Covid-19:
Public Policies and Society's Responses

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Políticas Públicas e Sociedade

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Quality information for refining public policies and saving lives

> ## Technical Note 7
> ## Hunger, unemployment, disinformation and psychological suffering advance violence and hopelessness in vulnerable communities in six Brazilian metropolitan regions[1]

Main Conclusions

- In six metropolitan regions surveyed by the Monitoring Panel of Community Leaders, hunger is the most critical plight faced by vulnerable families because of the pandemic. While relief initiatives have multiplied, they still remain insufficient, incipient, and not always coordinated.
- Unemployment, reduced wages, and lack of income afflict families and hinder access to protection items, such as masks. Debt and default on payments further aggravate their vulnerable conditions.
- Lack of information, fake news, and discrepant recommendations from different public agents lead to confusion and contribute to low adherence to preventive measures.
- The desperate pursuit for income-generating activities is compounded by poor housing conditions, such as overcrowding, thus hindering adherence to social isolation.
- The new living conditions generate significant psychological impacts. Signs of exhaustion, despair, fear of dying, and lack of future prospects are perceived as a threat to one's own survival.

What to expect

- For community leaders, the increase in contamination, non-compliance with measures to contain the virus, hunger, lack of access to the health system, and increased violence are problems that will escalate even faster.

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1 The state of São Paulo, for example, which recorded the first death caused by Covid-19, took measures such as the closing of schools, one of the first to be adopted, as early as March 16, just under 60 days before the information was collected presented in this Bulletin. Store closures, with the exception of essential services, decreed by the government in the same state began on March 24.

Recommendations

- The information collected suggests an urgent need to expand and coordinate efforts to distribute food as an emergency solution and not as a substitute for other structured social protection initiatives.
- It is important that the public sector encourages social and psychological support activities for families that increasingly find themselves in a situation of hopelessness and collapse.
- Given the distortion of guidelines and disinformation, it is essential that the different levels of government, from federal to states and municipalities, coordinate themselves to help communities respond more confidently to the protection measures against Covid-19.

Covid-19 led to an increase in hunger in vulnerable communities in large metropolitan areas[1]. This is the conclusion by the first wave of research by the *Monitoring Panel with community leaders about the impacts of the advance of the Covid-19 pandemic*, conducted by the Solidary Research Network.

The study surveyed information from leaders in more than 70 communities, neighborhoods, territories, and locations of high social vulnerability in six metropolitan regions of the country. The Panel plans to record objective information on a regular basis regarding the main problems faced by these populations as the pandemic advances. The identification and monitoring of these problems allow public authorities and the communities themselves to conduct crisis anticipation and risk management.

Between May 5 and May 10, 2020, a brief standardized questionnaire was applied, by way of cellphone applications, to 99 community leaders, to which 72 replied. These leaders are representatives in locations with high socioeconomic vulnerability in the following metropolitan regions of the country: Manaus, Recife, DF, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo.

Community leaders and representatives are strategic sources of information, as they are constantly mobilized in the everyday life of the community when tackling the most serious problems afflicting their areas. In constant dialogue with the population, they hear demands, manage conflicts, and have a more integrated outlook of the territories in which they operate. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of community engagement for the effective communication of risks as well as for the control of the pandemic in local contexts, especially in highly vulnerable communities. Due to their knowledge of the territory, their experience, and the capillarity of their personal networks, community leaders play a strategic role in the dissemination of measures to prevent the spread of the virus and in building alternative solutions to the social damages of the pandemic.

