NEWS BULLETIN 24/7
Publicado em 19/08/2022 - 12:03

Opinion – Sou Ciência: The social costs of the pandemic in Brazil

The Federal Universities have not only carried out hundreds of clinical and epidemiological research on Covid-19, but also dozens of assessments of the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, especially on the most vulnerable populations. These are the so-called indirect effects of the pandemic, related to the loss of work and income, increased informality, poverty and hunger, among other socio-spatial vulnerabilities. On the one hand, the negative consequences of Covid in the deepening of the historical and structural inequalities of Brazilian society were evaluated and, on the other hand, the public policies that should address them, such as emergency aid, were monitored.

Several of these surveys were carried out in partnership with communities and social movements, highlighting some of the popular self-defense and local empowerment initiatives, when public policies were clearly insufficient to contain the increase in vulnerabilities and social inequalities. This also meant an innovative methodology of action research in a scenario of profound health crisis, experienced by Brazil in the last two and a half years, which left almost 700 thousand dead and levels of food insecurity equivalent to those of the last century, with 33 million people starving.

The Sou Ciência Panel, carried out in partnership with Andifes (National Association of Directors of Federal Educational Institutions) shows an impressive dimension of the performance of public universities during the pandemic, even having been affected by constant cuts in funds.

Let’s look at the themes and issues of socio-economic research at some of our federal universities. Unifesp, for example, mapped the increase in social inequalities in the Metropolitan Regions of São Paulo and Baixada Santista, analyzing 14 communities in a context of socioeconomic vulnerability compared to a middle-class control neighborhood. The report involved 108 researchers, half of them fellows, including local community workers. The UFMG Institute for Advanced Transdisciplinary Studies participated in the World Pandemic Research Network (WPRN) platform, with 100 academic institutions publishing research on the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19.

In Rio de Janeiro, UFRJ worked in a network with Fiocruz, UERJ and PUC-RIO in the assessment of social and economic losses and supported the fight against Covid-19 in the slums of the metropolitan region. In Porto Seguro, Bahia, UFSB evaluated the negative impacts on tourism in the region and how indigenous communities reacted to the pandemic. In the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo, Unipampa and UFSCar mapped consequences for family farming. In Santa Maria, UFSM studied the financial (in)security of families due to the pandemic and the situation faced by migrants and refugees. In Uberlândia, the UFU assessed the impact on trade and created indicators.

In Brasília, UnB studied the socioeconomic effect on the food sector in prisons and for immigrants and refugees. UnB also strengthened networks and popular initiatives, with mobilizations that defend access to water as a right, healthy cities, agroecology and food sovereignty in the peri-urban region of Brasília. In Salvador, UFBA evaluated the socioeconomic impact on teaching activities, on health professionals and on vulnerable groups (children, elderly, indigenous people, quilombolas). In Maranhão, UFMA studied the consequences of the pandemic in quilombos.

With regard to the performance of Universities in the evaluation and monitoring of public policies in the pandemic, UFMG created the Covid-19 Social Observatory to inform the absence of action by the public authorities and the resulting implications. In Rio Grande do Sul, UFSM also created a Socio-Economic Observatory to verify the impacts and estimate recovery scenarios for the economies and social realities of the region’s municipalities. In Goiás and São Paulo, UFG and Unifesp studied the results of direct and indirect income transfer programs, such as emergency aid. In Western Bahia, UFOP carried out comparative analyzes between municipalities that were experiencing different phases of the pandemic.

The general picture is of universities mobilized to understand the impacts, carrying out research involving the communities themselves, monitoring and guiding public policies – with the objective of strengthening citizenship and guaranteeing rights.

Several studies have made it clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is serious, but it is conjunctural, as the structural problems faced by the most vulnerable populations accumulate and go far beyond the virus. The pandemic makes visible and deepens situations already experienced and the lack of access to rights that have already been denied or limited – and with little progress in setback in the last decade. In other words, the pandemic works as an extreme event that highlights even more explicitly and clearly the structural and brutal inequality of Brazilian society, but it is not its cause.

The virus amplified this situation of huge losses imposed on workers, with mass unemployment and salary losses, with the labor and social security counter-reform, with the amendment of the spending ceiling and successive cuts in public policies. It is, therefore, a revealing and accelerating element of an ongoing process, whose economic and political agents

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need to be recognized and held accountable.

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