

Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

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PAID DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THE CRISIS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN PANDEMIC TIMES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM INDIA

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The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Monitor on COVID-19 recently brought out an assessment of the impact of the pandemic on paid domestic workers where its technical officer on vulnerable workers, Claire Hobden, predictably stated: “The COVID-19 crisis had exposed the particular vulnerability of informal domestic workers, emphasizing the urgent need to ensure they are effectively included in labour and social protection.”ⁱ The vulnerabilities that this statement refers to arise out of the ‘invisibility’ and ‘non-recognition’ of domestic workers as ‘workers’ with legitimate rights. For this reason alone, it is difficult to find credible estimates of, both the number of domestic workers in different countries, as also the exact scale of the worldwide crises emerging from the COVID pandemic.

Available information draws from the character of the impact of the pandemic on the domestic workers. However, despite this limitation the ILO has estimated that about 55 million paid domestic workers have been adversely impacted by the pandemic and of these, 37 million are women. In South Asia alone, it is estimated that by 15 May 2020, 87.5 percent of all paid domestic workers faced the brunt of the economic crises arising

out of the measures to tackle the pandemic by the governments of different nations.ⁱⁱ The ILO’s estimation is based on two assumptions: first, on the available latest estimates of national labour force statistics for different countries; second that there has been a uniform impact of closures or lockdowns to control the pandemic. Though both these assumptions are reasonable for a rapid assessment, they may not give us an in depth understanding of the long term impact of the pandemic. At best they point towards the deepening of a persistent crisis of social reproduction for all categories of domestic workers.

This short essay illustrates some aspects of this crisis through an examination of the preliminary results of a pan-India survey by the All India Democratic Women’s Association. The survey was done by activists in eleven States and fifty five districts of the country, covering approximately 1,726 paid live-out domestic workers. The experience of these workers shows that the impact of the pandemic has been structured by long term vulnerabilities that arise out of their lack of recognition as ‘workers’ which keeps them outside the ambit of labour laws; this in turn reflects the lack of adequate legal and

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institutional coverage in terms of access to social protection and decent working conditions. In order to highlight this, many women and trade union organisations have been fighting for the ratification of ILO's Convention 189 in India; in the wake of the pandemic these groups have rightly been emphasising a greater urgency to provide legal protection to domestic workers. While this in itself is a significant and worthwhile struggle, often partially successful in many regional contexts in India, the fragile nature of these victories is evident of the generalised penury that has been faced by domestic workers, even in states where some amount of protection is available. The root cause of this fragility, as analysed through the survey, is linked to the vulnerabilities of all informal labour and its crisis of social reproduction, which is reflected in the inability of women workers to meet their daily requirements even in the pre-pandemic times.

The crisis faced by workers in vulnerable and informal employment is best exemplified by the burden of social reproduction on domestic workers, whose place in the world of work is structured by the invisible and informal nature of their employment. As has been evident in a multitude of studies, the unimaginable burden of social reproduction on these women arises from the class position of their families where their husbands and other earning members are largely in informal employment with no

steady source of income. For example, data available from the National Capital Region, Delhi shows that many family members of domestic workers were dependent on the sole earnings of domestic workers even before the pandemic: about 60 percent had school going children whose school fees had to be paid by these workers; 51 percent had unemployed spouses; and 14 percent had disabled or elderly members in the family.ⁱⁱⁱ The 2014 All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) survey on Delhi found that the average size of the family of the domestic worker was 4.9, and the monthly income was about INR 2,800 (approx. USD 37.30).^{iv} This had only gone up to USD 63.70 or INR 4,786 in 2020, but more than half of the workers got less than this amount. This means that the crisis of social reproduction persisted even before the onset of the pandemic. However, the rapid assessment or AIDWA Survey 2020 did not get into this aspect because of the constraints imposed by the conditions in which the survey was undertaken.

Coming to the broad contours of the impact of the pandemic, the Survey highlights selected facets of the consequences of unplanned lockdown by the government to 'control the pandemic.' There were three phases when mobility was restricted for the workers and employers were not willing to call them for work: the closure started on 24 March 2020 and was extended after 15 April

till 4 May 2020; but from 5 May onwards, the workers were allowed to work as per 'guidelines' of the Union Government.^v The Survey assessed access to work in all these three periods and found that a majority of the domestic workers had no work during the period of the lockdown. In the first period (i.e. 24 March to 15 May) about 59 percent of the surveyed women did not get any work, whereas some employers (from multiple houses) gave minimal work to 9 percent of the total sample. This means that 68 percent of the women were work deprived either totally or to a very large extent. Further it is also significant that 41 percent of the women got no salary for the month of March even though they had worked for three weeks in March; 24 percent were only given salary for the amount of work they had done till 24 March 2020. This situation got progressively worse in the second phase of the lockdown when 80 percent of the surveyed women could not go to work and only 4 percent did work in a few houses. This was accompanied by the massive loss of income, with 61 percent of the all women getting no wages in April and only 13 percent getting a part of the wages: this means that about 73 percent of all surveyed women faced massive income losses. It appears a small minority of surveyed women got paid by sympathetic employers even though they were asked to stay at home. These may have been women who also got

assurances that they would get their jobs back once the lockdown opened.