This Bulletin presents the results of our analysis and review of the open questions asked to these leaders[2]. In this first survey, the methodology used did not incentive specific themes or problems since our objective was to grasp unexpected situations and events provoked by the current crisis.
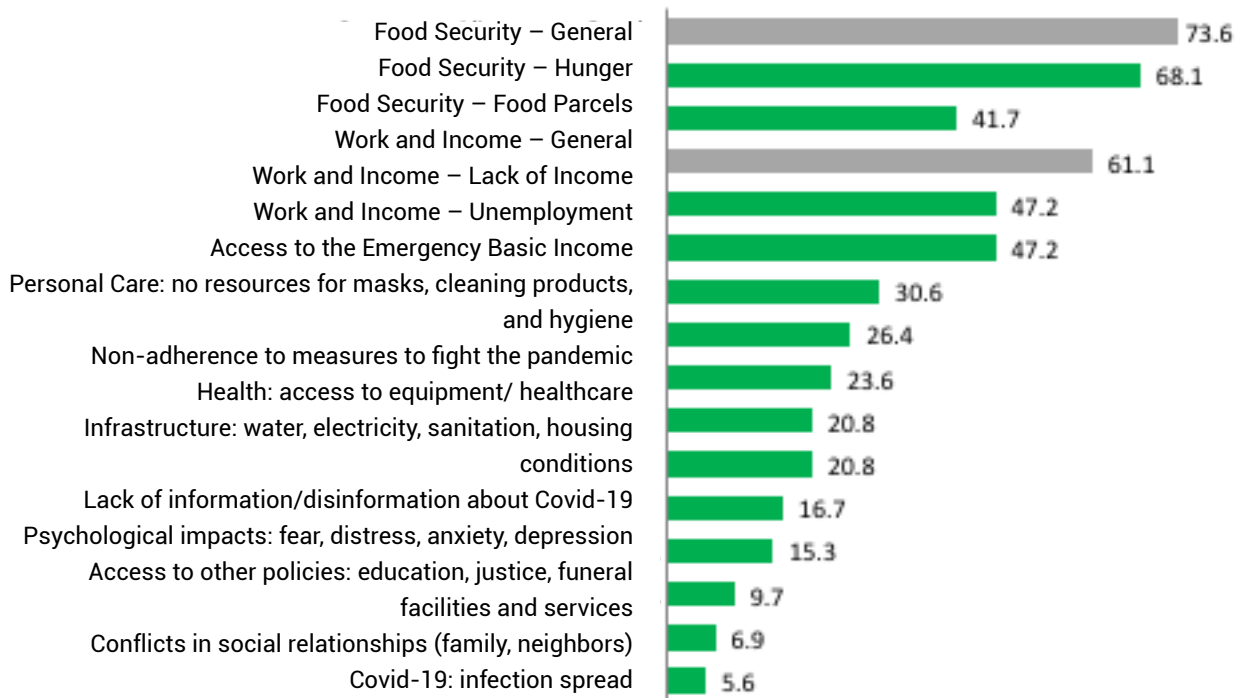
The answers to the first question convey an overall state of widespread dismay. In 68% of the communities, hunger is already one of the main problems experienced. Work and income were mentioned by more than 60% of respondents as serious problems. Almost half of the leaders signaled lack of income and unemployment as one of the main problems intensified by the pandemic.

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2 Our formulation was: "The questions below refer to the potential problems, conflicts, and situations of hardship that emerged or were aggravated because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the policies for its containment, such as social distancing, for example. (i) In the past week, what type of problems and situations has the population experienced in the community/territory in which you operate? Please report the main reasons why people have been seeking you or the main problems that you have learned are occurring." (ii) The second question asked was "In your opinion, what problems or situations could occur, worsen, or aggravate in the upcoming weeks?"

Even the emergency income assistance proposed by the federal government to alleviate the lack of income and employment has become a serious issue in people's lives: more than 30% of the respondents reported difficulties to access the benefit as among the most intense problems experienced by the populations residing in these communities. The chart below merges the first wave of responses.

Chart 1 - Problems experienced by the communities on account of the pandemic – May 05-11

Multiple Answers in% (N = 72).

Source: Monitoring Panel of Community Leaders Amidst the Covid-19 Scenario. May 05-11/2020.

Food Security

At the moment, hunger and a lack of income for purchasing food are the most recurrent and critical difficulties faced by the population in these territories. There is a widespread perception that many families are afflicted by hunger due to relative deprivation. The risk to food security intensifies as the epidemic lingers and emergency resources turn out to be insufficient.

Despite the proliferation of initiatives to distribute food parcels in the communities, resulting from assistance policies, organized civil society, and philanthropy, the local associations and leaders are strongly mobilized in search of community resources and solutions. However, these efforts are insufficient to satisfy the growing needs, as we may see seen in the leaders' statements.

"People here don't have much to eat, in fact they have nothing. So, if you give a food parcel[3] to a person who lives in a shack with eleven people, some parcels arrive with 5kg of rice. Eleven people, eating lunch and dinner, that's not enough for two days, in a rough estimate. So, that's providing for hunger. (...) If you deliver a parcel today to this family, you'll need to deliver another one the next week, at least."

