



A building in Plaza La Hoja, in the center of Bogotá, where several red rags are exhibited as a symbol of starvation and request for help. Photo: Camilo Rozo.

Source: <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-04-17/el-hambre-como-bandera.html>

How is Covid-19 crisis impacting Colombia?

On 26th March 2020, in tune with the global crisis released by the spread of the coronavirus, Colombia entered into a quarantine that has been lately extended until May 11th. Currently, the country has confirmed 6211 cases and 278 deaths. ¹² The aim of this paper is to analyze what is the local impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Colombian territory and to speculate about possible desirable futures that will permit us to face this unique worldwide moment.

A democratic virus?

This crisis of humanity has reconfigured numerous assumptions about globalization, globalized economy and connectivity. At the same time, queries about worldwide mechanisms of governance, universal rights and supply chains have arisen. The pandemic has spread globally in terms of incidence and the idea about a democratic virus that does not take into account matters of place, age, race or gender has been wide-reaching. Nonetheless, has the impact been symmetrical between countries and regions? The mitigation and prevention strategies appear to be different and uneven. The multidimensional inequalities are deepening and strengthening the power relationships across the world, with the vulnerable population appearing to be even more vulnerable.

^{3 4}

¹ (Instituto Nacional de Salud n.d.)

² These are the official numbers, however, [the lack of evidence](#), [medical capacity](#), [equipment damage](#), [inefficiency](#), etc. suggest that there are many more cases than those presented.

³ (Fariza 2020)

⁴ (Vommaro 2020)

This is the case of the Latin American region in general and of Colombia in particular. The pandemic revealed structural problems that hinder even more the capabilities to deal with the crisis. This way, it is risible that the virus, an entity that lacks agency and that seeks a body to live and reproduce itself, was identified as democratic. Each country and region as a *host*, depending on its social, economic and political structure, can be more or less prepared to diminish the impact. The next part will analyze the Colombian case.



Usme, Bogotá. Photo: Luis Carlos Ayala

Previous context

As in other countries, the debate regarding how to face the crisis oscillates between countries that continue deepening the neoliberal ethos or those who are willing to

improve politics of care into their societies⁵. In Colombia, contrary to the Latin American countries of the South, neoliberal practices were rooted into a democracy and not into an authoritarian power.⁶⁷ Plus, during the decade of the 80s-90s, the country presented a significant economic growth that differs from other countries in the region. However, this positive performance occurred simultaneously with a deepening of inequalities, the rise of poverty and a peak moment of arms and narcotraffic struggle⁸. The above has historically been led by hegemonic classes which have always belonged to the country's economic elite⁹. Hence, the neoliberal logic legitimizes a narrative that prioritises corporation and capital interests, through a collective dispossession model¹⁰ irrespective of the social, cultural and economic development of the territory and its communities, especially at the expense of the ethnic groups, the afro-population and the peasantry. Besides, to appropriate this discourse, the State, while repressing participative places and dissent practices promoted policies of exclusion, persecution and fear, along with the citizenship deprivation of public goods such as health care, education and territory^{11 12}. Besides, it has established an extractive economy that constantly abuses the environment and impoverishes the territories and communities. Today, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with high levels of poverty and inequality and with high differences in the concentration of wealth.¹³

Currently, the discourse about

⁵ (Cadahía 2020)

⁶ (Cadahía 2020)

⁷ Moreover, parallel to the development of neoliberalism, the 91' Constitution, which recognizes a pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation, was established.

