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Unemployment, poverty, and hunger in Brazil in Covid-19 pandemic times

Desemprego, pobreza e fome no Brasil em tempos de pandemia por Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This scientific note presents preliminary developments of the Covid-19 pandemic on unemployment, poverty, and hunger in Brazil. The data on unemployment rate, un employment insurance claims, contingent of families in extreme poverty, and food insecurity was collected in government information systems, research published by public agencies, scientific articles, and in news portals. In an upward trajectory since 2015, the increase in unemployment and the number of families in extreme poverty was exacerbated after the pandemic began, drastically reducing the purchase power and access to healthy and adequate food, affecting mainly women and the populations of the Northern and Northeastern regions. Between January and September 2020, there was a 3% increase in unemployment in Brazil and, in October 2020, there were almost 485 thousand more families in extreme poverty compared to January of the same year. There are inadequate and insufficient responses from the Brazilian government to the articulated set of problems. The Covid-19 pandemic is a new element that potentiates the recent increase in hunger in Brazil, which occurs in parallel with the dismantling of the Food and Nutrition Security programs and the expansion of fiscal austerity measures, started with the political-economic crisis in 2015. There is an urgent need to recover the centrality of the agenda to fight hunger in Brazil, associated with the development of more robust contributions on the impact of the pandemic on the phenomena of poverty and hunger.

Keywords: Coronavirus infections. Food and nutrition security. Hunger. Poverty. Social vulnerability. Unemployment.

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RESUMO

Nesta nota científica apresentam-se desdobramentos preliminares da pandemia de Covid-19 sobre o desemprego, a pobreza e a fome no Brasil. Utilizaram-se dados sobre a taxa de desocupação, solicitações de seguro-desemprego e contingente de famílias em extrema pobreza e em insegurança alimentar, coletados em sistemas de informação governamentais, em pesquisas publicadas por órgãos públicos, em artigos científicos e em portais de notícias. Em trajetória ascendente, desde 2015, identificou-se um aumento do desemprego e do número de famílias em extrema pobreza após a instauração da pandemia, o que pode reduzir drasticamente o poder de compra e o acesso à alimentação adequada e saudável, afetando, principalmente, as mulheres e a população das regiões Norte e Nordeste. Entre janeiro e setembro de 2020, houve o aumento de 3% desemprego no Brasil e, em outubro de 2020, havia quase 485 mil famílias a mais em situação de extrema pobreza, relativamente a janeiro do mesmo ano. Verificam-se respostas inadequadas e insuficientes do governo brasileiro frente ao conjunto articulado de problemas. A pandemia de Covid-19 consiste em um novo elemento potencializador do aumento recente da fome no Brasil, que ocorre paralelamente ao desmonte dos programas de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional e à ampliação de medidas de austeridade fiscal iniciadas com a crise político-econômica em 2015. Urge resgatar a centralidade da agenda de combate à fome no Brasil, associadamente ao desenvolvimento de contribuições mais robustas sobre o impacto da pandemia nos fenômenos da pobreza e da fome.

Palavras-chave: Infecção por coronavírus. Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Fome. Pobreza. Vulnerabilidade social. Desemprego.

The Coronavirus 19 (Covid-19) pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. Nine days later, the state of community transmission of the virus was also declared in Brazil; up to December 17, 2020, there had been 7,110,434 cases and 184,827 deaths in the country making it the third largest total number of cases in the world and the second in the number of deaths [1,2]. Also, while there were 3,426 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the Northern and Northeastern regions of the country, the average was 3,319 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the other regions [2].

According to the WHO, social isolation is the best strategy for containing the transmission of the disease, for which there is currently no specific pharmacological treatment [3,4]. Consequently, economic activities have been paralyzed or reduced in Brazil, resulting in growing unemployment, poverty, and hunger and requiring acts of government to mitigate the worsening health and socioeconomic conditions of the population [5,6].

In this scientific note, we aim to discuss the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in preliminary indexes of unemployment, poverty, and hunger, as well as to evaluate governmental action in that scenario. To look into unemployment, we will use data from the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) and from the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* (IPEA, Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research), as well as the number of people who required unemployment insurance from the government, provided by the Brazilian Ministry of Economy. To describe poverty, we evaluated the Ministry of Citizenship's database on social information to check for the number of families in extreme poverty. The data on food insecurity, which indicated hunger, was also provided by IBGE. As a complement, we have analyzed scientific articles and reports published by news agencies, which provide updated data on the variables of interest in the research.

