

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

**Solidarity policy in defense of life:
 A hope in Brazil's pandemic**

**JAFSCD
 Responds to
 the COVID-19
 Pandemic**



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The current Brazilian political situation together with the advance of coronavirus (COVID-19) has reinforced inequalities to food access in Brazil, generating uncertainties about satisfying basic human needs. Before the COVID-19 boom, Brazil had already been showing the effects of a long political and economic crisis, largely a result of the 2016 coup, which has led to more than 11% of the population unemployed and more than 40% in informal work.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's statements have made explicit his denialist policy by prioritizing the economy over life. Bolsonaro's government has been undoing social security and food security policies through the reform of the social security system, the dismantling of public universities, the shut-down of agrarian reform, the disassembling of food supply policies, and the end of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security. Bolsonaro starts from an authoritarian policy, based on the neoliberal ideology and fear in which agribusiness and other large private corporations are prioritized rather than strengthening the collective alternatives that could help ensure a healthy diet for the Brazilian population. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, adds another societal stress factor, bringing back food insecurity and “the ghost of hunger” in Brazil.

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In this context, social movements and political organizations such as the Levante Popular da Juventude (Youth Popular Uprising), the Movimento de Trabalhadoras e Trabalhadores por Direitos (Workers Movement for Rights), the Consulta Popular (People's Consultation), Movimento de Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement), Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (Movement of People Affected by Dams) and Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (Small Farmers Movement) have reinforced solidarity and mutual aid in the territories, acting to guarantee the defense of life and denouncing Bolsonaro's death policy, the attempt to save the economy instead of the Brazilian people in these COVID-19 times.

Solidarity for Brazilians is not something new; it is part of the population's daily life and is a political practice of social movements and organizations. Mutual assistance among people of the same territory is one of the collective forms for surviving in the peripheries of Brazilian urban centers and is also part of the reciprocal relations between peasants and common traditions.

If solidarity is a decisive factor in the maintenance of life during normal times, in the times of Bolsonaro and COVID-19, it becomes a bigger challenge. With social seclusion, part of the Brazilian population has to live a dilemma, choosing between precarious isolation in small houses with a large number of residents, or exposure to the risks of contamination to achieve incomes that guarantee, minimally, access to food and hygiene.

In this sense, the solidarity policy that is being built by social movements and political organizations for this period is based on the development of a dialogue network between the most diverse sectors of society that can contribute to improving hygiene conditions, food access, and awareness about the recommendations for coping with COVID-19. In addition, there is an urgency for the network to bring awareness about the need for political struggle in defense of life.

The actions developed, therefore, start in two correlated ways. The first is to raise awareness about COVID-19 prevention mechanisms and the need to fight for the guarantee of life through methods that do not compromise social isolation. To this end, debates, courses, and discussion groups are held through social networks. The internet is being used as a tool in the battle of ideas, to encourage political debate and social engagement. Informative materials, banners, and posters are being produced to share on the streets.

The second is to construct channels that ensure food and hygiene items for people who are socially vulnerable. Food and hygiene materials are acquired through donations received by social movements and political organizations or from donation boxes throughout the city. Then the donations are sanitized and distributed to families identified by this network. The distribution of breakfasts, lunches, and soups and the construction of networks for the commercialization of agroecological products are other actions being developed as ways to guarantee the income of peasants in this period.

It is worth noting that these actions cannot cover the scope of the challenges that the Brazilian population has been going through. While the role of the state in guaranteeing basic rights is necessary, it is a way to reinforce solidarity as a guiding principle for social transformation, the valorization of human life, and the commitment to the Brazilian people. If the Bolsonaro government has strengthened the concentrated and globalized food system, the social movements and political organizations of Brazil have shown that there are ways to build a healthy diet and solidarity relations, although they will only become a reality for the whole population through social engagement and political struggle. These actions are based on a policy of class solidarity in the construction of a new food system for the Brazilian population, built on the guarantee of food sovereignty, agroecology, a fair supply system that enables the revaluation of heritage food, and creativity. Those are the essential foods of social transformations. 