⁸ (Arroyo 2015)

⁹ (Niño 2009)

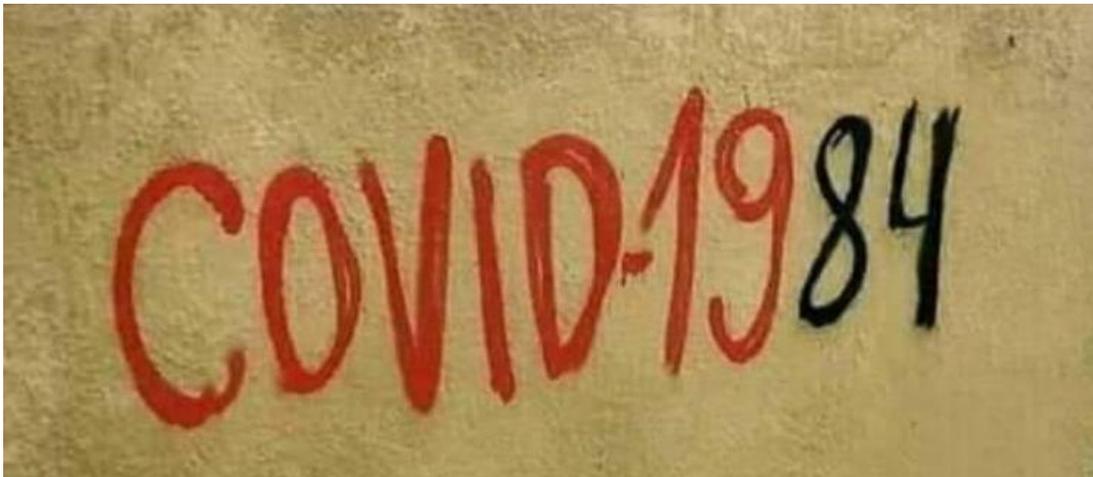
¹⁰ (Arroyo 2015)

¹¹ (Cadahía 2020)

¹² (Quintana 2020)

¹³ (Banco Mundial 2018)

the war against the virus and the *invisible enemy* has appeared in the international news and the government's vocabulary^{14 15} but in Colombia, the rhetorical use of the warlike discourse as a metaphor is not new.¹⁶ Throughout history, the idea of an internal opponent has been a constant and the reason of its position today as the number 1 country in the region in terms of military investment (3.1% of the GDP in 2019).¹⁷ Since the signing of the Peace Agreement (2016) with the guerrilla FARC, the position of the current government has been rather negationist and with no will for the implementation of the settlements.¹⁸ Under this context and in the current panorama (the quarantine and the reinforcement of the executive power) doubts arise about if there is a viable future in which to build a more democratic and equalitarian nation or rather if more inequalities and a rise of authoritarian measures will surge during this emergency.¹⁹



This graffiti remembers "1984" the dystopian novel of George Orwell, as well as the period of time when neoliberal policies started to be implemented in Colombia. Source: found in the twitter of @SergioGuzmán, author unknown.

14 (Lutz and Crawford 2020)

15 (Enloe 2020)

16 (Pinto García and Ojeda 2020)

17 (Aristizábal Bedoya 2020)

18 (Semana 2020)

19 (Uprimny 2020)

COVID-19 in Colombia

Since the virus landed in the country the government reassures that the “curve is flattened”.²⁰ Compared to other Latin American countries’ horrifying situations ²¹ there are constant official messages of tranquility. Nonetheless, the overall feeling is that a social bomb is brewing and that it will soon explode if proper measures are not taken. Some circumstances that have been intensified during this crisis can be described as follows:



Bogotá. Photo: Luis Carlos Ayala

²⁰ (Semana 2020)

²¹ (León Cabrera y Kurmanaev 2020)

1. The dehumanization and the exercise of violence in the population. An example of this is what happened previous days before the announcement of the confinement measures, when prisoners protested for the improvement of their conditions. This riot was communicated as an intent of fugue with very unclear information from the national government. This legitimized a violent response and resulted in an indiscriminate use of power: 23 killed and 83 wounded in the Modelo prison.[22](#) [23](#) Strengthened by the pandemic environment, the disturbances still continue.[24](#)
2. The epidemic of harassment, military and police violence precede the actual sanitary crisis. In Bojayá, Chocó, for instance, the population is having “overlapping experiences of confinement”.[25](#) They have a long history of “forced confinement by military means, sexual violence, blockages, as well as difficulties in making a living and accessing food, medicines, and healthcare in the midst of violence and authoritarian rule”.[26](#) Moreover, in the national territory perpetrators are taking advantage of the quarantine and the continuous assassination of social leaders does not have any truce during the control measure. [27](#) [28](#) Meanwhile, the government still denies the systematic killing, encouraging necropolitics [29](#) and the “continuity and fluidity of practices and discourses of militarization in the