Since 2015, unemployment has been rising among the Brazilian population aged 14 or older, and it has escalated after the beginning of the pandemic and measures related to its containment [7] (Figure 1). We understand as unemployed the out-of-work population who is currently seeking occupation [8]. In the third trimester of 2020, there were 13.7 million people out of work (14.6% of the 14-or-older population), with an increase of 3 million people by January 2021 [7]. Despite the general national growth, there are also regional and gender disparities to be observed: unemployment is larger among women (16.8%) and in the Northeastern region (17.9%) of the country [7]. IPEA has also identified growing unemployment, striking

13.7% of the population in July 2020 and justified by the retraction of activities in the labor market due to the pandemic [9]. Data of the Ministry of Economy show that in the first five months of 2020, Brazil has accumulated 3,297,396 requests for unemployment insurance, representing an increase of 12.4% of the total in 2019 [10]. In May 2020, such percentage has increased by 28.3% compared to the previous month and 53% compared to the same month in 2019 [10].

The increase in the unemployment rates was accompanied by the growth of the number of families in extreme poverty (monthly income of up to R\$89.00 per person), which was equally enlarged in October 2020 (Figure 2), reaching about 20% of the Brazilian families [11,12].

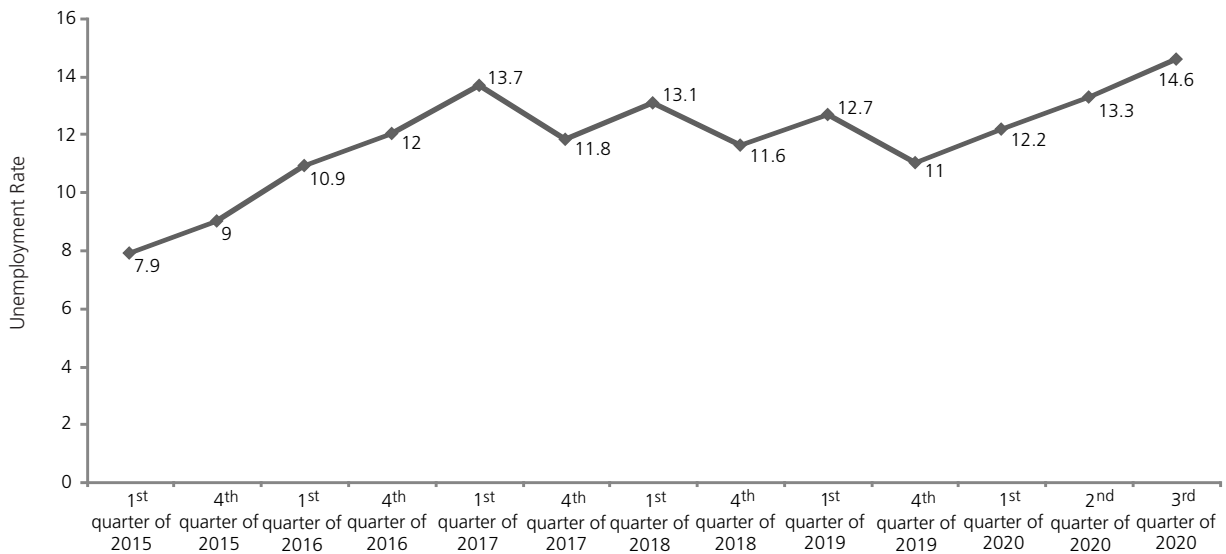


Figure 1 – Unemployment rate (%) of the Brazilian population aged 14 or older between 2015 and the third trimester of 2020. Brazil, 2020.