In light of this it is significant to highlight that approximately 44 percent of the surveyed women did not get their jobs back even after restrictions on movement of domestic workers was removed after 5 May 2020. In many cases where women worked in multiple houses, only a few employers (i.e. 10 percent of the total sample), called them back to work. This denial of work was influenced by the popular perception that women living in slum habitations would bring the infection to the homes of the employers and the stigma associated with being 'COVID positive,' playing an especially important role in the denial of work for migrant workers and workers in the informal labour. About a third of the workers reported that their societies or resident welfare associations had prevented them from coming into the colonies to work; in more than half the cases women either feared the virus, or faced lack of availability of public transport, or feared harassment from the police if they went out for work.

This generalised phenomenon of the loss of work is corroborated by a random survey of the Government of India's Domestic Workers Sector Skill Council which reported that 23.5 percent of the migrant domestic workers had gone back to their village, about 85 percent had lost their work, and those who found some work had an income loss of at

least 44 percent in their salaries. However, this survey also concluded that domestic workers were receiving their incomes in affluent colonies and metro cities.^{vi} But this particular conclusion is not borne out by the AIDWA survey which shows that more than half the domestic workers did not get money for either March or April in the affluent colonies of South Delhi where domestic workers went to work; more than half of them in Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai also did not get paid for a good part of March and April. Thus, all surveys show that effectively, job and income loss remained a huge problem for a majority of the women.

As is obvious, loss of work for the women is typically accompanied by the lack of earning of the husbands of these women, many of whom work as daily wagers, construction workers, contractual workers and other such occupations which form the core of vulnerable informal employment. Some of them are also self-employed like rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, street vendors etc., who do not have the economic capacity to survive a closure of business. The AIDWA survey revealed that the husbands of 70 percent of the domestic workers had not earned any money during the period of the lockdowns and 17 percent had no husbands and had been sole earners even before the pandemic. This means that the loss of work for domestic workers has led to the destitution of their families, many of whom have had to

take loans to survive: in seven out of eleven states more than 20 percent of the women had taken loans to survive; in three states more than 45 percent of the surveyed women had taken loans for meeting their needs.^{vii} Many others did not take loans because they feared that they would not have the capacity to pay back their debts.

The above mentioned loss of livelihood and the crisis emanating from the precarious economic situation is foregrounded in the deepening and persistent informality which afflicts the domestic work. This reality has been contested by women and workers organisations which have been struggling for at least the inclusion of wages under the schedule of work within the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 (which has now been replaced by the Code on Wages). In some states there have also been some successes, with five of the eleven surveyed states having regulations to bring domestic work under Minimum Wages. However, as revealed in this survey, the ground realities are different; 73 percent of the surveyed women earned less than Rs. 5,000 per month (or USD 66.72), with 23 percent earning even less than Rs. 2,000 (USD 26.69) per month prior to the lockdown. The situation can be illustrated through the example of Karnataka, one of the states where the law of minimum wages is applicable for domestic work. In this state, the minimum wages for domestic workers was set at around Rs 13,000 (USD 173.47)

per month for 8 hours of work in 2018. By this standard the hourly wage would be about Rs. 55 (USD 0.73) per hour. If the woman worked in about 2.5 houses per day and spent about 5 working hours, her monthly earning should be about Rs. 8,250 (USD 110.08) per month. This is far higher than the average monthly income of Rs. 5,317.70 (USD 66.52) in the survey in Karnataka. Even the other states with minimum wages for domestic workers report similar conditions. It must further be noted, that any rise in monthly income is a result of “working more” and “working harder,” rather than having better terms and conditions of work, implying that those who work in more houses have a higher income. Further, most women worked in two houses or more to earn higher wages; in states like West Bengal women even worked in about 10 houses and travelled long distances to earn a mere Rs. 8,000 (USD 106.75) per month. Such instances only highlight the extreme exploitation of domestic workers in India.

