



## Governance and the Pandemic

### Questionnaire #2: Civil Society & Marginalised Groups

#### Brazil

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#### Question #1: Public Trust

Is the government response to the pandemic being met with public approval? Please specify where this assessment is taken from, i.e. YouGov Poll, newspaper headlines, etc.

On April 6 2020, a [Datafolha poll](#) (one of the most important opinion polling institutes in Brazil), published in the influential newspaper "Folha de São Paulo", revealed that 76% of Brazilians believed that the most important thing to do in the midst of the new coronavirus pandemic was to maintain the measures of social isolation in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health, then led by Luiz Henrique Mandetta. However, the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, never supported these measures. He considers COVID-19 a "little flu" and calls the cry of experts to take the pandemic seriously, "collective hysteria". Thus, on April 16 2020, precisely due to disagreements with President Bolsonaro regarding the policy of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic period, Luiz Henrique Mandetta was dismissed from his post.. In his inaugural speech, the new Minister of Health, Nelson Teich, said he was "totally aligned" with the thinking of Bolsonaro, and that he would work to build a "[structured and progressive exit from the isolation](#)". A new Datafolha poll, carried out at the end of April 2020, revealed that Brazilians' [approval of social isolation measures had fallen to 68%](#), and it continues to fall since then.

#### Question #2: Accurate Statistics?

Are accurate statistics on infection rates and death rates available? If so, who is producing this information? And is this information trusted by the public?

"[Brazil is sailing blindly in the fight against COVID-19](#)". These words were pronounced by the new Minister of Health, Nelson Teich, in a conference call with Brazilian senators in April 30 2020. The minister stated that there was no way to know exactly how many people were infected with the new coronavirus in the country because of the lack of mass testing. When the Minister of Health himself admits that the data and statistics the government works with are unreliable, the population tends not to trust them either. Statistics on COVID-19 infection and mortality rates in Brazil are produced from information provided by the health departments of each state and municipality in the Brazilian federation (there are 26 states in Brazil plus the Federal District which holds the national capital and more than 5,570 municipalities). The Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), under the Ministry of Health, also produces, concentrates, analyses and disseminates these information.

"Brazil is sailing blindly in the fight against COVID-19."

Underreporting: according to a [study](#) carried out by a group of researchers from several Brazilian universities released on May 6, 2020, the total number of infected people with coronavirus in the country is 15 times greater than that which is officially reported by the Ministry of Health.

### Question #3: Support for the Vulnerable

**In instances of a lockdown, what support is available for vulnerable persons, i.e. domestic abuse victims, less able bodied persons?**

Until today (May 8, 2020), only the states of Maranhão and Pará have implemented lockdown measures. These are “localized lockdowns”, that is, they apply only to a specific set of municipalities, where there has been a significant [spike in number of COVID-19 cases](#). These two states are located in the North of Brazil – one of the least developed regions in the country. According to Antônio Pedrosa, a legal advisor and member of the Human Rights Society of Maranhão (the poorest state of Brazil), social inequality works against all isolation measures and represents the biggest challenge to contain the expansion of the pandemic, as well as enforce any form of lockdown. ["The biggest challenge is to keep at home those who cannot stop working to survive, since the help of the government does not arrive \[...\] the despair of starving to death inside home will settle shortly"](#), says Pedrosa. The federal government promised an emergency aid of \$600 Brazilian reais (US\$104 dollars) per month for informal and unemployed workers. However, to [withdraw this money, a bank registration must be made and it is also necessary access to a cell phone, to receive an access code](#). This process is making the most miserable unable to reach this benefit. Domestic abuse victims or less able bodied persons are not even mentioned in any government report or official pronouncements by authorities.

### Question #4: Marginalised Groups

**What are some of the challenges that marginalized groups, i.e. low-income**

<sup>1</sup> The expression used by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in demographic census is “pretos e pardos” or “blacks and browns” in English. “Black” is usually referred to people of primarily African descent. “Brown” is, broadly, the word we use for the miscegenate/mixed people of Brazil. However, this is a term that designates a very specific kind of miscegenation: between blacks (of African origin), indigenous peoples, and whites (mostly Portuguese persons, i.e. the former colonizer). This mixed people

**households, religious/ ethnic minorities, face with regards to the pandemic?**

Coronavirus is definitely more lethal in peripheral regions of Brazil and among Brazil’s black and brown population.<sup>1</sup> [According to experts heard](#) on May 3, 2020, by “O Globo”(one of the most influential and conservative daily newspapers in the country), the disease will have a deadly impact in areas without basic sanitation and where the supply of health services is scarcer. The Sanitary Physician Ivan França Jr, from the University of São Paulo (USP), says,

“We will pay the price of our inequality. And who will pay most of this bill will be the poorest, who are unable to stay at home, have no sanitation, have no way to even wash their hands because the water is not enough.”

Data from an epidemiological bulletin from the city of São Paulo show that the pandemic kills more black and brown Brazilians than it does white Brazilians. The risk of COVID-19 death for black Brazilians is 62% higher than for white Brazilians. Comparing browns to white Brazilians, the risk is 23% higher for the former. Furthermore, the risk of COVID-19 death is inversely proportional to income and, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the average monthly income of employed white Brazilians is more than 70% higher than that of black or brown Brazilians. In Rio de Janeiro, data reveal a deepening of this socio-economic gap. Lethality rates reach 21% in the poorest areas of the city, while Barra da Tijuca and Zona Sul, the rich tourist areas, where the disease was initially recorded, have average lethality rates of 8%. What these data reveal is that the black persons and the poor are dying more from COVID-19 in Brazil than the whites and the rich.

