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Indigenous Peoples, Uncertainty and Exclusion in the Global South in Periods of the Pandemic

Javier Lastra-Bravo

Abstract

The indigenous peoples are distributed in all regions of the world, representing more than 6% of the world's population. According to UN data, the pandemic has disproportionately affected indigenous groups, aggravating the structural inequalities and processes of widespread historical discrimination and exclusion present in the Global South, for example, high rates of extreme poverty, social exclusion, high prevalence of the disease, and limited and in some cases non-existent access to health care. Also, indigenous peoples have a great wealth of knowledge, traditional practices, cultural forms, and access to natural resources, as well as forms of collective social organization and community life that result in resilience factors in response to adversity and uncertainty. In this way, the chapter focuses from a descriptive-analytical approach on the situation of indigenous peoples and the pandemic, analyzing the forms of responses, their resilient action in the face of uncertainties and structural exclusions in the Global South.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, Global South, Postcolonialism, Social exclusion, Resilience, Autonomy

1. Introduction

Indigenous peoples represent 6% of the world's population, and there are currently more than 476 million different indigenous groups spread across all regions of the world. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous peoples have been more affected than the rest of the population, due to historical and structural inequalities present in the post-colonial Global South. These problems are especially linked to exclusion from democratic processes, structural discrimination by the State, social exclusion, extreme poverty, socioeconomic problems, and deficient access to health care. Elements that threaten the lives of indigenous groups, generating a greater risk of dying from the virus, generating a disproportionate impact on the rest of society.

In this context, the pandemic caused by the coronavirus has had different repercussions on the individual and collective rights of indigenous groups, increasing the risk of contagion due to structural conditions and exclusion, but also generating their mechanisms of resilience from the communities themselves, positioning themselves in the adverse and disproportionate effects of the pandemic.

Thus, for indigenous peoples, in the context of exclusion and inequality, COVID-19 is positioned as a high-risk factor, since the indigenous population often has a lower quality of life, due to factors such as poverty, isolation, or lack of adequate infrastructure.

Concerning exclusion, it should be noted that indigenous peoples are one of the most forgotten and excluded social groups when faced with the actions of the States [1], because public policies linked to dealing with the pandemic many times leave aside the specific social and cultural factors of indigenous peoples.

From the perspective of International Organizations, it has been pointed out that indigenous peoples are those who are most at risk due to their economic, social, and developmental marginalization by the States, being even affected their Human Rights, the reason why the United Nations Organization recommends to implement special measures for the protection of indigenous populations [1]. In this sense, different organizations have focused on generating proposals that facilitate assistance and allow dealing with the pandemic from the perspective of indigenous groups. For example, UN Women has developed proposals focused on making visible the situation of indigenous women in the context of social isolation, focusing on gender policies and prevention of violence in the communities. On the side, we can find the recommendations of the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, which has focused on promoting the defense of human rights in indigenous groups as well as respect for their collective rights. The International Labor Organization has also concentrated on publishing notes that allow the creation of public policies focused on the situation of poverty in which indigenous peoples live. Finally, the International Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has focused on generating recommendations to combat hunger and malnutrition in the context of pandemics, emphasizing food security programs.

We can point out that the problem of COVID-19 and indigenous groups have attracted the attention of international organizations, which have taken great care to make recommendations to the States to improve the condition of indigenous peoples, focusing on improving their current state of vulnerability to the pandemic, promoting measures to ensure a differentiated response for these groups [2].

This chapter presents an analysis of the effects of the pandemic and the global health crisis, especially concerning the disproportionate impact of this crisis on indigenous peoples. Focusing on an analysis of the structural elements that generate greater vulnerability for these groups.

2. Discrimination and historical exclusion of indigenous peoples. the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on indigenous groups

As previously mentioned, the global health crisis has affected indigenous communities in a particular way, because elements like structural inequality, exclusion, and high poverty rates have aggravated the situation in which indigenous peoples confront the pandemic, increasing their vulnerability to the effects of the virus concerning the general population. This is because they experience a high level of socioeconomic marginalization, requiring specific attention and response focused on their cultural contexts.