As we have seen above, the crisis of social reproduction is endemic to the very existence of women domestic workers under a negligent neoliberal state which has been refusing to recognise and respond to the problems of women workers. Few days after the first lockdown was imposed, the government announced a relief package^{viii} with some food and miniscule income support for ‘migrants’ and some other

workers. This small support was followed by several announcements by state governments and four tranches of a so-called relief package by the Union government in mid-April, with a purported aim to provide support to all workers and farmers. However, these much debated measures, did not even mention the plight of women domestic workers and their families, many of who were employed in informal labour and no substantial support was either pledged or given to them.

In the background of these measures, the Survey documented the ground level realities with respect to government support and found that access to subsidised food and free rations was the only measure that had benefited women and their families in some limited ways. While about 70 percent of the women possessed ration cards for subsidised food, about 76 percent received help in terms of subsidised rations. But even this support in terms of food was not regular in its supply as some women were only assisted once and others did not receive their full quota of rations, thus compelling the women to reduce food intake. This meagre support was also not accompanied by any other form of cash transfers or support, even though these were promised by governments at different levels. About 53 percent of the women received no support other than food rations, whereas 27 percent of the women received a paltry sum of Rs. 500 (USD 6.67) per month for two months under the Jan Dhan Yojana,

and 13 percent of the single women (out of total of 17 percent in the sample), received approximately Rs. 1,000 (USD 26.69) to Rs. 2,000 (USD 53.38) as widow pension. In effect, 80 percent received no substantial survival support during the lockdown or after the process of unlocking began. It should further be noted that the situation was the worst in the BJP ruled states of Haryana and Karnataka where more than 60 percent received no support. It is further significant to note that in Haryana a vast majority did not even receive support in the form of cooked food or dry rations. This created a more generalised crisis of social reproduction within all informal labour, of which the domestic workers form an important part.

The discussion above shows that the impact of the pandemic on the life of domestic workers is embedded in a larger systemic crisis that was persistent since the pre-pandemic times and was characterised by the deepening and reconfiguration of informality in the last decade or so. The non-recognition of paid domestic work is also embedded in these structures and this linkage has been

exposed by the quantum jump in crises of social reproduction because of unplanned lockdowns. This crisis is further accentuated by the lack of recognition and labour rights for these workers and the ratification of Convention 189 will surely remedy some of the deprivations faced by these workers. But the root cause of their distress is unlikely to be resolved through this method because the overall status of domestic workers is intimately linked with the crisis of social reproduction of other sections of the working classes. This is evident from the virtual destitution of people in informal labour, who constitute more than 90 percent of the entire workforce. Therefore, the struggles of the domestic workers have to be linked to the larger struggles of all working people. It is for this reason that any future politics and political mobilisation of paid domestic workers must be visualised with a perspective that facilitates collective responsibilities for social reproduction. This of course is only possible with the fundamental transformation in the present day social relations of production.

ⁱ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748093/lang-en/index.htm

ⁱⁱ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_747961.pdf, p.2.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.isstindia.org/publications/1590124768_pub_ISST_-_Domestic_Workers_Final_compressed.pdf

^{iv} As on 21 July 2020 1 USD = INR 74.94. This conversion rate is used in this paper.

^v The Ministry of Home Affairs issued its first guideline for a 'full closure' on 24 March 2020, prohibiting any type of local movement. No public transport was allowed. On 14 April 2020 another set of guidelines was issued to extend this 'full closure', but from 4 May 2020 onwards some local movement was allowed, though public transport and internal commuter trains were

affected. The government announced some schemes to help informal labour to survive which are detailed in the subsequent discussion.

^{vi} To see report visit <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DGVEjTkVZShC-jL7RThW5U67atgDSSbC/view> accessed on 15 July 2020. This survey was based on telephonic interviews of 200 domestic workers in eight cities including metro cities. Also see <https://www.skillreporter.com/2020/05/news/ssc/dwscc-conducts-survey-on-condition-of-domestic-workers-in-covid-19/>.

^{vii} As more than half the surveyed women lived in rented houses, their daily needs also included payment of rents to maintain a roof over their head.

^{viii} The first relief package was announced on 13 May 2020 which focused on provisioning of free and subsidised food, based on food deprivation estimates by the earlier formed committees of the Government of India. Apart from this it promised to provide women with Rs 500 (USD 6.67) per month through a cash transfer into their 'Jan Dhan' bank accounts, which are zero balance accounts opened under the Prime Minister's Jan Dhan Yojana that was launched during the first term of the Modi Government. Some minimal help was also offered by different state governments in the form of support for widow pension, support to migrants and the self-employed etc. Further, the Prime Minister's Garib Kalyan Yojana (Poor Welfare Scheme) was announced in May in four tranches with an additional aid of Rs 50,000 (USD 667.20) Crore to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which was started by the Congress-led government in 2005. However, these measures were inadequate and critiqued by several spectrums of workers organisations.

