


COVID-19: A Great Challenge for Public Health and the Economy in Colombia

Editorial

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The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a serious global crisis in which developing countries seem to be severely affected in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is a matter of concern given the poor working conditions and the high poverty rates in the region. The Colombian labor market has been severely affected by social distancing adopted to slow down the spread of COVID-19¹. However, human and economic losses caused by this pandemic, which does not discriminate, are countless. Facing this invisible enemy in a prudent and wise manner will be the greatest achievement in our history and finding a way to achieve it will be our most precious legacy for generations to come.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) is calling for coordinated and far-reaching action to address the magnitude of the public health problem that we are currently facing. Similarly, the United Nations is calling for a global, multilateral and solidarity-based strategy that will provide the world not only with a cure for the virus but also with solutions to the consequences of a socio-economic crisis that has worsened in the most vulnerable communities and nations².

The economy of a country relies on multiple actors. It is our responsibility to build a future where no human deaths are caused by economic deprivation, poverty and indifference to fragile and unstable health systems³ as all the efforts to care for life will have

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been in vain. If more aggressive public policy actions are not promptly taken, the unemployment rate may easily rise above 20%, as was the case in the 1999 recession. A massive increase in unemployment and the collapse of business networks could lead to persistent effects of this crisis involving a depressed labor market in the midst of a disease that seems to be lasting. In this context, the pandemic has left women, elderly, youth, informal workers, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), informal sectors and groups in humanitarian and conflict-related situations vulnerable. Thus, a drop in productivity leading to an economic depression would be the darkest scenario, which may represent a real disease hard to recover from¹⁰. It is not a matter of restarting completely but recovering our productive life, protecting our health and those who are at risk and vulnerable.

In Colombia, it is worth mentioning that the economy for the year 2019 increased by 3.3% compared to only 0.1% for Latin America and the Caribbean, according to ECLAC, 2020⁴. Therefore, a similar increase was expected to continue this year. However, in the first quarter, two factors had a severe impact on the global economy: the spread of COVID-19 and the oil price drop. Economic losses are estimated at around \$4.6 billion and \$59 trillion per month, which represent between 0.5% and 6.1% of the national GDP⁵. At present, the economy has been the most impacted sector by COVID-19. However, other activities such as tourism, restaurants, administrative and real estate services, construction and formal and informal trade have been also hardly hit by the pandemic⁶.

The negative effects in the economic field are multiple and often complex to address. In the case of formal work, there are immediate issues to solve such as pay cuts or layoffs, whether justified or not⁹. As for informal work, there is a dilemma for people between earning a living and exposing to the virus or fines for failure to comply with mandatory social distancing. It is estimated that 42.4% of employment is generated by sectors at risk that are mostly affected by social distancing measures. MSMEs are faced with the problem of not only an entire service sector on the verge of bankruptcy but also of entire families living in the uncertainty and anxiety of how to protect each other as they witness how their savings and loans sink along with quarantine extensions that are intended to deal with the number of sick people but know nothing of unemployment rates¹.

Unless there is a definitive solution to control this global health emergency, following the measures established by the WHO to prevent a rapid uncontrolled spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus as well as appropriate biosecurity protocols will allow, through various strategies, to reactivate our society's productive base as a mechanism to avoid a greater economic contraction. It is estimated that gross government debt stands at 61% of GDP in 2020, increasing by 10.7 pp compared to 2019⁷.

This public health emergency of international concern becomes morally charged when social, economic and health rights converge⁸, an issue that, according to the projections made by the Inter-American Development Bank, is one step away from recession as it does not only affect healthcare professionals, healthcare systems and public policies but also government institutions and, certainly, the heads of government who are facing the challenge for controlling the pandemic and implementing actions to deal with unemployment and the decrease in GDP. Thus, we are faced with the dilemma of either placing the economy over human rights or handling these two on an equal footing and although it may be a complex and misleading process,

it is possible to reach a consensus⁸. Privileged people, the scientific community and all those who have a degree of influence are called upon to play a critical, active and constructive role in urging state leaders to protect human life and economy and thereby, ensure that the supply of goods and services remains active during and after the pandemic³.

Humankind must assume this situation in a wise and holistic manner, understanding that public health and economy are part of a whole rather than mutually exclusive. Social distancing is the best tool at hand now. However, the question is how sustainable is this measure for society and developing countries? What is the number in figures and deaths that we are willing to endure because of the pandemic, now that the lack of economic resources poses a big threat as many people are moving from poverty to misery?³ It is time to find a balance between controlling perhaps the most dangerous infection of this century and preventing worsening poverty in a society that refuses to accept a deep economic recession as well as the loss of more human lives that are added to national statistics every day. We are facing the greatest challenge in public health history. It is time to gear the economy towards healthcare and the right to a decent life, promote healthcare and protect the economy.

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