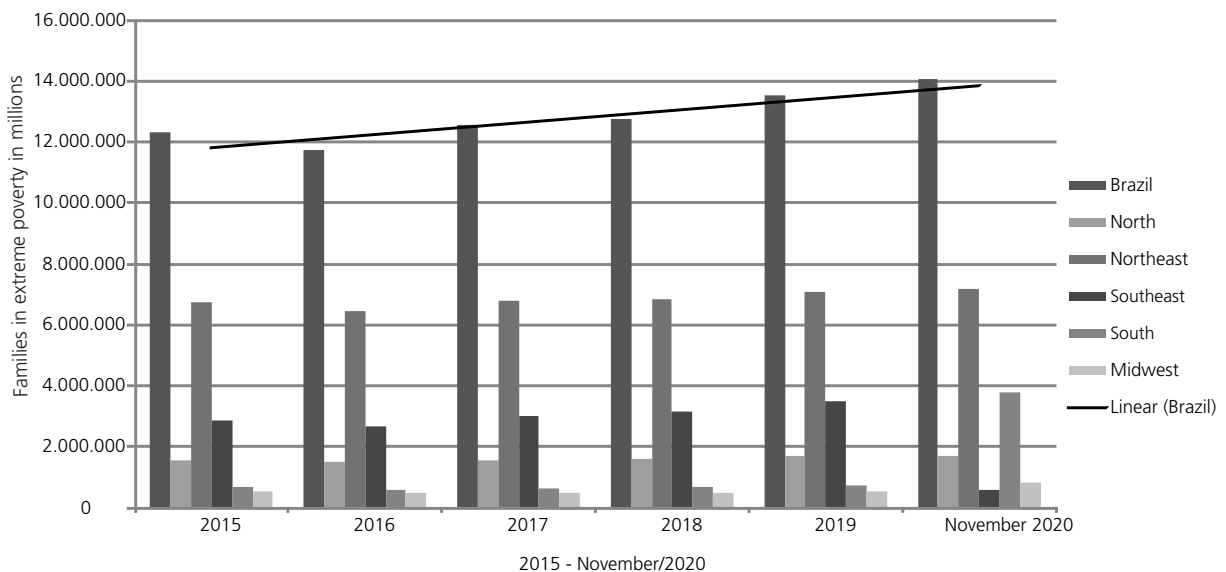


Figure 2 – Families in extreme poverty between 2015 and October 2020. Brazil, 2020.

Family income is one of the factors associated with Food Insecurity (FI) and the increase in unemployment and extreme poverty might drastically reduce people's purchase power and access to adequate and healthy food [13-15]. In Brazil, FI is measured by the *Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar* (EBIA, Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale), which expresses the families' perceptions regarding access to food [16]. International records indicate that the pandemic might increase FI, especially in countries like Brazil, with previous challenges in reducing poverty and hunger [17,18]. Thirteen of the seventeen Brazilian capitals investigated by the National Research on Basic Foods applied by the *Departamento Intersindical de Estatísticas e Estudos Socioeconômicos* (DIEESE, Interunion Department of Socioeconomic Statistics and Studies) demonstrated a rise in the prices of natural and minimally processed foods. In the state of São Paulo, for instance, these prices accumulated a 12% rise in the last 12 months, a situation that is further aggravated by the restrictions in circulation, which limit the available labor force, but mostly by protectionist policies of exportations and importations, that also contribute to rising prices of food items [19,20].

Threatens of shortages alarmed since the beginning of the pandemic persist and worsen the problem of accessing food items, especially for socially vulnerable families, currently one of the largest problems we face due to the Covid-19 pandemic [19,21,22]. In that context, it is urgent to recompose the *Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (CONSEA, National Council for Food and Nutrition Security), a fundamental instance in *Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (SISAN, National System of Food and Nutritional Security), and increase coverage of public policies and programs of access to income and food, like the *Bolsa Família* Program (PBF), the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE, National School Food Program), and public equipment related to food and nutritional security (SAN), associated with public finances for initiatives in the civil society in such area. Stimulating the local production and distribution of food by family farming is strategic to contain the escalation of famine [5,23-25].

In April 2020, the federal government sanctioned the concession of an Emergency Basic Income of R\$600 for vulnerable groups during the pandemic [26]. However, the late response, the difficulty in accessing the program, and its temporary character might reduce its effectiveness to the right to food [27]. Moreover, 158,452 people were cut from *Bolsa Família* in March 2020, with disproportionate effects in the Northeastern region, that currently holds 25% of the cases and deaths by Covid-19 in the country, deals with a 17.9% regional unemployment rate, holds 51% of the families in extreme poverty in Brazil, and 49.7% of the families in PBF (Chart 1) [28]. Also, cuts in PBF tend to disproportionately affect women, the program's main beneficiaries. Along with their larger rates of unemployment (Chart 1), such cuts aggravate women's vulnerability to FI during the pandemic [29].

Chart 1 – Cumulative number of cases and death by Covid-19, unemployed population, families in extreme poverty, and families covered by the *Bolsa Família* Program, by Brazilian regions. Brazil, 2020.