PARAGUAY IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC: DEBT, VIOLENCE AND EXCLUSION

Abel Irala¹ and Sarah Zevaco²

We are living in an unbalanced and unequal world: lack of access to food, low incomes, unemployment and disease haunt millions, the owners of great fortunes expand their profit margins; only 15 persons accumulate 8 trillion dollars;ⁱ Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon and n° 1 of the ranking, has a fortune of more than 180,000 million dollars, three times more than Paraguay's Domestic Product.

In Paraguay, a country of less than 7 million inhabitants, an "island surrounded by land" and a neighbor of Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia, the arrival of Covid-19 exacerbated the main characteristics of state-society relations: huge socioeconomic inequality, authoritarian and police regime that lasted beyond the beginning of its democratic transition in 1989ⁱⁱ – and neoliberal and corrupt governments. This main path leads to growing poverty, precariousness and dehumanization of life, against which popular sectors, still a minority in power and organization, constantly react.

Here, around 1,679,000 people (24.2% of population) live in poverty conditions, with income that is not enough for a basic consumption basket, and more than 330,000 in indigence.ⁱⁱⁱ Some small numbers make a great fortune: just 4 persons have more than 100 million dollars.^{iv} Average monthly per capita income in the country is US \$ 250, and poorest 10% live on less than US \$50. In 2017, 70% of the employed population earned less than the legal minimum wage.^v

Inequality is also evident in access to land. Today, according to the Gini index, unjust access to land in Paraguay expresses almost a perfect inequality punctuation. The last agricultural census carried out in 2008 indicates that 2.6% of land owners concentrate 85% of it^{vi} and 17 million hectares of land are dedicated to livestock housing 13 million head of cattle^{vii} (on average each animal has 1.3 hectares to graze). Yet there are thousands of landless peasant families in the country. The land question is a legacy of the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) and in general of the oligarchic, capitalist, mafia and impunity policies promoted by the Colorado Party, which has governed the country since 1947 – with the exception of the years 2008-2012 were Lugo, a former bishop, came to power with strong citizen support, and was overthrown by a parliamentary coup in 2012 after the Curuguaty massacre, a land conflict that left 17 dead.

Inside this context, covid-19 strikes the entire world. The first case occurred in Paraguay on March 7, with quarantine declared March 11. The pandemic joined a series of crises: it is not an isolated crisis, circumscribed to the health system, but a multisectoral crisis that reminds us of the limits of consumer society, exacerbated individualism, an economic system that is related to destruction of nature,^{viii} where large multinational companies are above the states and dictate the rules of the game on a world scale for the production and distribution of food, water, and natural goods.

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In the face of a pandemic, Paraguay's ruling government first resorted to partial quarantine measures, with educational suspension, border closure and then total quarantine until May 4, the date on which it began a kind of easing called *intelligent quarantine*, of different phases with the aim of gradually opening the different commercial sectors.^{ix} Even so, deforestation and agribusiness activities were exempt from quarantine.^x

Sanitary measures were applied in a context marked by a total lack of suitability on the part of the Ministry of Education,^{xi} an improvisation in matters of social, economic and food assistance, deepening punitive control, an absolute void of employment protection (formal and informal), amid acts of corruption that have involved several of the president's collaborators. A government without answers for the popular sectors.

Increasing debt

Since 2013, national external debt has constantly increase, first by Horacio Cartes (2013-2018), and now by Mario Abdo's rule. As of 2019, Paraguay had a debt of US \$7,238 million, which by April 2020 grew to US \$9,149 million. The government's decision is to continue increasing it^{xiii} at least by a further US \$350 million,^{xiiii} although in July political leaders - even sectors promoting bond strategies - have started to express concerns about such high levels of debt compared to low economic performance.

The main goals of this is the payment of previous debts and the construction of infrastructure. The latter is carried out mainly to ensure the transit of commodities for the business of large multinationals, although different social and political sectors have

been proposing taxes on large fortunes or soy exports.^{xiv}

Paraguay's debt issue is related to its structure and sustainability: that is, majority dependence on sovereign bonds, private financial market credit products, as opposed to multilateral debts - which are negotiated with multistate institutions. Until now, only the interest on the debt has been paid in bonds, with the issuance of more debt. The state's ability to pay with its own funds is extremely low.