²² (Oquendo, El País - Al menos 23 muertos y decenas de heridos en un motín carcelario en Colombia en medio de la pandemia 2020)

²³ (La Vanguardia 2020)

²⁴ (Páramo Izquierdo 2020)

²⁵ (Pinto García and Ojeda 2020)

²⁶ (Pinto García and Ojeda 2020)

²⁷ (Uprimny, Dejusticia - Líderes sociales en tiempos de coronavirus 2020)

²⁸ (Oquendo, El País - El coronavirus no detiene la violencia en Colombia 2020)

²⁹ (Aparicio 2019)

context of war, post-conflict and the current pandemic”³⁰. Paramilitarism, dispossession of land, displacement and internal migration ³¹ continue being great problems to face in the midst of this new epidemic. ³² Moreover, the use of crisis for eviction, ³³ unconstitutional practices that weaken existing mechanisms in Colombian legislation and institutions, ³⁴, and the recomposing of armed groups in the territories is alarming.

3. The neoliberal ethos mentioned above has led the country to the privatization of public services and to the promotion and growth of capital above life. ³⁵ This pre-existent precarization deepened with the crisis and the “mortgaged governance”³⁶ first reaction to this situation was to save banks, not people. One of the national government’s first responses, for instance, was to take away territorial pension funds and relocate them to subsidy liquidity of the financial sector.³⁷ The state wants to recuperate the economy, but of whom and for whom? The renounce to the notion of “public” with scarce forms of social protection, insufficient subsidies and amnesties in public services and rent, summed to the flexibilization of work and the reduction of taxes for the enterprises, correlates perfectly with a free market logic.³⁸ Regarding the health care system, since the reform of the

³⁰ (Pinto García and Ojeda 2020)

³¹ (de la Rosa 2020)

³² (El Espectador 2020)

³³ (El Espectador 2020)

³⁴ (Semana sostenible 2020)

³⁵ This relationship between capital and life has been built as a false disjunctive since, as states by de Sousa Santos (2020) “economy cannot prosper among the death”. Hence, this wrong binomial is problematic since the beginning.

³⁶ (Gamba 2020)

³⁷ (V. Romero 2020)

³⁸ (Quintana 2020)

health care sector in 1993, ³⁹ the fragile system [40](#) [41](#) [42](#) gives no warranties for medical assistance.[43](#) [44](#) The lack of capacities, absence of forecasts, precarious infrastructure, plus an apparent sub register of data give not much hope about the future. Cynically the government may question itself: “who are the living we are willing to save, and who will be sacrificed?”[45](#).

4. The crisis intensifies the differences between capital cities and regions[46](#) [47](#) but inequality and poverty are ubiquitous and appear with a different shape in the urban areas. For instance, both extreme poverty and hidden poverty populations with economies of “daily life, daily income” and bad work conditions are not able to face the pandemic. [48](#) There is a high number of people living in the streets with no shelter [49](#) and a poor sector that suffers overcrowding in homes with no potable water. Besides, there is a growing middle class that is totally vulnerable and risks falling into poverty.[50](#) Moreover, the question of whether a home is indeed a means of protection is troubling. What are the implications of being locked with your own abusers? The global “burden of care” in women

³⁹ (de Groote , de Paepe y Unger 2007)

⁴⁰ (Dinero 2020)

⁴¹ (Semana rural 2020)

⁴² (Leal Acosta 2020)

⁴³ (Andia and García 2020)

⁴⁴ Moreover, to the actual pandemic it is possible to add other Latin American epidemics with highly rate of deaths such as dengue (Dinero 2020)

