something is different from counting pages; measuring something different from folding something. We try to adapt our processes to the people we work with, so that they can be comfortable with what we are doing.

Parallel to these working skills, we also have group activities called ADPS [roughly translated as Activities for Personal and Social Development], where we work with 17 skill sets that are essential for any successful integration into the job market and for living in a democratic society - from empathy, to perspective, to teamwork and conflict resolution, to decision making and leadership. The whole logic behind this approach is that our beneficiaries regain routines, and then develop all the skills mentioned in a way that makes sense to them and is not imposing.

CAIS Recicla is not a recent project, but it has undergone a wave of structural changes since 2018. A new management team brought together a different philosophy that aimed to first solidify internal processes, then overhaul the image and lines of communication, to then expand and consolidate the project.

These changes had an immediate impact, with production growing 10x from the first to the second semester, and with new tools and machines [the main acquisition being a sewing machine].

This wave of transformation meant more processes were done internally, which added a layer of complexity to the internal management, but also made the project more transformative. In 2018, 13 beneficiaries were involved in the project, and there was a drastic increase in pieces produced and sales.

2019 continued, with us being able to recruit a new head handcrafter, new machinery - including an electric guillotine, and to develop new products for new clients. The biggest step was, nevertheless, the renovation of a space that was being used as a warehouse for the Centre. We have completely transformed the space into a showroom/workshop, so that the general public can come and see our products and processes. We wanted to gain that dimension, where we could be accessible and transparent.

Along with these transformations we have expanded our customer base, shipping products to new clients in Portugal and Luxembourg. This resulted in an even bigger increase in production, totalling 10,281 pieces for the year [+125,51% when compared to 2019], and an increase in revenue of 87%.

Our plans for 2020 were, of course, greatly affected by the pandemic, but we have used the first lockdown to develop a new image and communication strategy, by focusing on three main pillars - lives, products, and clients/partners.

The logic here is threefold. We transform the *lives* of the beneficiaries we work with, the *products/materials* we have access to, reinventing them all with creativity, and of *clients/partners* that choose to cooperate with us, and therefore are creating social and environmental impact.

We also involve our clients in our process even more. From brochures, to posters, to packages, to letterhead paper, most organizations will have materials that are obsolete, so we try to integrate them into our finished products - we have lately been producing products without any virgin materials, i.e. only using waste materials, which generates an even bigger positive environmental impact, but also creates a more emotional connection between the client and the product.

We have also tried to develop better impact measurement tools, to understand our project in the three dimensions mentioned above.

Handcrafters are evaluated in how much they have developed professional skills but also in their personal well-being. We have been noticing a pattern in people highlighting the impact the work has on their well-being, as they do not just feel that they are a part of a horizontal and democratic project or contributing to a bigger



cause, but also that they are busy and that their self-esteem is boosted. Today, we have people who actively come to us in order to be involved in our production and, because of that, we have progressively increased the number of beneficiaries that cooperate with the project, from 11 to 19 in just two years.

When it comes to products, we produced, last year, 7,230 products that originated from the transformation of 57,162 donated materials.

We have also tried to involve civil society more in the project, establishing new partnerships with universities and key partners. This broadened participation led to us producing bags for a foundation for one of the main private tv channels in the country, products for one of the largest waste management companies, international companies, weddings, and even a hip hop artist. Our orders have increased over 50% when compared to 2019. 100% of our customers answered they would order again and recommend our products, rating their overall satisfaction at 4.75 out of 5.

All these steps have resulted in us being the best ranked project in Porto's Municipal Social Entrepreneurship Awards, which allows us to transform the project even more.

2021 will be the year where we finish renovating part of the space we are using, so that we can use it to its full potential. We are also launching a new personalised line of products.

We have, for the first time ever, hired someone to work with us full time. We are also preparing the launch of our online store and acquiring new machinery and tools that will allow us to expand our transformative processes, with manual printing processes like serigraphy and linography.

Throughout the years, 100+ beneficiaries have participated in the project; 75,000+ products have been made, with the cooperation of 10+ designers. Notably, 25% of the beneficiaries have integrated into the job market. The remaining became empowered with training and qualifications.

We will continue to be open to finding ways of positively impacting the lives of our beneficiaries and reducing waste. We hope you can join us in this wave of transformation.

Do reach out to us in caisrecicla@cais.pt
Find us on linktr.ee/caisrecicla

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