In 2023, the term of the first capital payment arrives – an amount of US \$700 million, equivalent to 80% of public health care budget. Then in 2026 and 2027 numbers are US\$ 600 and US\$ 500 respectively. Where will such amounts of money come from, when ruling power groups permanently refuse to raise taxes on the highest-earning sectors? It is very likely that more debt will have to be requested, this time from multilateral IMF-type organizations, in exchange for austerity plans (the consequences of which are generally disastrous for the working class, and result in less public spending, fewer rights, and greater poverty). If bond holders said debt cannot be paid, Paraguay must negotiate payment in New York's courts, as Argentina did some years ago. The famous “comparative advantages” of Paraguay do not represent any solidity when it comes to having a state with the capacity to pay: neither the maquilas, nor the low fiscal pressure (10%), nor investment laws or support for the agribusiness sectors fostered capacity to generate jobs or economic development that would allow for some “spill effect.”

No jobs, no income

As government commits to external loans, the situation of the majority of the population worsens. About 70% are in informal jobs,^{xv} the self-employed are not able to generate economic income, and as of May 8, 102,323 permanent or temporary job suspensions were reported,^{xvi} estimating a minimum of 1 million people working in shops, hotels and restaurants that they are closed or without activity.^{xvii}

In 2018, US\$ 569 million were received as remittances that Paraguayans abroad sent to their families. A little more than 50% of remittances are sent from Spain,^{xviii} amount that this year will not be received. On the contrary, it is estimated that some 25,000 Paraguayans are returning from abroad in the context of the pandemic.^{xix}

Police state

Throughout the so-called democratic transition in Paraguay, 124 peasant militants have been assassinated around land struggle.^{xx} Governments have responded to land conflict with a process of criminalization of peasant, which extends to impoverished sectors in general. Paraguay has always been a faithful ally of US security policy, but since 2013 the “joint and combined exchanges” (JCET), which involved the entry of US troops into Paraguayan territory, have been systematically observed for exercises in urban combat, information gathering, riot control, attack tactics and others. The last admission was between the months of August and September 2019.^{xxi}

In 2017, with the support of Panama co-optation,^{xxii} Paraguayan police incorporated a motorized tactical group called *Grupo Lince* to intervene in cities in different territories of

the country. Intervention of this group is carried out with great violence, from patrols on motorcycles, with hoods and without name holders, always with weapons in hand. They have assumed an important role during the quarantine, encouraged by a warlike speech by the Ministers of Interior and Defense.

Government has deployed a crude system of militarization and control over the population. The reiterative message from the Minister of Interior, Euclides Acevedo is: “We are at war against an invisible enemy,” and in an arrogant tone speaks of “undesirable social bacteria that must be eradicated” while publicly authorizing the police and their special groups to proceed to beat people, “the misfits must be beaten.”^{xxiii}

On 7 June, 3,295 people were charged by the Public Ministry for violating the health quarantine.^{xxiv} The military, despite the fact that the National Constitution does not enable them, took to the streets to carry out controls and barriers, and the Lince Group troops acted on several occasions with excessive use of force. Amid the pandemic, an even more punitive state is being recreated.^{xxv}

Food dependency

Businessmen boast that “Paraguay produces food for the world,” and that it could feed 80 to 100 million people.^{xxvi} Paradoxically, almost 30% of the 7 million inhabitants are poor: hunger and lack of access to food during the quarantine had to be alleviated by the self-organization of the citizenry and the solidarity of the social movements, day by day.

In 2018, a United Nations report warned about the lack of food urgent situation.

According to the Global Food Security Index, “Paraguay ranks 67 out of 112 countries in terms of food security, the second to last in South America. About 10% of children under the age of 5 currently suffer from short stature, and among children of indigenous peoples the chronic malnutrition rate reaches 41.7%.”^{xxvii} This problem is enhanced by the pandemic, but the production model is designed for the concentration of agriculture, in this case grains, and their non-diversification. Only 6% of agricultural land is used for food production,^{xxviii} which is insufficient and as such, dependence on food imports from neighboring countries grows. There is little state interest in promoting and strengthening peasant agriculture, that is, food production. Between January and October 2016, some food products with the highest daily consumption that entered the Abasto Market – the largest wholesale market in the country – came mainly from abroad: tomato 55% from Argentina, potato 97% from Argentina, onion 98% Argentina and Brazil, and locote 78% from Brazil. This trend was exacerbated between 2017 and 2018.^{xxix}

Social organizations struggling during quarantine

Social protests have not stopped during quarantine. Youth, women, neighborhood, union, peasant and indigenous organizations have once again demonstrated their commitment in the struggle to build a different society. Despite the restrictions established, social movements have raised their voices, often ignored by the mainstream media.

Several central workers and unions have made complaints about unjustified dismissal of workers, expressing the situation of vulnerability in which the country's working

class finds itself. They have also recalled that public health is a tragedy in Paraguay, being responsible for only a minority group of privileged people.

