

Spotlights on the multiple crises: Impacts and responses on the ground

BY ROBERTO BISSIO, SOCIAL WATCH

COVID-19 is a global catastrophe, but every one of the millions of infections has happened in the context of close local contact. While global mobility has spread the new coronavirus at fast speed all over the world, national capacities and policies to confront it are very different. Injustices and inequalities aggravate the impact of COVID-19 and without strong intervention from the State, the existing imbalances are reinforced. A few billionaires are getting richer while the slow-paced progress over decades to reduce global hunger and poverty is being reversed.

Civil society organizations around the world are monitoring the impact of COVID-19 and reclaiming the streets, with revitalized leadership and a rainbow of demands that combine old and new issues.

“Back to normal” is not possible nor desirable. The needed global changes are being incubated by a myriad of local hopes and actions.

When the new coronavirus was first detected in China, at the end of 2019, the decision to lock down huge areas in order to stop its spread (not without some initial hesitation) clearly put the protection of life first. Economic losses and damages were to be dealt with later.

One by one (but remarkably not collectively) most governments of the world took similar decisions and societies drastically reduced their mobility on a global scale unprecedented in history.

A Brazilian catastrophe

Only a handful of political leaders decided to confront scientific advice, and one of these was President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, for whom COVID-19 was “just another little flu”. The result has been catastrophic, not just in terms of the pandemic (over 100,000 diagnosed deaths by mid-August 2020, second only to those in the USA) but also in terms of the

economy that his denial policies tried to protect.

In June, the World Bank forecast an 8 percent decline in Brazil’s GDP in 2020 (from a previous forecast of 2% growth),¹ while the global economy is estimated to decline by 4.9 percent and emerging market and developing economies, including Brazil, by 3 percent, in their first contraction in at least 60 years.²

This means that in spite of Brazil being a top exporter of food and agricultural products, it risks being included this year in the Hunger Map produced by the FAO, due to the combined effect of an increase in unemployment and a decrease in social security payments.

1 World Bank, “COVID-19 in Brazil: Impacts and Policy Responses”; <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/152381594359001244/pdf/Main-Report.pdf>

2 IMF, World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020.

According to the Institute for Social and Economic Studies (INESC) progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Brazil³ by Ana Cernov and Iara Pietricovsky, “Brazil is one of the few developing countries that has a public health system, with universal and free access – the Unified Health System (SUS), established by the Constitution in 1988. Just when this system most needs all available resources to deal with an unprecedented health crisis, the health budget in Brazil, which historically is insufficient, had allocated the same resources in 2019 as in 2018 and at the same levels as in 2014.” But between 2014 and 2019, the Brazilian population increased by 7 million people. As a result, the report concludes, “the lack of funding for health has limited the capacity for a quick and efficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly harming the most vulnerable populations, which depend exclusively on SUS.”

Social Watch-**Bénin** also reports dramatic cuts in health expenditure in this African country prior to the eruption of COVID-19: “The financial resources of the Health Ministry have been dropping since 2015 (7.9% in 2015; 6.8% in 2016; 5.2% in 2017; 5.3% in 2018 and 5% in 2019). This is far below the percentage of the budget that should be allocated to health according to the recommendations of the Abuja Declaration and of the WHO.”

Similarly in **Bahrain**, which used to be “recognized amongst Gulf states for its excellent health services and indicators” the report by the Bahrain Transparency Society observes that “things are changing”. Among the changes, the shift from free to paid medication is forcing low-income expatriates to forego adequate health care, thus increasing their vulnerability.

As the Brazilian report points out, “neoliberal policies are not meant to respond to emergencies”, and therefore “social policies are essential to guarantee the life and dignity of the most vulnerable groups, and looking at the economy alone will only reinforce inequalities and widen the gap between social classes”.

3 The full text of all the quoted national civil society reports are available at www.socialwatch.org.

In contrast, the report from the Social Watch Coalition of the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (RDC) informs readers that the new government, elected in 2019, has raised salaries for nurses and doctors, among other pieces of good news, like the liberation of all political prisoners and the establishment of free basic education. Yet “the socio-economic situation is worrying... as RDC had barely declared the end of the campaign against the ebola virus when the new coronavirus entered the country”.

Food Insecurity

According to the latest FAO report, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020,” almost 690 million people went hungry in 2019 –up by 10 million from 2018, and by nearly 60 million in five years. 4 High prices and poor access also mean billions cannot eat a healthy or nutritious diet.

Across the planet, the COVID-19 pandemic could tip as many as 132 million more people into chronic hunger by the end of 2020.