(Community Leader at Campo Limpo, São Paulo - SP)

"Lack of financial resources to buy food. Many were unable to access the Emergency Assistance. People come to us for food. They're starving!"

(Community Leader at Jardim Gramacho, Duque de Caxias - RJ)

Not only the coverage and regularity of donations remain insufficient to meet the demand, the leaders also signaled a lack of coordinated actions and the difficulties in prioritizing beneficiaries, thus impacting the distribution of aid: some neighborhoods or regions of the cities are not always listed in the donations map. Certain groups within the communities tend to be regularly contemplated while others are unable to access donations and many families fail to receive their contributions proportionately.

Within this scenario of scarcity and disorganization, queues and disputes over food begin to erupt.

Work and Income

Unemployment, reduced wages, and lack of income were among the most cited effects of the pandemic by the community leaders to this Panel. The prevailing perception is that a considerable share of workers in these locations have lost their jobs, while others have suffered wage reductions. Small shopkeepers and service providers are also facing a sharp drop in income. There were recurrent mentions to the critical situation endured by self-employed and informal professionals, who were temporarily discharged without guarantee of remuneration or estimate when their activities will resume. This is the case of cleaning ladies, caretakers, and civil construction and maintenance professionals, such as bricklayers and carpenters, as the families and establishments for whom they provided services did not continue to pay their daily rates.

Faced with ever-increasing needs and insufficient government response, the leaders reported increased pressure for resuming income-generating activities, which often implies non-compliance with recommendations for social isolation and, consequently, increased risk of infection.

"Unemployment is the problem. We have several residents with overdue rent, lack of cooking gas, overdue water and electricity bills. There is shortage of food, personal hygiene items, and personal protection products such as masks, hand sanitizer, among others. Mothers with young children in need of milk and diapers."

(Community Leader at Jardim da Conquista, Diadema - SP)

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3 Translator's note: A basic-needs grocery package. The *cesta básica* (or food parcel) is a Brazilian economic term referring to a food parcel to meet the minimum needs of a typical family. The parcel generally contains food items, personal hygiene products, and cleaning products. There is no consensus as to which products make up the *cesta básica* and the list of products included may vary according to the purpose for which it is defined, or according to the distributor that composes it.

"As for housekeepers, cleaning ladies, care providers for the elderly, and nannies, these women are suffering from income loss. At first, some employers continued to pay them, but only a few. This has caused these women to return to work, moving around the city and interacting with many people."

(Community Leader at Morro do Coroa, Rio de Janeiro - RJ)

Emergency Basic Income Assistance

Difficulties when trying to access the Emergency Assistance were often reported by community leaders. The financial benefit provided by the federal government, destined to informal workers, individual microentrepreneurs (MEI), self-employed workers, and unemployed people only partially reaches the most vulnerable populations.

Community leaders reported difficulties when registering, withdrawing, or receiving the benefit. The population in these areas lack access or are unfamiliar with the use of mobile applications and often lack the necessary documents to receive the benefit through a different method. Because of the pandemic, many community residents are unable to obtain new copies of their documents, as they are unable to access public administration organs nor do they know the corresponding online procedures. There were also frequent reports regarding the exposure of the most vulnerable population to agglomerations in queues at Caixa Econômica Federal bank branches and in lottery houses, without the use of a masks, when seeking information about their benefit.

As a result, all those without personal documents are left without the assistance benefit.

Lack of information and disinformation about Covid-19

One in six leaders in this Panel mentioned the lack of information and/or disinformation about the pandemic as a serious problem in the communities. If the pre-Covid-19 world already experienced harmful consequences with the advance of fake news[4], the lack of consistent information and the spread of fake news further aggravates the management of the crisis.

The topic emerged in at least three dimensions: (i) the difficulty of understanding the risks of an intangible danger represented by the virus; (ii) the spread of fake news that minimize the impact of the epidemic; and (iii) the confusion, mostly generated by the discrepancy between the recommendations made by the municipal, state and federal public authorities, which intensify the population's uncertainties and lack of understanding.

This discrepancy has serious consequences for adherence to preventive measures. Community leaders point to the need for targeted awareness-raising actions, with the transmission of communications and guidance directly to this population, as seen in the statements.