Student organizations have harshly criticized the management of the Minister of Education and have earned negotiation space for teachers' unions, but the government refuses to engage them. Student movements recalled that there are historically postponed rights such as food sovereignty, health, education, and brought proposals for action.

Peasant and indigenous organizations also carried out protest actions. They questioned the government's repressive policy, the situation of absolute abandonment of their communities, the poor distribution of land, and recalled that hunger is beginning to lurk in rural areas. Despite this, they have contributed to alleviating hunger by donating food of their production.

Social organizations have also criticized the government's debt policy, as well as the claim to carry out a *modernization reform* of the State, and the refusal to increase taxes on large fortunes, tobacco and soy.

We are certainly in a time of great uncertainty. An attempt is made to cover up the causes of this devastating pandemic, related to colonial expansion of capital, a production model that generates precariousness of life, high genetic manipulation that deforests and contaminates, that violates the right to protests. Covid-19 is not a simple natural disaster, nor a “divine” type punishment for human beings: it is one of the consequences of a model that has commodified all areas of life.

- i INFOBAE ECONÓMICA “Quiénes son las 15 personas más ricas del mundo y qué industrias encabezan el ranking, según Forbes”. Available in: <https://www.infobae.com/economia/2020/04/08/quienes-son-las-15-personas-mas-ricas-del-mundo-y-que-industrias-encabezan-el-ranking-segun-forbes/>
- ii The Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) ended with a military coup carried out by his own son-in-law, at the end of which Stroessner went into exile in Brazil, and continued to rule the Colorado Party (ANR) until now, out of a brief progressive process (Lugo government 2008-2012) that ended with a parliamentary coup. The “truth and justice processes” were brief and never dismantled the culture of impunity, corruption, conservatism and authoritarianism on which the State rests, a State in which rights are not effective.
- iii DGEEC “Principales Resultados de Pobreza Monetaria Y Distribución De Ingreso – 2018”. Available in: https://www.dgeec.gov.py/Publicaciones/Biblioteca/POBREZA-MONETARIA%20-2018/Pobreza%20Monetaria_Boletin.pdf
- iv 5DIAS newspaper “De acuerdo con consultora, hay 4 paraguayos con más de US\$ 100 millones”. Available in: <https://www.5dias.com.py/2017/08/acuerdo-consultora-4-paraguayos-mas-us-100-millones/>
- v L. Ortiz “Estructura fiscal y protección social. Economía política de los privilegios en Paraguay”. Available in: https://icso.org.py/sitio/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Econom%C3%ADa-pol%C3%ADtica-de-los-privilegios-en-Paraguay_Ortiz.pdf
- vi APNUD “Sector rural paraguayo: un diagnóstico integral para un diálogo informado”. Available in: <file:///C:/Users/DAMIAN/Downloads/CDH%20N%C2%BA%207%20-%202010.pdf>
- vii Rural Association of Paraguay “Introducción al Paraguay y su sector cárnico”. Available in: <https://www.arp.org.py/images/Paraguay-y-el-Sector-Carnico.pdf>
- viii Mundo Agropecuario “Crisis de COVID-19: Soberanía alimentaria para evitar el desabastecimiento”. Available in: <https://mundoagropecuario.com/crisis-de-covid-19-soberania-alimentaria-para-evitar-el-desabastecimiento/>
- ix Ministry of Interior “El Gobierno presenta 'Plan de Cuarentena Inteligente' y extiende cuarentena total una semana más”. Available in: <http://www.mdi.gov.py/index.php/component/k2/item/12249-el-gobierno-presenta-plan-de-cuarentena-inteligente-y-extiende-cuarentena-total-una-semana-m%C3%A1s>
- x BASE IS report “Sojeros aprovechan la cuarentena para continuar deforestando”. <http://www.baseis.org.py/sojeros-aprovechan-la-cuarentena-para-continuar-deforestando/>
- xi The quarantine decreed in the country's schools was neither planned nor accompanied by measures that would ensure a minimum continuity: teachers and parents found themselves without support tools, and the gaps in access to education widened. School feeding was abandoned and then restarted, based on merit and not on the right to food.
- xii Database on public debt of Ministry of Economy. Available in: <https://www.economia.gov.py/index.php/dependencias/direccion-de-politica-de-endeudamiento/estadisticas-y-publicaciones/deuda-publica>
- xiii Hoy newspaper “Nuevo crédito de US\$ 350 millones: “Vamos a intentar convencerles”, dice Abdo”. Available in: <https://www.hoy.com.py/nacionales/nuevo-credito-de-us-350-millones-vamos-a-intentar-convencerles-dice-abdo>
- xiv They have been discussed and rejected in the Senate, never with the support of the Executive.
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COVID-19, AND NOW?