⁴⁵ Preciado (2020) refers to this management of life and death as “necropolitics”, which reminds the mechanisms used by the Colombian government to continue promoting paramilitary justice and persecutions (Preciado 2020)

⁴⁶ (Parada Lugo 2020)

⁴⁷ The factual reality is that in Colombia, over 20 million people don't have internet access at their house, and only 37% of public-school students have internet and a computer at home (Braconnier Moreno 2020)

⁴⁸ (Ramírez C 2020)

⁴⁹ (DANE 2017)

⁵⁰ (Gamba 2020)

and gender-based violence has increase perversely (up to 79% since the confinement started⁵¹ including cases of femicide^{52 53}). Overall, there is an incipient social crisis due to hunger and lack of support from the government^{54 55 56}; and a highly significant informal sector⁵⁷ of the economy that can relapse rapidly into increasing levels of poverty^{58 59} and inequality. ⁶⁰



“Informal workers, that is, half the country, prefer to die of “flu” than of starvation locked in the room while you discuss how to deliver aid”.
Photo: Luis Carlos Ayala

51 (RCN Radio 2020)

52 (Arenas 2020)

53 (El Espectador 2020)

54 (Oquendo 2020)

55 (El Tiempo 2020)

56 (El Tiempo 2020)

57 (DANE 2020)

58 (Alvarado 2020)

59 (Banco Mundial 2018)

60 (Garzon 2020)

***Co-vida*⁶¹: is there a feasible and desirable future?**

“What are we going to do with what is happening to us, what are we going to do as citizens, as a state and as humanity?”⁶² Are we going to learn something about this?⁶³ There is uncertainty but from a radical perspective, there are two different pendular movements projected simultaneously: a social bomb explosion or a progressive structural renovation. What is the opportunity that the Colombian society may have for transforming the social, cultural and economic hegemonic model prevalent today? How can we think about practical decisions for the urgent problems and at the same time

⁶¹ Anita Krishnan (2020) asks herself: “*What if we were to reframe COVID-19 as CO-VID: an opportunity for us to live together, see together, and know together?*”

⁶² (Cadañía, Universo Centro - Conversa en Cuarentena 2020)

⁶³ (de Sousa Santos 2020)

speculate and imagine about different possibilities for inhabiting this fragile world? Beyond the catastrophe and the negative aspects of the crisis, this moment has also showed globally the importance of the care practices and unveiled the differences in the economic and labor distribution. Agriculture, health, education and culture are the pivotal sectors that have risen most visibly during the pandemic. Hence, land distribution, basic income and rent, slowdown of the big industry, public health and education systems, greater investment in culture, re-localization of the economy does not look like a utopia anymore⁶⁴. Furthermore, solidarity, collaboration, citizen power, territorial control by ethnic communities, ancestral knowledge and food sovereignty along with entrepreneurial activities and innovation, are also trends of the ways of how the crisis has been faced. Hence, within a very uncertain terrain of imagination some ideas arise about the future:

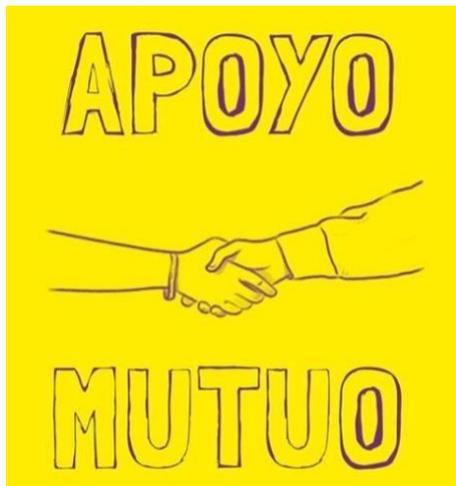
- It is imperative to disrupt the dichotomy between capital and life and to discontinue warlike discourses. We need to start talking about care narratives, to ideate new epistemologies, and to create new structures that permit us to re-think the “common” and “popular” as aesthetic-political actions for transformation.⁶⁵
- We have to renovate our relationship between each other and between nature. The pandemic has made us conscious not just of our individual body but also of the ecosystem as a body ⁶⁶.

