Covid-19 dispatches Pandemic deepens lack of social cohesion in the Dominican Republic

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The coronavirus struck the Dominican Republic in a situation of economic and social fragility, hitting formal and informal workers as well as vulnerable people. Despite the country’s high economic growth rates over the past 50 years (5.1% in 2019, according to the central bank’s report for 2019) its inhabitants have not benefitted from the distribution of such income through efficient public policies, above all in the most essential sphere of public policies at this time, the health system: while its public branch is undergoing a sustainability crisis of historical dimensions, private health is very expensive. There are 360 intensive care units and 582 ventilators for 10 million inhabitants, and entire provinces have not been included in an agreement with the Juan Bosch Foundation (FJB) for health care.

The situation is the same in the area of social security, affected by privatisation which limits people’s access to health services, social security, retirement and pensions, child care and occupational risks, and which doesn’t provide economic support in emergencies: Act 87-01 (article 50, paragraphs I and II) established the creation of an unemployment security scheme, but it was rejected by both the government and employers for its supposed lack of financial sustainability. This is an example of how the state’s and employers’ failure to comply with their legal obligations causes damage to workers.

Another difficulty results from the lack of social cohesiveness to face the pandemic. A well-organised civil society has been submitting proposals for social and economic solutions and democratic rights. However, the government did not value those proposals as elements of social cohesiveness in favour of development, despite the existence of a variety of channels for tripartite and cross-sector social dialogue.

At a political level, the regular lack of social cohesiveness is now deepened by the current election process: adding to social and economic fragility, there is political disintegration concerning proposed solutions, which seem to reflect specific interests of political parties, including the party in government.

To make things worse, the president is currently not exercising his full leadership, and the nation is far from adopting an attitude of complete obedience to face the virus. Furthermore, his decisions have a tendency to boost his candidate’s standing with the electorate, while the candidate is trying to take advantage of the economic measures the government adopted to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

If we evaluate the effect on the main public services, and the minimum social protection levels required to cope with the disease, other shortcomings can be observed such as the lack of water or its quality, when the levels of household and personal hygiene of those who have to work because they provide essential services to the community are so important.

Low education levels, unemployment and informality are other deficiencies of our system which conspire against the people and in favour of the virus. At present, the quarantine is broken owing to a lack of understanding and an underestimation of the pandemic’s danger to many citizens, whose lives are currently at risk. However, extending the confinement affects the economy and aggravates social problems in the immediate future, eventually deepening the cracks in the structure of a wounded democracy whose institutional framework is already weak.

Majority are informal workers

Informality stands at 55.2% (according to the central bank’s Continuous National Labour Force Survey in 2019) or 2.5 million people (1.7 million self-employed workers and 260 000 domestic workers). These workers - the majority of the economically active population, who will now be unemployed - face the choice of death by the virus or starving together with their families. The government’s Employee Solidarity Assistance Fund (FASE 2 in Spanish) provides for two monthly payments of 5000 Dominican pesos (about US$85) each to these workers. However, this is a Pyrrhic subsidy, if we take into account that a street vendor earns at least 10 000 Dominican pesos a week, which determines household consumption.

Since December of last year, the contraction of the Dominican tourist industry decreased employment in this sector. After the pandemic was declared, hotel occupation decreased by about 90% of the existing capacity, leading to the loss of thousands more jobs.

So, when the Dominican government declared a state of
emergency on 17 March 2020, it announced the FASE 1 programme for formal employees and FASE 2 for informal workers. These programmes were to be funded by the Dominican Institute for the Prevention and Protection of Occupational Risks based on social security contributions.

In the case of formal workers, the unemployment subsidy amounts to 8500 Dominican pesos (70% of the minimum wage) for suspended workers - about 700 000 workers from 40 000 companies - with employers contributing the remaining 30%. However, these numbers do not reflect the real situation due to the differences between the minimum wages earned by the country’s workers. Free zones, hotels, restaurants, sugar plants and some other sector-unspecific companies are included in the income bracket from 7448.43 to 11 595.44 Dominican pesos, which may receive the 70% subsidy. However, in some cases of sector-unspecific companies, the subsidy might be as low as 50%, while the other 50% is left to the employer’s mercy. To make things worse, there is nothing written that might oblige employers to contribute at least 30%. The situation of professionals and specialists earning 20 000 to 40 000 pesos or more is even more difficult.

### Working women in the Covid crisis

The Dominican Republic has no gender equality policy. Therefore, women find themselves in a situation of economic and social disadvantage during the pandemic.

As a result of confinement, contract suspensions, part-time work and teleworking, working women are exposed to violence and insecurity: they have to shoulder the heaviest burden, as women are in charge of providing essential services such as food, care, health care, domestic work, commercial activities, pharmacies and banking, among others. Furthermore, they have to cope with long working hours, lack of transport, the risk of contagion and harassment at work by parts of the public and employers. And they have to carry a double burden due to their additional responsibilities at home, all of which is aggravated by the lack of water for personal and household hygiene.

The entire country has already spoken out against working conditions and the lack of protective equipment in the health sector, where a majority of workers are women. While carrying out their care work women have to face long working hours, suspension of vacations, contagion, loss of life and high levels of violence.

For women who have been suspended or laid off and are now in family confinement, the situation is the same, as they are exposed to domestic violence while they are in charge of all the care work, which is more intense due to the additional time spent together with the family. During the first week of confinement the Ministry of Women received 238 calls by women asking for protection against violence. As long as women are confined together with their aggressors, they find themselves in a high-risk situation at home, because they have less chance to ask for protection. At the same time, security assistance and care for pre-existing medical conditions are precarious, as services focus their attention on Covid-19.

Health and occupational safety risks must also be taken into account, because attention at a company level is precarious, and the home has not even been considered by health policies, including the need for psychosocial attention for both paid and unpaid working women.

Domestic workers are yet another group of women who do not qualify for social protection despite losing jobs, because the Dominican Republic is not prepared to apply ILO Convention 189, which grants their labour and social rights. About 20% of these women live with their employers and find themselves exposed to violence and the requirement of endless working hours by all family members, which oblige them to fulfil more tasks than they would normally have to.

As a result, women had to stay at home together with their families without knowing if they would be able to return to their jobs, and without their wages – and without state assistance. The same happens to women subcontracted by companies, who are not entitled to wage protection, because they are not registered with social security.

The situation is even worse for migrants, especially those without documents, who are not included in any protection scheme at all due to their longstanding marginalisation. Now they have become even more vulnerable, because their lives depend on humanitarian help and the solidarity of the community.

### The role of trade unions

Against this background, the importance of unions and collective bargaining must be stressed; where ever collective bargaining exists, it has been possible to arrive at agreements concerning working hours, wages, vacations, staff reductions or suspensions and pledges linked to economic recovery and the strengthening of production. This is the path unionised working people chose for their solution to the Covid-19 crisis.

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