For a Food-Producing Agriculture that Nourishes Humans, Protects the Living and Reduces Ecological and Climactic Risks

Habib Ayeb¹

Key lesson from Covid-19: the pressing need for change

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to spread and worsen, with a dramatic global toll that continues to increase by the day. Already the global count is frightening. As of 25 June 2020, more than 9.5 million people were infected and more than 480,000 dead, to say nothing of the millions of people dispossessed of their sources of income by the global economic crisis which the pandemic has caused.

Fortunately, Tunisia has been largely spared and the official balance sheet is relatively good: around fifty deaths and less than 3000 people infected. It is certainly not a cause for joy, but it could have been much worse. Fifty deaths for a population of 12 million people is as though the death toll in France, which is currently mourning around 30,000 deaths, were to have been only 250 or 300 for a total population of about 65 million. There are many explanations for the Tunisian outcome. But the actions, which have certainly been quite effective, of the Tunisian government only partially explain the “good” record. Furthermore, let us cite, first, the exemplary behavior, despite an extremely difficult tableau, of Tunisia’s women and men.

Meanwhile, our agriculture, aligned with a global food system which it has no capacity to influence, is extractivist, unequal, impoverishing, dependent, and destructive of the environment, the climate, natural resources, and biodiversity. Its current form is a crime against nature which risks engulfing

us if we do not change paradigms and our political, agricultural, and consumption choices, and if we do not relinquish the paradigm of food security, based on the principle of comparative advantages, and replace it with that of food sovereignty, based on agroecology. It is doable, it is realistic, it is urgent, and it is vital. It is our only solution if we want to protect ourselves and contribute to the collective effort to protect nature and life.

Let's change paradigms to reduce risks

The task is immense and in any case, may take some time before we reach irreversibly bad results. However, each day of delay is a day lost, and one step closer to the irreversible. There is one thing that must be remembered: Covid-19 did not fall from the sky. All pandemics are caused by human activity. Consequently, there is no “divinely”-willed death, and it is perfectly possible to avoid the appearance of a pandemic if we we accept the fact that nature is not a simple inert medium; that man cannot live in spite of and against it without experiencing its reactions, and that if nature can live and will continue to live without man, man will not be able to live without nature.

Unfortunately, all economic frameworks, labeled as modern, are based on the permanent quest for ways to dominate nature and to subject it to the selfish will of modern man, supposedly all-powerful and dominant. We know that deforestation, caused in large part by the needs of intensive farming and therefore linked to a global diet based on

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proteins of animal origin, is the main cause of the appearance of the Corona Virus and, therefore, of the pandemic. Thus, the mapping of the displacement of the virus traces back directly from the agricultural sector. All the studies published during the last months converge on this deadly finding: the capitalist, intensive, and extractivist model which dominates world agriculture is directly responsible not only for the current pandemic, but also for the impoverishment of animal and plant biodiversity, as well as for climate change, whose direct and indirect consequences are already visible.

Tunisia and its agricultural sector are in every way, needless to say, in the same framework, and do not escape this unavoidable and incontestable observation and its consequences. Furthermore, to think for a single moment that we can disconnect the agricultural sector from the remainder of our social and economic sectors is an error in thinking and an unproductive *fuite en avant*. Yet, with that said, we cannot afford to wait for a global anti-liberal revolution to take effect before beginning to act.

Indeed, and unfortunately, the liberal and capitalist economic system still has a bright future ahead of it. However, this fact does not prevent us from acting progressively, and starting by limiting the system's most destructive effects. We can aim, as a first step, at the short-term creation of protective walls around the broad sector concerned with agriculture, food, natural resources, and biodiversity, shielding it from the laws of the market, against the mechanisms and standards of the world food system and, of course, against a savage agribusiness which does not seem to know any other god than profit. It is a question of reversing our ways of thinking and acting and ensuring that wholesale economic reform begins with the agricultural and food sector. In so doing, we

will have secured our food supply in a way which contributes to our independence and sovereignty, protected the living and natural resources, strengthened social, climatic and ecological justice, and secured the rights of future generations.