In this context, globalization, neocolonialism, and neo-extractivism have contributed to generate processes of exclusion and marginalization of indigenous groups, especially with the loss of their lands, generating forced displacements, high poverty rates, and the violation of their collective and individual rights. This is in addition to the generation of constant processes of structural inequality [3] and systemic discrimination [4] in which they find themselves, which has increased in

the context of the pandemic, generating an increase in racism and stigmatization of indigenous groups, for example, in some localities such as Chiapas, Mexico, they have been discriminated against by considering them as focal points of infection due to their high rates of contagion [1].

In this sense, it is necessary to point out that the indigenous groups of the Global South are found in post-colonial contexts, where elements of coloniality are still evident [5], which are configured as factors of exclusion and discrimination for these groups. In this situation, their political, economic, cultural, and social rights have been historically and systematically violated by the dominant societies, which is demonstrated by statistics and surveys that show that indigenous groups are the world's populations with the least access to basic services such as water, health, education, and adequate housing.

2.1 Employment and working conditions

Recent studies by the International Labor Organization [6, 7] show that indigenous groups also experience inequalities and exclusion in the work market, even when specific rights have been recognized to protect them from this situation [8]. In this sense, we can point out that indigenous populations are one of the most precarious groups in terms of work insertion, accounting for 86.3% of the world's informal economies [6].

This situation does not improve when focusing on indigenous women, who experience triple discrimination: gender, class, and ethnicity, as they are women, poor and indigenous [9, 10]. In this sense, indigenous women have specific difficulties entering the labor market, according to data from the International Labor Organization, only 49.3% of indigenous women have a job, in which most of the cases correspond to informal employment [6, 8].

These statistics undoubtedly reflect a worrying state of indigenous groups, demonstrating their vulnerability and exclusion from formal jobs and the labor market in general, which in the context of the pandemic becomes extremely worrisome, because, due to the various sanitary restrictions, it is expected that the informal economy will be reduced by 80% as a result of the crisis [11], especially when, in many cases, the restrictions on mobility and access also mean not being able to generate income [12].

These studies also point out that indigenous peoples represent 19% of the world's population living in extreme poverty, in other words, they are people who live on less than US$1.90 a day, categorizing indigenous peoples as one of the poorest populations in the world. This is also reflected in their acquisition of pensions and retirement benefits that are much lower than those of the rest of the population [13]. In this sense, the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples has pointed out that this situation has been exacerbated in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic [1], for which reason it is necessary to generate, on the part of the national States, political measures and strategies that are linked to improving the living conditions of indigenous groups.

2.2 Access to basic services

Another risk factor is access to basic services such as potable water, in this regard we can mention the case of the indigenous people of Colombia, where more than 50% of the indigenous population does not have access to this service [11], making them especially vulnerable to contracting the virus in precarious survival conditions, limiting the possibility of hand washing and hygiene management, as well as the impossibility of obtaining medical care or medicines.

It should be mentioned that the policies and measures of the States linked to generating access of indigenous groups to social protection are insufficient and ineffective [6], which is due to the marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination of which they are victims [14]. In this sense, we can point out that there is very low coverage of social protection programs of the States about the indigenous peoples of the Global South, a situation that is reflected in diverse countries of the region, such as Peru, Nepal, Kenya, Bangladesh, Cambodia or Colombia, which are countries where the coverage of social protection programs is less than 40% of the indigenous population [8], which is also because many indigenous people live in remote areas or areas of difficult access.

This deficiency of access to basic services is determined by a lack of public policies related to improving living conditions in indigenous territories, generating inequalities, discrimination, and structural exclusion on the part of the State. This situation has developed even though the states of the Global South have generated a series of public policies related to reducing the inequality experienced by indigenous groups in recent decades. However, despite these initiatives, in many States, the situation of exclusion and the social gap has increased considerably in recent years [7, 15–17].

2.3 Education

Education has been historically presented as a social factor that has generated exclusion of indigenous groups in the Global South, which has increased in the post-colonial context, currently presenting limited access to education for indigenous groups. In this sense, statistics from UNESCO (2019) and the ILO (2020) show that indigenous people worldwide are less likely to have access to formal education, the education levels of indigenous people being lower than those of non-indigenous people. In this context, we can mention, for example, the case of the indigenous communities of Cameroon, which are presented as those with the lowest access to primary education services.

Another factor of exclusion that has been presented in the context of the pandemic is related to access to distance education or online modality. In the context of COVID-19, indigenous children and youth have not been able to have access to online education platforms, since most rural indigenous populations do not have the necessary infrastructure to access distance learning programs, since they do not have access to internet or electricity supply [18].