⁶⁴ (de Sousa Santos 2020)

⁶⁵ (Cadahía 2020)

⁶⁶ (Díaz Noscue 2020)

- To understand the true needs of the territory and the local. We need a political ecology that acknowledges the pluriethnic and multicultural diversity and autonomy; integrates legal pluralism, diverse knowledge and an alternative development model⁶⁷.
- It is essential to recognize as citizens our responsibility and potentiality to transform; to motivate the reconfiguration of different institutionalities from top to bottom. ⁶⁸ There is a fundamental need to identify social assets with the aim of collaborating, building and creating together⁶⁹ in defense of rights, equality, and redistributive economy and to find assets with capabilities to take actions, permeate and put pressure on public policies agendas. ⁷⁰



“Mutual support” is the name of the campaign launched by the editorial sector to promote the work of bookstores and editors in the middle of the crisis. The cultural sector is one of the most affected and least mentioned in the official discourses. There are great initiatives and good will from the sector. This collaborative work between assets will be essential to survive the crisis.

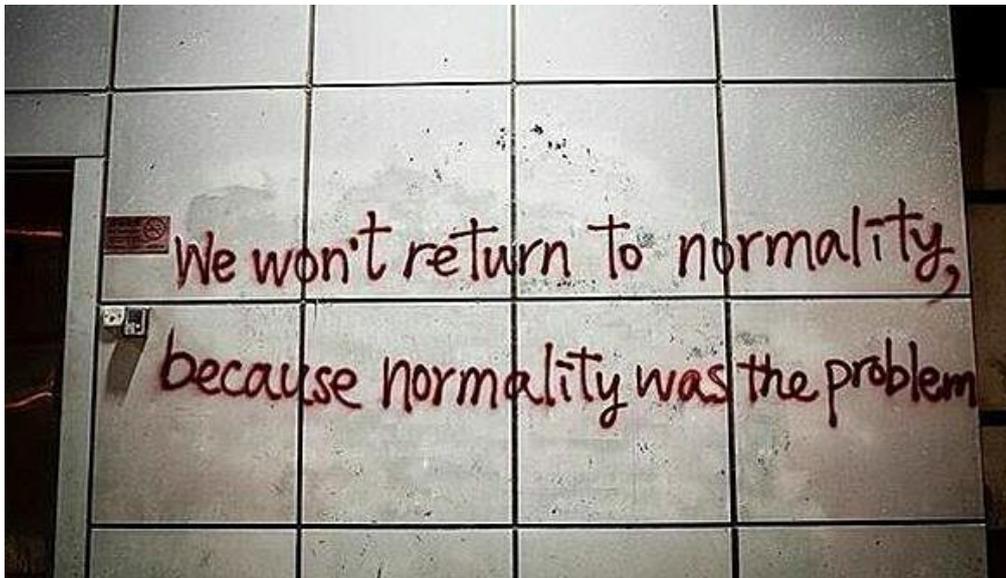
⁶⁷ (Díaz Noscue 2020)

⁶⁸ (Quintana 2020)

⁶⁹ (Cadahía 2020)

⁷⁰ (Cadahía 2020)

- To assume a human rights focus⁷¹ and a defense of life among everything. It is important to question how to promote the places for globalizing the resistance of all the people of the world⁷². The challenge is to promote interventions capable of guaranteeing the fundamental rights to peace, life, food, and health. Also, to think regionally in terms of inter-dependency, and in a global scale, for the need of worldwide policies⁷³.
- To propose a modest change and to think long term. Are we willing to take advantage from the uncertain to imagine possible futures for humanity? We have to reinvent normality, to act differently and to vote differently. To recognize our limitations: what are we willing to change after this?



Source: https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Causalidad-pandemia-cualidad-catastrofe_6_1010758925.html

⁷¹ (Uprimny 2020)

⁷² (Díaz Noscue 2020)

⁷³ (Cadahía 2020)

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