First, the function and place of agriculture in society and the economy must be completely redefined. To that end, we cannot avoid a broad debate around a central question: what should be the ends of agriculture? Today, Tunisian agriculture is used less and less to feed the population and more and more to accumulate profits for a small minority of investors, and, especially, to meet the essential or "exotic" needs of wealthy consumers in the North. Recall that Tunisia, which imports 50 percent of its overall cereal needs, is one of the largest producers and exporters of olive oil in the world and one of the main importers of vegetable oils. This is a scandal that rises to the heights of a crime against our health, our ecology, and our society! This cannot last long because the social, ecological and even economic costs of this agriculture built for others are high and mounting. We must radically change the paradigm and move to a social, ecological, equitable, and sustainable agricultural policy with the peasantry at its heart, and food sovereignty as an immediate requirement. We must move from comparative advantages to imperative needs, from security to sovereignty and dignity, from imports to local production.

The first ten urgent and pressing reforms

To that end, several tasks are essential. We foreground those which seem to us the most urgent and the least difficult to undertake quickly if the political will which we lack were truly to exist:

1. **A radical agrarian reform** which fixes the minimum land size at 5

hectares, not subject to further division (except in the ancient oases) and the maximum size at 100 hectares, with intermediate “stages” inversely proportional to the average rainfall: the higher the rainfall, the lower the height of the ceiling. Since its independence Tunisia has had only one attempt at land reform (1963-1969). A top down political decision, this reform, known as collectivisation or co-operative reform, intrinsically bore all the reasons for its failure. Imposed brutally on all small farmers who were forced to join cooperatives (Co-operative Units for Agricultural Productions (UCPA)) as simple employees and abandon land ownership in favour of the cooperative, this reform was experienced by those concerned as a violent collective dispossession. Fought against by the big landowners, who were close to the political regime and who were afraid of losing their private property, the experiment was abandoned and finally stopped in 1969. The end of this so-called “socialist” episode opened the way for policies of accelerated liberalization of agriculture and privatization of natural resources, such as water and land.

2. **A redistribution of “state” land** into small plots of around 5 to 10 hectares, not subject to further division and not “resalable” for a period of 30 years or more, and for the benefit of the heirs, if any, of the landless peasants or those with less than 5 hectares, and young people without fixed employment, starting with the children of peasants.
3. **Adopt the fundamental principles of agroecology** and encourage it by all means, including financially when necessary. The teaching of agroecology, especially in schools and universities specializing in agriculture, must be compulsory.
4. **Ban all use of carcinogenic chemical pesticides** in agriculture and set up an ecological bonus/Malus system for the allocation of subsidies, credits, and other financial support from the state (for example, fewer pesticides and antibiotics and more local seeds and varieties of animals, etcetera = high bonus).
5. **Make water a common good that cannot** be privatized, and is accessible and free of charge without conditions, for all real needs, to everyone living in the territory. Beyond such needs, access to water must be paid for at a high rate so as to prevent any form of appropriation, pollution and waste. Drastically limit, by ban and/or surtax, the export of any agricultural product, whether food or otherwise, from irrigated agriculture.
6. **Systematically impose the “polluter pays” principle** on all economic or institutional actors, including state institutions.
7. **Reserve subsidies and public aid for agricultural food production** intended for the local market.
8. **Prohibit for at least 25 years any activity, economic or otherwise, including** agriculture or construction, on the site of any **forest burned**, be it voluntarily or accidentally, or cut down.

9. Establish strict standards and rules aimed at **greatly reducing the profitability of “industrial” animal-raising and favouring pasture on natural meadows and rangelands.**
10. **The exit of the agricultural sector from all international conventions** including ALECA, all bilateral agreements, and those of the WTO, in a proactive approach towards rupture with the world food system and the global food market.

Tunisia has all the means and tools and skills necessary to carry out this vital reform, and it can do so now, under the best possible conditions. So why wait for a new pandemic of greater magnitude than Covid-19, or a big global economic crisis, to move? It would be sheer irresponsibility. Crises always have "something good and useful" in the sense that they often open up new opportunities and show new paths and alternatives. The Covid-19 pandemic had the merit of alerting us to several central issues and opened up debates that had been practically impossible until then, notably on agricultural, food and environmental policies, the roles of peasants and the dramatic consequences of climate change.

In Tunisia, there is both a growing awareness of the dangers of intensive and export-

oriented agriculture and its direct consequences on food security, the environment, the climate and health. This is an opportunity that must be seized to show new alternatives and impose economic policies based on social-economic and ecological rights and the absolute urgency to protect the "living" and fundamental rights of current and future generations. To launch a large-scale reform of agricultural, food, and ecological policies, political will and willingness on the part of decision-makers, civil society, the media and other “influencers” are essential.

Thus, the Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE) calls on all decision-makers, political actors, and activists concerned with the risks of the current system and committed to social, ecological, climate justice and the need to hand over a livable world to future generations, to be actively involved in a collective approach which can result in national bases for agriculture, food and the environment, intended to mark the contours of a new project that breaks once and for all with current policies.

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