Inequality has increased in recent years just as the accumulation and concentration of wealth has been increasing, an inherent phenomenon of the current economic system. As a result, the wealthy have become richer and the poor continue to be excluded from the system. Although the role of education and the opportunity to generate equality has been openly discussed in previous decades, it is known according to current research [19–23] that education is also distributed unequally, as a result of the neoliberal market system operating in the Global South, where the State have been dismembered under Friedmann's postulates, losing its central capacity, leaving the market to mediate in public affairs. In this sense, education has also been transformed into a consumer good, which can be privatized and monetized, so that its access is conditioned by the market.

In addition to the unequal growth of globalized economies has constituted a factor of exclusion for marginalized groups in the Global South, amplifying, through the neoliberal market system, inequalities in basic services such as access to education. In this way, access to education has been distributed very unequally [24] as a consequence of the neoliberal system, which has caused people with little access to education to be employed in the informal labor market, generating

marginalization in the educational and productive process. This increases the economic gap [25] between the sectors with access to education and its privileges and those sectors where education becomes more complex in its access. Generating technological development and modernization for certain social groups, while others remain marginalized from the profits and benefits of global capitalism.

2.4 Land and community

Indigenous peoples have historically maintained a special relationship with the land, being present in their cosmovision as a life-generating element. However, the effects of neocolonialism, globalization, and extractivism have created serious problems in terms of land ownership, and have still generated various processes by which indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of the land they consider ancestral [1].

The loss of land and territories becomes even more complicated because the indigenous populations base their economic activities in most of the Global South on agriculture, with 55% of the indigenous population employed in agricultural activities [6]. This activity has been strongly affected in recent years due to the growing extractive activity in indigenous territories, which has produced an amplified effect of land loss, in addition to other factors such as global warming, linked to desertification, floods, soil erosion, and droughts. It should also be noted that the indigenous groups of the Global South are among the populations that suffer most of the consequences of food insecurity. Therefore, the generation of restrictive policies of the pandemic associated with displacement has generated an increase in food insecurity, often prohibiting indigenous groups from accessing the sale of their products or obtaining other necessary economic resources.

This has greatly affected the semi-nomadic indigenous peoples, who have not been able to manage their grazing tasks, making it impossible for them to move their livestock or sell their products and animals in the city's markets, making it difficult for them to obtain economic resources [26].

Another important factor is the loss of indigenous lands and territories, producing forced displacements and overcrowding in the communities. One of the main reasons for the loss of land is the arrival of neo-extractivist industries [27–29] such as mining and forestry companies, which make use of their land, forcing them to settle in other places with a low productive level or, in the worst case, forcing them to reduce their land, producing overcrowding in the communities, which has become a risk factor in the context of the pandemic, increasing the possibilities of contagion.

Undoubtedly, these forced displacements and the process of land loss, in general, are an element of uncertainty and vulnerability that affects indigenous groups in the context of the pandemic, since in many cases they are unprotected by the States. In this sense, land and the community, in particular, represent a relevant factor for indigenous groups, because in many cultures the collective is presented as the central element in their worldview and ethnicity, being a central element for their survival as groups.

On the other side, in the context of pandemic and isolation, the community plays two fundamental roles, on the one hand, it is configured as that element where the indigenous people, through autonomy and self-determination, can generate specific measures to face the health crisis, but it is also presented as a risk factor since in community life there is a greater probability of contagion, either by community work, food exchange, religious ceremonies, among others, which makes physical distancing much more complex [30].

Another problem has been generated by indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation, who are more vulnerable because they are less immune to imported diseases [31–33], and are also far from health services. At present, it is estimated that there are around 200 groups, mostly in the Amazon and Gran Chaco regions of Paraguay, which are at special risk due to the lack of State protection and lack of access to health services or social assistance from governments. In this context, we can mention indigenous groups in the Amazon, who have indicated in a report to the UN [1] that the virus has been introduced by religious missionaries and by workers in the mining and forestry industries.

2.5 The information barrier

Another factor that has generated the exclusion of indigenous peoples in the context of the pandemic has been the limited access to information and communication. This is because prevention measures against COVID-19 are not translated into indigenous languages and are not approached from a relevant cultural perspective, so there is difficult access to information, not achieving the necessary dissemination among the indigenous population, who often do not have access to traditional media such as television. This has resulted in a lack of updated and correct information regarding the virus, the development of the pandemic, or the public policies and benefits developed by governments, even some indigenous communities in Africa, have come to ignore the pandemic, perceiving it rather as an urban health crisis, so they have not adopted preventive measures [1].