Brazilian Regions	Cumulative cases of Covid-19 ¹		Cumulative deaths by Covid-19 ¹		Unemployed population (millions) ^a	Unemployment rate (%) ²			Families in extreme poverty ^{3,b}		Families covered by Bolsa Família ^{3,c}	
	n	%	n	%		Total	Women	Men	n	%	n	%
North	642,474	13.0	15,191	10.3	1,042	13.1	-	-	1,716,855	12.2	1,796,535	12.6
Northeast	1,355,526	27.4	39,772	21.1	3,942	17.9	-	-	7,171,399	51.0	7,092,999	49.7
Midwest	615,013	12.4	13,183	9.0	1,033	12.7	-	-	573,889	4.1	681,243	4.8
Southeast	1,721,384	34.8	66,250	45.1	6,673	15.4	-	-	3,787,719	26.9	3,812,630	26.7
South	608,347	12.3	12,429	8.5	1,403	9.4	-	-	808,811	5.8	890,395	6.2
Brazil	4,942,744	100	146,8226	100	14,092	14.6	16.8	12.8	14,058,673	100	14,273,802	100

Notes: ¹Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Brazil, data referring to December 17, 2020, 8.27 p.m. [2]; ²Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [7]; ³Ministry of Citizen ship [11]; ^aUnemployed population: people out-of-work in the week of reference, but who sought work or acted on that sense in a 30-day reference period (data referring to the third trimester of 2020) [8]; ^bData referring to October 2020; ^cData referring to November 2020.

Although temporary, the Emergency Basic Income has had a positive impact on the most vulnerable population, reaching 30.2 million households. In May 2020, the social policy was the only source of income for 5.2% of the households (about 3.5 million). It is estimated that the revenue compensated around 45% of the impact of the pandemic on the total of salaries [26,30].

Concurrently, the federal government debates the creation of a minimum income program, *Renda Brasil* (Brazil Income), whose beneficiaries would be the families in PBF, besides informal workers identified with the Basic Emergency Income. However precocious, speculations regarding the supposed program foresee the extinction or reduction of other social policies, like the *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* (BPC, Continuing Benefit Conveyance), salary bonuses, and unemployment benefits for fisherman during the interdiction season, which are provisions mostly granted for vulnerable populations, like the elderly, disabled persons, and artisanal fishermen. Hence, the debate on a basic income program revives the issues of tax reform and public spending [31,32].

In the areas of food and nutrition, although the country has exited the Hunger Map in 2014, after over a decade of public policies and programs, according to the United Nations, the economic and political crisis started in 2015 has resulted in institutional ruptures, budget cuts, and drawbacks in social rights and in the agenda of SAN policies [33]. Thus, from 2016 onwards, we have seen the growing prevalence of hunger [34]. On the other hand, new measures of austerity have been debated worldwide, with cuts on social policies [35].

Besides the fragilization of social policies, Brazil also faces the rupture of the processes of dissemination of information regarding FI. The national data available in August 2020, provided by the *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* (PNAD, National Household Survey), still referred to 2013. In 2017/2018, the *Pesquisa de Orçamentos Familiares* (POF, Family Budget Research) used EBIA to estimate food insecurity for the first time. According to it, 36.7% of the investigated households showed some level of food insecurity (against 22.6% in 2013, according to PNAD): 24% showed light FI, 8.1% moderate FI, and 4.6% severe FI [36]. A recent study estimated the increase of food insecurity in Brazil, especially among the population with an income of up to ¼ of a minimum wage per capita [15], reinforcing the growth of poverty-related hunger [15].

Historically, hunger is measured by indirect indicators that, like EBIA, present limitations in terms of precision [16]. Thus, as concerns about hunger grow in the population, indicators capable of measuring it more precisely, subsidizing decision-making related to its reversion, are more and more important.

The national crisis provoked by Covid-19 exposes the reality of a historical and structurally unequal society in which state action is needed to preserve incomes, jobs, and support vulnerable populations in order to avoid the growth of poverty and hunger [37]. The Brazilian government is recognized both by the UN and the international scientific community as one of the worst in the world when it comes to facing the damages caused by Covid-19 [38,39]. Besides the governmental inability to build social and economic policies geared toward results, the pandemic and its effects on unemployment and poverty contribute to the increasing trajectory of hunger in the country.

The number of updated publications on the relations of the pandemic and its socioeconomic outcomes is still reduced, limiting the discussion of the results found in the present study. Given the preliminary character of this note and its use of recently published data on unemployment, poverty, and FI, we suggest the development of new studies analyzing the impact of the pandemic on the social issues of food insecurity and hunger, and seeking more robust contributions. However, the results presented already point to a rough scenario, in which the relevance of fighting hunger and defending the human right to adequate and healthy food in Brazilian public policies needs to be rescued to reverse the dismantling of the previous years.

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