"(...) it seems as if people still don't believe in the virus, because there is a lot they don't see. And without correct information, people won't be able to protect themselves, especially the poorest ones. People are still not believing in it."

(Community Leader at Brasilândia – São Paulo – SP)

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4 The newspaper Folha de S. Paulo (05.20.2020) revealed that fake news channels about the pandemic on YouTube are viewed almost 3 times more than videos with real data: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibrioesaude/2020/05/canais-de-fake-news-sobre-covid-19-no-youtube-sao-vistos-quase-3-vezes-mais-que-os-de-dados-reais.shtml.

"One of the problems is that people are idle with nothing else to do, they're worried about the situation and confused due to the conflicting information."

(Community Leader at Morro do Papagaio, Belo Horizonte – MG).

"The lack of information by way of flyers, leaflets, and sound cars. Disinformation spreading by word of mouth (fake WhatsApp messages). Rumors that the virus is a conspiracy, only a mild flu, or not a big deal. Health workers without protection. Unprotected merchants."

(Community Leader at Capão Redondo, São Paulo – SP).

"One of the biggest problems we've seen is with information, right? Sometimes we hear something, so the health agencies say something, but other people say we need to continue life normally, right? And people are facing difficulties, they don't understand how serious the virus is for older people."

(Community Leader at Jardim Leni, São Paulo – SP)

"You know, many people come to me with complaints regarding the discrepancy in the information that is passed on. And that's mostly because of the political fight going on right now in the country (...) each politician, each leader and politician providing different information, right? Our president says one thing, our governor says something else, our mayor too. So there's this political fight going on, which hinders people's understanding."

(Community Leader at Engenho do Meio, Recife – PE)

Adherence to preventive measures

Agglomerations in bars, parties and bingos, the reopening of commercial establishments without safety inspections, and the transit of people without masks are part of the daily life of community leaders. Deep down, according to their reports, there is a great deal of disbelief among the population as to the severity and transmission rate of the disease; and the difficulties for accessing the correct information and the discrepancy of recommendations are at the heart of this issue. Furthermore, housing conditions prevent the adoption of many preventive measures.

In an environment in which personal relationships are indispensable for survival, social isolation measures become incongruous with the necessities of everyday life.

"Where I live in our community, unfortunately, and especially last week, there was no social isolation, which should have occurred. Perhaps due to a lack of awareness or maybe because people don't believe in the magnitude and severity of the disease, a lot of shops were open, only a few people wearing masks, etc."

(Community Leader at Parada de Taipas, São Paulo - SP)

"The major problem is the lack of social distancing. People are walking around the streets, whether month-old babies or elderly women over 70, from morning to night (...) The lack of isolation is mostly because of the precarious conditions of the houses, whether the houses in the village or the shacks and stilts of the favela, or even the housing complexes; the rooms are small and scarce for large families with relatives and companions."

(Community Leader at Vila Santa Luzia, Recife - PE)

"So, in the last week, what scares me the most, what worries me is that people continue to go out to work, and there's no solution for that, right? We live in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, so that means we naturally have to move to the downtown area or more distant regions from the periphery so we can work, right? (...) And I have no suggestion whatsoever for them, 'don't go to work or you'll catch this disease'. How can I say that? If they don't work, they can't eat. (...)

(Community Leader at Morro do Macaco, Cotia - SP)

"Here where I live, I've noticed lately that people have been going out a lot to solve small errands or even visit relatives. Most people go to banks, supermarkets, and lottery houses, as many are waiting to receive the emergency income assistance or have already received it and need to adjust their lives, pay their debts and supply the house with food. Even though here in the most peripheral and populous part of the Distrito Federal people are not really respecting isolation, most people are wearing masks, but unfortunately the elderly are the most resistant to wearing them or they sometimes don't even have one. Since the situation is not yet serious around here, many Uber drivers risk themselves driving around, as many people are enduring financial difficulties".

(Community Leader at P Norte - Ceilândia, Distrito Federal)

Psychological impacts

Fear of dying, exhaustion, distress, despair. The pandemic has brought significant psychological impacts on the vulnerable population in the communities. At least 15% of community leaders describe situations of panic and anxiety among families, in addition to their perception that cases of panic attacks and nervous breakdowns have worsened during the pandemic. People with diabetes, high blood pressure, and other health conditions who seek help and are unable to receive medical are, and at a loss as to who to turn to, are overcome by anguish and hopelessness in the search for improvements in their living conditions.

