

A catastrophe is approaching, but we can still avoid it

- The COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil is on the rise, with alarming numbers of new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.
- We need to establish immediate restrictive measures across the entire country to contain an even more alarming spread. Such measures can only be lifted when the rate of new cases and deaths fall to levels that are much lower than is currently observed.
- The lack of centralized coordination by the Federal Government has hampered all effective measures to combat the epidemic in the country. We have been counting with few strategies of testing and screening of contactants. There are delays in vaccination and in resuming the financial assistance to vulnerable individuals, that allow them to survive during this period of severe restrictions on mobility, as well as on economic activities.
- The population and their representatives in the Lower House and the Senate must demand that the Government take the appropriate measures to stem the growing humanitarian crisis.

The number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths due to Covid-19 in Brazil has grown alarmingly since mid-February, currently reaching unprecedented levels, leading the country to the edge of the collapse of the healthcare system.

It is necessary to take stricter and immediate actions right now. The country can no longer afford to wait.

There are multiple causes for the current situation. The relaxation or even complete abandonment of physical distance measures may have played an important role. However, the explosion of cases that we see today cannot be explained without due consideration of the novel viral variant that emerged in Manaus at the end of 2020, denominated P.1. According to studies and to our own analysis, P.1 exhibits higher transmissibility than prior variants, thus accelerating the epidemic and creating the need for harsher and more restrictive public health measures. Undoubtedly, we have arrived at this situation due to a lacking sense of urgency on the part of the Brazilian government, as well as to the administration's disregard for protecting lives. This is reflected in the absence of coordinated actions aimed at mitigating the epidemic. The time has come to change that in order to avoid an even bigger catastrophe.

Policy priorities are: First and foremost, the adoption of a strict lockdown, with the closing of non-essential establishments, as well as limits on the circulation of people to avoid further contagion. Only essential services should remain open, such as grocery stores, drugstores,

public security, and healthcare services. We are aware of the immediate costs of these actions, but there is no other way to avoid widespread hospital collapse, and the resulting despair and deaths. An uncontrolled epidemic in proportions not yet seen would have even more devastating effects on the economy. The duration of this lockdown should be gauged for each region, but it must last at least 14 days. The urgency of implementing these actions cannot be overstated. We will only be able to abandon these policies when cases and death rates reach much lower levels than what is currently observed.

We call on the National Congress to urgently approve financial aid without conditionalities to alleviate the consequences of mobility and economic restrictions on the most vulnerable segments of the Brazilian people. Restricting mobility as we propose, along with the other non-pharmacological interventions, needs to be aligned with a strategy for a progressive resumption of daily activities, as soon as the situation of the pandemic – currently catastrophic – shows significant improvement. We have observed, in several countries around the world, the success of widespread testing strategies, quarantines, and contact screening. Adoption of similar measures would allow the lockdown to be gradually lifted. Inexplicably, in Brazil, such strategies have not been implemented, even after more than a year of the pandemic, except for a few municipalities. We are very far behind and this has to change immediately.

It is also fundamental to accelerate the rate of vaccinations in the country to reduce the prevalence of serious cases and deaths, as has been observed in several countries with better vaccination coverage. Brazil has the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde – SUS*) and its National Immunization Program, and thus the structure to provide healthcare and expertise in vaccination campaigns. We can rapidly expand vaccine coverage, subject to vaccine availability.

The Brazilian federal government effectively abandoned efforts to coordinate the mitigation of the epidemic. At the moment, we are a constellation of 27 federative units without coherent policies and without centrality, many of them at the edge of collapse. It is necessary to seek a level of consensus and understanding within society and the political establishment in order to adopt and ensure adherence to the measures that we propose, and which we regard as imperative.

Without a strategy to contain the epidemic, Brazil became fertile ground for the emergence of new, and possibly very dangerous, variants of SARS-CoV-2, as well as for its spread. This poses a threat not only to the country itself but to the entire world. The intense circulation of the virus in Brazil allows new mutations of concern to arise on an ongoing basis. The global threat that Brazil has become puts the country at risk of international isolation not only by means of the closure of borders but also by the possible imposition of sanctions. The consequences of these risks for the country, for the economy, and for its future relations with the rest of the world may be irreversible.

To summarize, we propose the following actions:

- The immediate adoption of a strict lockdown, with the opening of essential services only, and severe restrictions on the movement of people across the country.
- The immediate approval of an emergency income transfer program in the amount of R\$ 600.00 (reflecting the current cost of a basket of staple foods) until, at a minimum, the indicators of the epidemic have been reduced to enable a reopening of the economy.
- The massive expansion of the vaccination campaign, with the purchase of doses of vaccines with proven efficacy.
- Improvement of epidemiological surveillance, with massive testing and contact screening, with isolation of cases, and quarantine of contactants.

The time of the pandemic must now be measured in days and hours, not weeks and months. A commitment to preserving lives demands these actions from Brazil, its leaders, and each member of society. The sense of maximum urgency is paramount at this moment when the fate of the nation is at stake.