A July 2020 analysis by FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP) identified 27 “hotspot countries” at high risk of—and in some cases already seeing—significant food security deterioration in the coming months, including rising numbers of people pushed into acute food insecurity.⁵

The FAO is particularly concerned about the pandemic’s impacts on vulnerable communities already grappling with hunger or other crises— including for example, the Desert Locust outbreak in the Horn of Africa and beyond, economic shock and insecurity in Yemen or the Sahel—as well as countries that rely heavily on food imports, such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and countries that depend on primary exports such as oil.⁶

4 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/online/ca9692en.html>

5 <http://www.fao.org/3/cb0258en/CB0258EN.pdf>

6 <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/q-and-a/impact-on-food-and-agriculture/en/>

Between March and May 2020, while countries around the world were massively locking down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World's 25 richest billionaires saw their personal fortune increase by US\$ 255 billion. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, gained US\$ 30 billion alone, consolidating his position as the richest person in the world, with an estimated fortune of US\$ 146.9 billion.⁷

At the same time, at the other end of the pyramid, the UN estimates that the global Human Development Index will actually fall in 2020 for the first time since it started to be computed in 1990, that poverty will increase and that the number of people facing food insecurity could double.⁸

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres graphically summarized: "...while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris".⁹

COVID-19 is having a differential impact across different countries and social strata. The losses and damages are enormous, but very unevenly distributed.

In Brazil, for example, "although the contamination rate for white and black people is similar, black people die in greater numbers: the mortality rate among whites is 38 percent and among black people 55 percent. In the favelas, where it is more difficult to comply with the recommendations on hygiene and social distancing, due to precarious basic sanitation and housing conditions, residents have three problems: the virus, hunger, and the ostensible presence of police forces." Inadequate housing and territorial inequities are a growing problem, made worse by COVID-19 (see Box 1.1).

7 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2020/05/22/billionaires-zuckerberg-bezos/#2a5359557ed6>

8 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26482HLPF_Advancing_human_wellbeing_BN_FINAL_1July2020.pdf

9 António Guterres, UN Secretary-General's Nelson Mandela Lecture, 18 July 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-18/secretary-generals-nelson-mandela-lecture-%E2%80%9Ctackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era%E2%80%9D-delivered>

What is "essential"?

A range of different forms of confinement and quarantine were implemented around the world in order to slow down the spread of the pandemic and avoid a collapse of overburdened health systems. In that process, low-paid services such as home deliveries, food processing, garbage collection and care-giving were identified as "essential".

In most comparatively affluent countries those services are largely provided by immigrants and yet, as reported from the UK by Imogen Richmond-Bishop of Just Fair, "COVID-19 has disproportionately affected migrant communities" through drops in income; limited access to welfare support; barriers for homeless migrants to access accommodation and overcrowded and substandard housing."

One of the measures introduced in the UK in 2012 as part of the "Hostile Environment" (for immigrants) is the "No Recourse to Public Funds" (NRPF) provision. A person with NRPF cannot access most welfare benefits or social housing. Without the safety net of social security, many families with NRPF end up living in destitution and are at high risk of exploitation and abuse. As a result, 32 percent of foreign-born households live in poverty compared to 19 percent for white British-born people.

In **Bahrain**, the population increased threefold between 2001 (650,000) and 2019 (1.7 m), mostly due to an abnormal influx of expatriates as well as mass naturalization. Bahrainis make up 45 percent and non-Bahrainis 55 percent of the population. Most migrant workers are males willing to travel alone to foreign destinations in order to remit funds to family members back home. This phenomenon forces both local and expatriate workers into a weak bargaining position. Existing legislation does not provide workers the needed space to defend their rights—partly due to restrictions imposed on the labour movement. The surplus in the expatriate workforce resulted in increased unemployment among both the local and expatriate workforce. In particular, working conditions and accommodations for many migrant workers are appalling, with several people crammed into a single room in the dormitories.

This situation created conditions for a rapid spread of COVID-19 and forced closures or at best limited functioning of numerous sectors, including aviation and hospitality, thereby undermining non-oil revenues at the same time as the global plunge in oil prices. Bahrain resorted to borrowing from local and international markets. The Brazil INESC report concludes: “The catastrophic impact of this double crises of COVID-19 and an oil slump, re-asserts the need for radical review of the development model.”