The most emotional accounts regarding the psychological impact, however, seem to address issues beyond isolation and mention their very subsistence. The increase in unemployment and the inability to acquire a minimum income intensifies fear and insecurity about the present. The situation of confinement and the unpredictability of whether people will have food the following day increases despair and doubts about survival, which was emphatically reported by the community leaders.

"The problem is how people are exhausted, (...) they're confined in the tiny space of their homes, with no electricity to "escape" boredom, and facing difficulties because they're at home spending money they don't have. Eating what they have, waiting for what comes next. (....) The main problem is unemployment. It prevails over despair, fear, and insecurity. It's messing with people's minds."

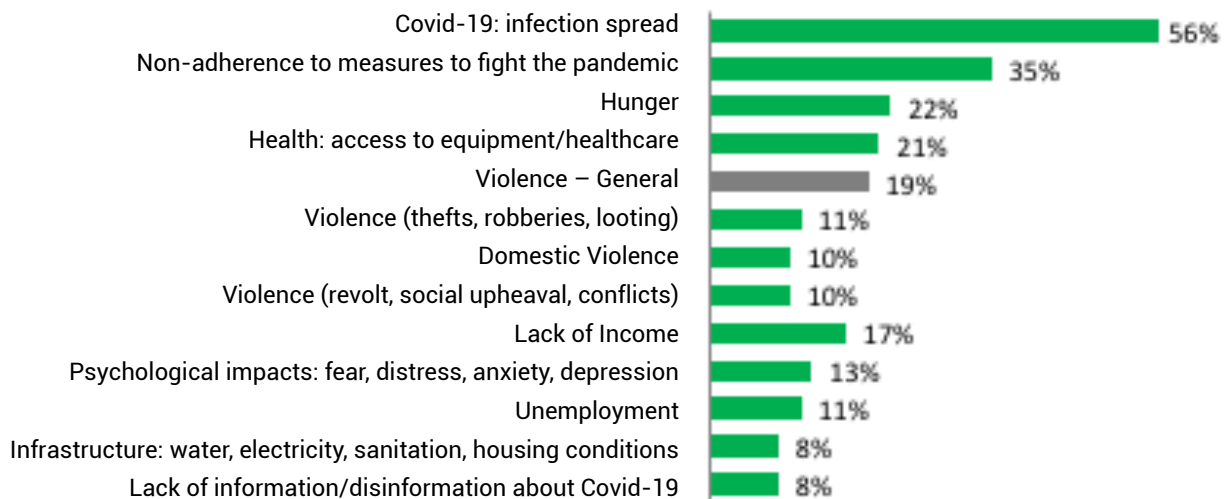**(Community Leader at M'Boi Mirim, São Paulo – SP)**

"Many people, especially women, talk about fear of dying, anguish, they no longer want to fight for their dreams, go to college, get married. They're enduring breakdowns and seeking professional psychological support. The lack of life prospects brought by the pandemic has psychologically impacted the community. (...) women inmates are also enduring frequent anxieties, and they're even receiving farewell letters from their partners."

(Community Leader at Morro da Coroa, Rio de Janeiro - RJ)

Problems and situations likely to worsen quickly

In your opinion, what problems or situations could occur, worsen, or aggravate in the upcoming weeks? This was the second question asked to the leaders interviewed in the first wave of the Panel, between May 5 and 11, whose responses were processed and coded in the graph below.

Chart 2 - Covid-19: Problems that will worsen in the communities in the upcoming weeks (%). Multiple Answers (N=72).

Problem	%
Covid-19: infection spread	56%
Non-adherence to measures to fight the pandemic	35%
Hunger	22%
Health: access to equipment/healthcare	21%
Violence – General	19%
Violence (thefts, robberies, looting)	11%
Domestic Violence	10%
Violence (revolt, social upheaval, conflicts)	10%
Lack of Income	17%
Psychological impacts: fear, distress, anxiety, depression	13%
Unemployment	11%
Infrastructure: water, electricity, sanitation, housing conditions	8%
Lack of information/disinformation about Covid-19	8%

Source: Monitoring Panel of Community Leaders Amidst the Covid-19 Scenario. Solidarity Research Network. May 05-11/2020.