Pandemics and diseases have been present in the collective memory of indigenous groups since the arrival of the European conquerors. Diseases such as measles, influenza, and smallpox devastated many indigenous communities in various territories of the global south centuries ago [34–36], so their presence is very present in their oral history, acquiring a special symbolic meaning, which is why the COVID-19 pandemic has particularly alarmed certain communities where there is little access to information.

This information barrier is a structural element of exclusion of indigenous groups, who, through language and specifically due to the limited recognition of their traditional languages, are prevented from obtaining information that would allow them to generate prevention strategies in their communities. This is in addition to a lack of trust in the State and the traditional media, as a result of the systematic forms of discrimination and exclusion to which they are subjected.

However, there are experiences where indigenous peoples have been involved and committed to the dissemination and democratization of information for their communities. In this sense, we can mention the work of the leaders of the Amazon region of Venezuela, who have developed a special working group on COVID-19 linked to the dissemination of information adapted to the specific contexts of their communities, issuing announcements in indigenous languages, and using community radio as a trusted disseminating element [37]. Another example is presented in India, where village councils and councils of elders have focused on translating and disseminating information related to COVID-19 prevention in indigenous languages [38]. Similarly, in Laos, health care mechanisms have been created in the Hmong language, guaranteeing access to information and health care from a culturally broad approach, incorporating the communities and their authorities in the generation of local community policies on the prevention of the virus.

Finally, Mexico has also included in its prevention strategy the actions of indigenous healers, who have focused on generating a network for the dissemination of information to incorporate a multicultural vision of the health problem. Although the existence of some initiatives to generate greater access to information has been

proven, it can be pointed out that these actions are insufficient, since they are specific projects that do not generate significant changes to the structures of exclusion and the constant barriers to information that affect indigenous peoples.

3. Responses from indigenous groups and implications of the crises

The aforementioned elements have shown that indigenous peoples are in a situation of previous inequality and exclusion to the rest of society [39, 40], which is evidenced in elements such as the lack of access to health services and precarious subsistence systems that have exacerbated social injustices in post-colonial states [41]. This is in addition to the fact that the health of indigenous groups in many countries is much lower than that of the rest of society due to the presence of pre-existing diseases and the presence of a low immune system [42], which is often due to socio-environmental risk factors and fragile ecosystems, which are affected, for example, by the contamination of water resources or air by extractive industries present in their territories.

However, indigenous peoples, as active agents and promoters of change, are finding their solutions to respond to the health crisis, based on their traditional knowledge and practices. Based on indigenous autonomy, they are generating diverse strategies that allow them to confront the risks of the pandemic. In this sense, although indigenous peoples are at greater risk of infection due to the structural problems to which they are affected, they also have diverse strategies and resources to cope with the pandemic, creating based on their lifestyles community-based and worldview, demonstrating a strong capacity for resilience to the global pandemic, however, it should be mentioned that this varies significantly from community to community depending on the context of each one.

In this way, the collective right to autonomy and self-determination of indigenous communities becomes very relevant, particularly since a United Nations report [1] has shown that those indigenous peoples who enjoy the right to self-determination are better positioned in the face of the pandemic, generating their control and isolation mechanisms, regardless of the actions taken by governments.

Similarly, those communities that have access to land and have generated sustainable agricultural practices linked to food security have been able to generate their food distribution mechanisms among the community. On the other hand, the community serves as a platform for economic assistance based on mutual aid and group solidarity. In this sense, examples have arisen such as the Maori groups in New Zealand who have applied the Mahi Aroha, where economic aid has been distributed among the communities, providing food, resources, and hygiene items, as a form of autonomy and self-management of the pandemic, focusing on the help of community members [43]. In Chile, the Mapuche communities of the coast have shared the food obtained from their fishing with other sectors of society that have been affected by the economic consequences of the confinement [1, 44].

Similarly, there have been several examples of other indigenous groups, which have autonomously managed aid to cope with the crisis, in many cases without government assistance.