Migrant Workers

There are 164 million migrant workers around the world, rendering them an important part of the global labour force. This is particularly the case in key sectors vital to economies and societies in the context of COVID-19, such as healthcare and food production. For example, among the countries most affected by COVID-19, many depend on foreign-born workers in healthcare services, particularly the USA, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Switzerland. Immigrants also constitute a significant share in other sectors affected by the crisis. For example, nearly 17 percent of skilled agricultural and fishery workers in the United Kingdom in 2015–2016 were foreign-born. COVID-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing global competition for attracting much-needed health workers and the need to address labour shortages in the agricultural sector.¹⁰

The need for governments to act swiftly to fight the pandemic has led to the adoption of emergency measures in many countries and parliaments have passed laws allowing the executive branch, for example, to impose curfews and confinements, restricting freedoms otherwise protected as human rights. But in deeply divided societies such restrictions are not always consensual and there is a very legitimate fear that authorities could use them for purposes beyond the need to protect public health.

This was clearly the case in **Hungary**, where, as explained by the Hungarian Social Watch Report 2020, “the emergency bill adopted by parliament in March 2020 gave Prime Minister Viktor Orbán sweeping powers to rule by decree and jail people for spreading information deemed to be fake news”. The government portrayed the move as a necessary response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, but critics immediately labelled the legislation dangerously open-ended and vulnerable to abuse.

Ultimately, when parliament ended the emergency in May, the prime minister kept more powers than those he had had prior to the pandemic.

One positive exception to this trend can be seen in the state of **Kerala, India**. Unlike most of the country, where the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi has trampled human rights and severely curtailed labour rights, Kerala’s Left Democratic Front government has successfully contained the pandemic through both its strong public health system and, equally important, a firm commitment to human rights and a democratic decentralization process (see Box 1.2).

Back to the streets

“Stay at home” policies imposed an additional burden on women through extra care work as well as greater risk of domestic violence. In many countries these lockdown policies also succeeded in emptying the streets of protesters that until earlier this year had demanded an end to austerity policies, more freedom and less inequality and discrimination (see Box 1.3 on Chile).

Jordan is one of the places where the expressions of discontent were successful. “The numerous protests in Jordan, mostly led by civil society organizations (CSOs), achieved sustainable social and economic improvements in terms of better wages, working conditions and the dismantling of unjust regulations,” reports the Phenix Center for Economic Studies from Amman. It adds:

¹⁰ https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/issue_brief_why_migration_matters_for_recovering_better.pdf

While the government had long disregarded the work of the CSOs or refused to engage in dialogue, their social role as mediators and decision-makers increased through the strong participation of non-political actors from the youth and middle class. Furthermore, the protests raised greater awareness – here, the intense use of social media undoubtedly played an important role – by showing people what they can achieve through collective efforts, which contributed to the emergence of new social and political movements and expansion of existing CSO networks throughout the collaboration between asymmetric actors. As an example, one of those new alliances and coalitions were the joint efforts of trade unions and business associations during the tax reform protests.

As in many other countries, the report noted, tax reform and other conditionalities imposed by the IMF in Jordan produced “greater distrust of the population in the government”.

Lebanon was considering IMF support to face the economic crisis before the August explosion in Beirut. The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) warned that “an IMF package, provided in the form of loans will merely mean a further debt crisis. Conditionalities that undermine both Lebanese sovereignty and promote austerity measures detrimental to already weak public services in Lebanon would push the country off the cliff.”

A widespread and non-sectarian social mobilization (Thawra) had started in Lebanon on 17 October 2019 “addressing recurrent injustices in accessibility and affordability of fundamental rights, including education and health, high unemployment and informality” and demanding the resignation of the government. “From students to the elderly, different professionals, namely teachers and doctors, as well as unemployed people have been part of the Thawra since its inception reflecting the country’s deeply rooted and multi-level injustices.” The mobilization stopped with the lockdown due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020.

The response of the government to the pandemic has been very limited, reports ANND: “A voluntary

fund was created as a tool to provide financial aid of 400.000 Lebanese liras to those in need – with no clarity as to its beneficiaries. Like the longstanding National Poverty Targeting Programme, such temporary anti-poverty measures are inadequate and do not address the root causes of inequalities, poverty, and injustices.” The government ultimately resigned after the August 2020 explosion, when massive numbers of people came back to the streets (see Box 1.4).

In **Nicaragua**, too, taxes are identified as being at the root of massive protests, according to the report by Coordinadora Civil:

As multinational corporations do not pay their fair share of taxes, Nicaragua sees its fiscal capacity diminished and the government raised the taxes on small and medium enterprises and on consumption (through VAT) twice in 2019. The impact of taxes on women is greater than on men, so much that the term “Pink Tax” has been used to make that difference visible.

Moreover, gender inequalities in Nicaragua are among the worst in Latin America. Some 77 percent of working women are in informal employment and depend on their partners for health insurance or social security coverage, which they lose in case of divorce, while the few with formal employment lose all benefits if they abandon the workforce to care (without remuneration) for children, sick or elderly family members.

Not surprisingly, demands for gender equality, women’s sexual and reproductive rights and care-centred social policies have been put high on the agenda of the protesters.