On top of all the difficulties endured by these populations, 56% of the leaders interviewed signaled that the spread of the Covid-19 virus, and the subsequent increase in deaths, will further intensify in the communities in the upcoming weeks.

To a large extent, these opinions are based on the perception that people will increasingly fail to obey measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic, such as social distancing, even if for reasons largely against the wishes of the population (mentioned by 35% of leaders).

Also associated with the leaders' predictions regarding the spread of the disease in the upcoming days, access to health appears among the main problems that will be intensified (indicated by 21% of respondents). Several accounts signaled that public facilities are already at full capacity and with the prediction of more people becoming infected, the system will inevitably collapse very quickly.

Hunger is once again mentioned by 22% of respondents as a problem that will become even more serious in the next period, as well as violence, which was mentioned in one in every five answers.

Among the types of violence that tend to increase in the perception of the leaders, three stood out: (i) domestic violence, mentioned by 10% of the respondents; (ii) robberies, thefts, and looting, mentioned by 11%; and (iii) violence associated with the increase of local conflicts, upheaval, and revolt by the population due to the situation in which they find themselves, listed as an imminent problem by 10% of the leaders.

"And the people's revolt. If the belly's empty, then you know what can happen, right?"

(Community Leader, Jardim das Palmas, São Paulo - SP)

"The lack of money leads to social chaos."

(Community Leader, Parque Regina, São Paulo – SP)

"People and entire families falling ill, violence increasing among family members, as we've seen happening, and the increase in robberies and thefts."

(Community Leader, Vila Santa Luzia, Recife – PE)

"Increase in crime and overcrowding in hospitals."

(Community Leader, Comunidade Gustavo Nascimento, Manaus – AM)

"In my opinion, the problems that could get worse or aggravate in the upcoming weeks is an increase of violence, the increase in robberies, especially armed robberies, small thefts, which we're even hearing about now, right? And the possibility of robberies with murders, and even robberies in the supermarkets, which has already happened around here because unfortunately some people don't know how to deal with the situation, they're becoming desperate. And so that number has aggravated this situation, and even the increased numbers in domestic violence."

(Community Leader, Vale do Amanhecer, Planaltina – DF)

"Increased hunger. Increase in robberies by young people in the community due to lack of food."

(Community Leader, Morro da Coroa, Rio de Janeiro – RJ)

Lastly, lack of income (17%), unemployment (11%), and psychological impacts (13%), such as an increase in depression, were also mentioned by the leaders as situations that will likely worsen in the upcoming days.

"We could see a dramatic increase of people with psychological problems, particularly depression, panic syndrome, suicides, insomnia, increased domestic violence and fatal accidents and deaths, more people dependent on alcohol and drugs, and theft and looting in homes, stores, shops, and others."

(Community Leader, Jd. Conquista, Diadema – SP)

Emergency recommendations

- The information gathered suggests an urgent need to expand and coordinate efforts to distribute food as an emergency solution and not as a substitute for other structured social protection initiatives.
- It is important that the public sector encourages social and psychological support activities for families that increasingly find themselves in a situation of hopelessness and collapse.
- Given the distortion and disinformation that lead to disbelief and confusion as to the nature and real danger that Covid-19 represents, it is essential that the different levels of government, ranging from the federal level to states and municipalities, coordinate themselves to help communities respond more confidently to the protection measures against the virus.

ABOUT

We are over 40 researchers, actively engaged in the task of improving the quality of public policies within federal, state, and municipal governments as they seek to act amidst the Covid-19 crisis to save lives. We dedicate our energies towards rigorous data collection, devising substantial information, formulating indicators, and elaborating models and analyses to monitor and identify pathways for public policies and review the responses presented by the population.

The Solidary Research Network has researchers from all scientific fields (Humanities as well as Exact and Biological Sciences) in Brazil and overseas. For us, the combination of skills and techniques is vital as we face the current pandemic. The challenge ahead is enormous, but it is particularly invigorating. And it would never have come to fruition if it weren't for the generous contribution of private institutions and donors who swiftly answered our calls. We are profoundly grateful to all those who support us.

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