The indigenous community plays a very important role as an element that allows generating resilience within indigenous groups, serving as an element that allows strengthening social relationships in confinement, facing stress and emotional problems related to it. In this sense, the indigenous community plays the role of emotional support for indigenous people who are in confinement or social and physical isolation. In this sense, it has been possible to identify that the support of the indigenous community, based on family relations, has generated networks that

allow them to focus on better management of the emotional stress generated by the pandemic and confinement. In this way it is possible to mention a study by Carolyn Smith-Morris who points out that the community generates benefits to the health of the members of the group, noting: "Having relationships and being involved in them, having a sense of belonging, and engaging with the community in a meaningful way are all healing activities. If we somehow manage to put more emphasis on these community activities, not at the expense of individual health measures, but in cooperation with them, we will tap into a source of ill health" [45].

In this way, traditional knowledge, culture, and specifically indigenous traditional medicine play an important role as an element of resistance and resilience of indigenous peoples to the pandemic, since the extensive knowledge of biological diversity and local pharmacopeia, allows indigenous people to generate from holistic perspective mechanisms that allow them to maintain their well-being autonomously without even having health care from the state. So, traditional medicine has been recognized by international organizations and is protected in the current international legislation, recognizing its value and usefulness for indigenous peoples.

Another of the actions undertaken by indigenous communities is self-isolation, as a measure to stop and prevent the transmission of the virus, limiting entry to the communities, allowing them to better control their prevention and contagion rates. In this sense, we can mention the experiences of the Igorot indigenous groups in the Philippines, who established the ubaya, which means a time of isolation of the community [46]. On the other side, we can mention the case of the Rapa Nui communities in the Pacific, who, not having administrative autonomous rights that would allow them to exercise a closure of the island, relied on an ancient ancestral Tapu law to exercise voluntary quarantine of the community, restrict contacts and hinder the spread of the virus. In North Africa, the Amazigh communities of Algeria also closed their territories to foreigners, generating a strict control to enter their communities and exercising from the traditional authorities recommendations to reduce social contact [1]. It should be mentioned that concerning self-isolation, the indigenous communities did not receive support from the governments in most cases, even finding themselves in conflict with the State for creating roadblocks as a measure of prevention and isolation.

4. Conclusion

As previously exposed, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a global crisis that has aggravated the problems and living conditions of indigenous groups, increasing the multiple vulnerabilities that affect them. In the first place, this is due to the presence of structural factors of exclusion and discrimination that have their roots in the post-colonial context of the global south and that have increased even more with neo-extractivism and globalized neoliberal capitalism.

Within these problems, we have been able to identify difficult access to state assistance programs, which are conceived from a state-centric logic, without taking into consideration cultural elements of indigenous groups or the contexts in which they live. In this way, we can also consider that exclusion is presented in the form of racism and discrimination when trying to access health services, for example, women are affected by gender discrimination, racism, and xenophobia.

As we have analyzed, indigenous groups are in an unfavorable and vulnerable situation to the rest of society, which has increased during the pandemic period. However, the various indigenous groups have generated different proposals to respond to this challenge, resorting to their traditional practices, their right to

self-determination and autonomy, and the creation of community initiatives that have strengthened their capacity to face the global crisis.

Finally, it should be noted that the global COVID-19 crisis has shown that many States continue to operate from a colonialist logic, often applying public policies that are decontextualized and do not adapt to the realities of indigenous groups, not taking into consideration the systemic exclusions that indigenous people confront. In this sense, and based on the above analysis, we can mention that the responses of the States have not considered the particular lifestyles of indigenous communities, nor their culture and traditions, generating public policies that often contradict their worldview and their ways of dealing with the crisis.

The indigenous peoples, however, have elaborated various proposals and demands that are linked to the need to be able to participate in the decisions of the States related to public policies with the pandemic and the management of the crisis [1]. In this sense, it is necessary to point out that to exercise efficient management of the pandemic it is necessary to respect the right of autonomy of the indigenous communities, allowing them to manage at a local level the crisis, with the necessary information, economic and material support from the States. In this sense, the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples points out that for good management and adequate response to the pandemic, it is necessary the coordination of both indigenous authorities and state authorities to generate a joint work that is adequate for the special contexts of the communities [1]. Therefore, respect for indigenous collective rights and the recognition of autonomy rights means a necessary action to exercise greater inclusion of historically excluded groups such as the indigenous in the State apparatus, expanding democracy and allowing for good crisis management.

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