Race-based inequalities are another major source of grievances. The Brazilian Social Watch report notes: “Afro-Brazilians represent 75 percent in the group of the poorest 10 percent; a black person is 2.7 times more likely to die from homicide than is a white one; in the job market, black workers earn less; 46.9 percent of the black population is in the informal sector, when the percentage among white is 33.7 percent; and the white worker received, on

average, 72.5 percent more than a black professional in 2017.” The resources devoted to change this reality of “structural, institutional and personal racism” represent, on average 0.08 percent of the federal budget distributed in various bodies”.

In the **USA**, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in May 2020 sparked an outpouring of protest, giving even greater urgency to the #BlackLivesMatter movement that began in 2013. Drawing on grassroots organizing and activism that had been developing over many years, recognition of – and mobilization against – the systemic nature of anti-Black racism spread widely, with sustained protests across the country and even internationally. The related calls to “Defund the Police” reflected recognition of the ways that economic and budgetary decisions play a major role in maintaining white supremacy. For example, the average wealth of white families is 6.7 times greater than that of black families,¹¹ due to decades of racist economic policy and practices, including housing and tax policies.¹²

In **Puerto Rico**, meanwhile, the “Summer 2019” uprising was triggered by the leaking of homophobic chats between Governor Ricky Roselló and his friends. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protests against sexism, homophobia and misogyny, but also against austerity policies, as synthesized in the outcry of “Ricky renuncia y llévate a la Junta” (Ricky, resign and take the Oversight Board with you).

Roselló resigned a few weeks after, but “la Junta” stayed. Created in 2016 when the island defaulted on its public debt, the Puerto Rico Oversight Board is charged with leading the country to “fiscal responsibility and access to capital markets”. Its members are designated by the US president and Congress (in which Puerto Rico has no representatives) and they are not accountable to any elected Puerto Rican authority.

Martha Quiñones Domínguez from Observatorio de la Deuda (Debt Watch) at the University of Puerto Rico-Arecibo reports that while the protest movement was successful in forcing the governor to resign, “territorial zoning was arbitrarily changed to allow construction projects that violate land use planning, laws were changed to limit rights, debt rescheduling forced budget cuts in pensions, education and health and the public Electric Power Authority was privatized”.

In July and August 2020, the protest movement started again, with demands for adequate compensation for healthcare workers and car rallies blocking the airport to demand an end to pandemic control measures. Amid resignations and prison sentences for legislators convicted of corruption, the primary elections due in August were cancelled by the territory’s Supreme Court because of the chaotic way in which they were organized.

Elections are better organized in **Switzerland**, but not without surprises. In November 2019, the left-wing Swiss alternative green party increased its seats from 11 to 28 in the lower house of the federal parliament. The more business-friendly Green liberal party increased its seats from 7 to 16. Most of these gains by parties traditionally committed to some kind of environmental protection came at the expense of right-wing parties, mostly the Swiss People’s Party. This shift was “unprecedented in Swiss recent history,” according to the report by the Swiss Platform 2030 Agenda:

This ended a year when the youth climate movement and the women’s strike took the streets, mobilizing crowds of historic size. With an ubiquitous presence in mass media, they changed Swiss public discourse, overshadowing sterile discussions on migration driven by conservatives, which previously were dominating....Both movements seized upon a key topic in sustainable development and made efforts to tackle the issue within a sustainability framework, to adopt holistic perspectives and to explore the connections to other aspects of sustainability.

The women’s strike and concurrent demonstrations on 14 June 2019 in many towns across the country

11 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>

12 <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/tax-code-can-do-more-to-narrow-racial-gaps-in-income-and-wealth>

managed to mobilize over half a million women and men, surpassing all expectation. With this strong signal and the discussions before and after this historic day, the women's strike successfully placed the message that Switzerland still has to tackle women's issues such as the gender pay gap, employee protection in case of pregnancy, maternity leave, violence against women and sexual harassment.

The youth movements to combat climate change joined forces with other groups and called for a single major climate demonstration in Bern on 29 September 2019. People streamed into the city from the entire country, quickly filling the rather small streets and places of Bern's city centre, so that many participants could not come close to the government building. This turned out to be the biggest demonstration that the Swiss capital city had ever seen, marking an impressive success in mobilization.

The "pan" in "pandemic" means "all" or "global" in Greek, while "demos" is the people affected, which are local and close by. The pandemic is global but every one of the millions of infections is the result of close local contact. "Back to normal" is not possible nor desirable as "normal" was a world of unbearable inequalities and blatant injustices marching towards climate disaster. The needed global changes will also be brought by a myriad of local hopes and actions.