It is crucial to note that there is no unification of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds in public and private hospitals in Brazil, that is, while in some places there are no ICU beds in the public health

constitute the majority of the Brazilian population. It should be noted that official statistics on the ethnic-racial composition of the Brazilian population do not usually make use of the expression “Afro-Brazilian” precisely because it is very difficult to make a clear separation between the “black” and the “brown” persons in the country.

system, there are surpluses in the private system. ["The private system has 55% of ICU beds to serve 25% of the population"](#) argues Francisco Braga, a researcher at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz). Meanwhile, the Brazilian public health system (SUS), which serves 75% of the population, has less than half of the ICU beds. Finally, Brazil has a huge housing deficit, with almost 7 million families without a home to live in – and more than 6 million decades-long vacant properties. This perverse lack of a housing system capable of reallocating vacant properties to homeless families further aggravates the difficulty of implementing measures of social isolation. It is also [necessary to register](#) the problem of precarious houses (almost 1 million) and overcrowded houses (over 300 thousand). For Cláudio Cabral Marques, Specialized Prosecutor for External Control of Police Activity in Maranhão, governmental authorities have to keep in mind the people who do not have a decent home to live in during lockdown periods. ["\[How\] people living in the peripheries, in shacks \[...\] are going to stay in lockdown? It won't happen. There will come a time when people won't be able to stand it."](#)

In summary: black, brown and poor Brazilians who live in precarious houses in the peripheries of the country are those who face the greatest challenges that the pandemic presents.

### Question #5: Local Activism

**How are local community groups and/or political groups responding to the pandemic in terms of providing support/ relief to vulnerable persons and/or marginalized groups? Please provide an example.**

In virtually all big Brazilian cities, there are groups of volunteers, normally not connected to any government agency, who distribute food, clothes and even “mobile showers” to the population in situation of street/living on the street. For example, in the city of São Paulo the Brazilian epicentre of COVID-19, no less than [24,000 people](#) are homeless. With at least [52 million](#) Brazilians living below the poverty line, out of a total population of 211 million, the exercise of charity is a common practice in the country and has gained strength with the pandemic. Many Brazilian cities also have government services to help those most in need, especially in terms of

meal supplies, public hostels, and hospital referrals.

Below, I offer examples from local groups, that is, from the state of Rio Grande do Sul (in the south of Brazil) and the municipality of Porto Alegre, its capital.

1) [“Collective Health Against Coronavirus”](#) – Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

This is an Extension Programme that promotes actions and reflexions on issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is coordinated by professors of the Department of Collective Health at UFRGS School of Nursing and involves university staff, students and the external community. It works in partnership with the State Health Secretariat, Municipal Health Departments, Social Movements and Civil Society Organizations.

Among the projects developed within the scope of “Collective Health Against Coronavirus” I highlight the following:

(a) “Health of the Black Population and COVID-19”. Coordination: Dra. Fernanda Bairros.

This group offers support to populations living in quilombola<sup>2</sup> communities in Rio Grande do Sul to face the pandemic, adopting measures such as: i) orientation to quilombola populations on COVID-19; ii) identification of the demands of quilombola populations in the face of the pandemic; iii) establishment of dialogue channels with the public authorities to carry out actions to help these populations; iv) monitoring the impact of the pandemic on quilombola communities in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

(b) [“Solidarity Network at UFRGS”](#). Coordination: Dr. Roberto Henrique Amorim.

A collaborative action that was built to help underprivileged communities to face the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of Porto Alegre. It is composed of more than 50 scholars, students and residents of courses related to the Health area. Besides producing educational materials, it receives donations for the purchase and distribution of face masks, alcohol gel and various hygiene products. The communities are allowed and encouraged to exercise the leading role in the organization and management of the material and resources delivered to them.

<sup>2</sup> A quilombola is an Afro-Brazilian resident of quilombo settlements first established by escaped slaves in Brazil. They are the descendants of Afro-

Brazilian slaves who escaped from slave plantations that existed in Brazil until abolition in 1888. Many quilombolas live in poverty.

2) Association of Haitians in Rio Grande do Sul.

There are more than 20,000 Haitian immigrants and refugees living in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. This association has a registered bank account that receives donations for the purchase of food, hygiene products and clothing to be distributed among the Haitians in need of help.

3) Porto Alegre City Hall.

Porto Alegre City Hall ordered the requisition of an empty three-story building to serve the street population who are at risk due to the new coronavirus pandemic. The property will house [205 homeless people](#) in Porto Alegre during the pandemic.

[president, Jair Bolsonaro](#).” This certainly echoes true.

*Silvia Feraboli. 25 May 2020.*

#### Question 6: Other comments

“Jair Bolsonaro, known for his racism, knows that those who are dying of COVID-19 in Brazil are black, brown, and poor people from the Brazilian peripheries, a population despised by the president and the elite that supports him.”

I conclude by emphasizing that Brazil is heading towards a health catastrophe of unimaginable proportions and, even so, the federal government insists on prioritizing what it calls "getting things back to normal". This is due to the fact that Jair Bolsonaro, known for his racism, knows that those who are dying of COVID-19 in Brazil are black, brown, and poor people from the Brazilian peripheries, a population despised by the president and the elite that supports him. His is a genocidal policy based on the assumption that “people will die” and “so what?” – these are two of his latest statements regarding the pandemic.

Finally, in the day that Brazil's death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic neared 10,000, Bolsonaro declared to journalists was that he was going to “make a barbecue to 30 people” at Palácio da Alvorada, the official residence of Brazilian presidents. According to the May 9, 2020 editorial of “The Lancet”, [“perhaps the biggest threat to Brazil's COVID-19 response is its](#)

**A Note On Sources**

All responses to this questionnaire were substantiated with information published on the official websites of the most influential Brazilian media outlets and can be verified in the links in the text.