

Post-Covid and multilateralism

Wagner Costa Ribeiro

Institute of Advanced Studies and School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the
University of São Paulo – Brazil

wribeiro@usp.br

Within the current international scenario, the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are the multilateral institutions that are best suited to develop cooperative actions necessary to combat the pandemic and its effects for the future. A future that will need to be different from the conditions that led to the emergence and proliferation of the pandemic.

This paper addresses, on the basis of UN and WHO actions, how multilateralism can be an alternative for the organization of social relations in the 21st century, at different scales, after the outbreak of Covid-19. Initially, we present part of the initiatives of the two multilateral organizations mentioned and then we analyze how Latin America and the European Union are walking paths of cooperation in the search for ways out of the crisis.

On January 30, 2020 - which some considered somewhat late - the WHO presented the Declaration of Public Health Emergency of International Importance when treating the disease and soon afterwards launched a plan of action (WHO, 2020). It was not the recognition of the pandemic, which occurred more than a month later, on March 11.

This delay is one of the focuses of criticism towards the WHO. For example, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, accused the slow declaration of the pandemic, which, for him, allowed a greater geographical dispersion of the virus. On May 29, he announced the break with WHO, two days after the WHO presented a manifesto in which it stated that it was necessary to go beyond returning to normal and seek new ways of organizing life and the economy in line with nature and in favor of quality of life (WHO, 2020a). Meanwhile, the WHO argued that neither the virus nor its ability to transmit was sufficiently known. This is still a matter for debate. Perhaps in the future we will have more documents that will allow us to say what actually happened. But there is no doubt that the delay in recognizing the pandemic has allowed the globalization process and intense flows of people, products and materials to continue, which has caused the virus to spread across continents.

Once the pandemic was recognized, the WHO began to develop a series of actions, often in coordination with the UN. We will present part of the activities that these international institutions have developed to fight the disease in a chronological way.

The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, in March spoke for the necessary cooperation between countries to seek alternatives to fight the disease. On March 28, the UN launched a Global Humanitarian Response Plan (UN, 2020), based on a demand from the WHO, which was initially budgeted at 2.1 billion dollars. Quickly, the budget more than tripled: by May 2020, it was 6.7 billion

dollars. Who will provide this funding? Unfortunately, the multilateral agencies are emptying out. This raises another important question: why was the international system not prepared to face a crisis like this?

The UN system itself acknowledges, through the negotiations on the international environmental order of climate change and biodiversity conservation, which we discussed at other times, that there was in fact a possibility of a pandemic in the terms we are witnessing now, unfortunately. It is not possible to claim ignorance about this threat. Global warming, associated with the loss of biodiversity, certainly leads to increased contact with viruses like this, which, it is important to say, already existed in nature. Through deforestation, the area available for the reproduction of animals is reduced, which ends up moving to areas occupied by society and breaking the geographical isolation that existed, as biogeographic theories show. The absence of antibodies results in the disease and, unfortunately, in thousands of deaths. This situation has already occurred at other times in history, which allows us to question why there was no previous international reserve fund to be withdrawn at that time. Hence, a first conclusion: it is necessary to create an international fund to face pandemics, especially because new cases may arise.

In the absence of an instrument to fund programmes to combat the pandemic, the WHO has proposed a Solidarity Response Fund for WHO (WHO, 2020b), which receives donations from individuals, companies, countries and international institutions. This fund has already raised about \$215 million, with the participation of about 390,000 contributors (May 2020). The amount is far below what is needed for a global humanitarian response to the pandemic. As admirable as the creation of the fund and the solidarity attention of thousands of contributors may be, it is still insufficient in relation to the amount budgeted by the UN. A response with such a volume of resources can only be given by contributions from countries, which takes over the role of the state which, besides investing in helping the population and smaller businesses, must also contribute resources for preventive international cooperation in the face of pandemic crises.

On 3 April 2020, the UN General Assembly defined a resolution for solidarity between countries. On April 20, a new resolution of the same body strengthened international cooperation in the search for vaccines, medicines and the supply of support material, especially personal protective equipment for health personnel, which took up aspects that the humanitarian response plan itself had already presented (UN, 2020 a and b). Soon afterwards, on April 24th, at the WHO, we had the recognition from several world leaders that cooperation is necessary. This fact corroborates the ideas of the Israeli historian Yuval Harari (2020) and the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff (2020), among others, who bet on the agreement to seek alternatives to the crises we face. How this cooperation will occur is the question to which we still have no answer.

On May 18 and 19, the World Health Assembly took place, in which a real and concrete cooperation possibility emerged. Among the decisions of that Assembly, the WHO proposed a truce in international trade rules regulated by the World Trade Organization (WTO) (WHO, 2020c). It is always good to remember that the WTO is not part of the UN system, so it is in fact more difficult to

have a direct interaction or action with it from a UN system institution. However, this multilateral institution foresees in the Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health (WTO, 2001), the possibility that member countries may request not to charge tariffs, patents and customs fees in situations involving public health, which is exactly the current situation. This would allow us to think, for example, that in the case of vaccines or medicines that may arise in the fight against the disease, these could be distributed without collection of fees and duties – yet another important conclusion.

A few months after the late recognition of the pandemic, we have witnessed a major multilateral cooperation effort involving regional institutions and articulations of leaders in regional blocs.

In Latin America, the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) has proposed a basic income for at least three months to the most vulnerable in Latin American countries, in addition to strengthening the goals for sustainable development as a means of reorganizing economic activity (CEPAL, 2020). The indicators of poverty and social inequality present in this part of the world justify such initiatives, but it remains to be seen whether these proposals will be accepted and implemented politically. Working to reduce social inequalities would be a major action and an opportunity presented by the current crisis. We could generate a lot of employment and work to reduce social inequality and produce quality housing, basic sanitation services, transportation infrastructure, among other possibilities to reduce social and environmental inequity in Latin America.

The European Union, still shaken by the departure of the United Kingdom, launched The Recovery Plan for Europe (EU, 2020), budgeted at 1.85 trillion euros, of which around 500 billion euros would be destined as a subsidy to countries such as Spain and Italy, very affected both in number of deaths and because they have a central axis of their economic activity in tourism. Half of this amount, given pressure from the Netherlands, would be granted in a plan for loans at lower interest rates than those practiced in the markets.

Some alternatives are being launched to find ways out of the post-covid crisis. In addition to the public health challenges, it will be necessary to reorganize economic activity and create an international reserve fund for future pandemics. The world was more prepared to face war than to face a virus. Weapons are lying around and face masks are missing. We need to change that picture. Both in Latin America and in the EU there is a possibility of more cooperation, which in some way reflects the actions of the UN and the WHO. This movement cannot be lost and is perhaps the greatest boost that the virus has given to humanity.

Socio-environmental theories (Ribeiro, 2010) offer important theoretical support for innovations in various fields of knowledge and for public programs and policies, whether supported by international agencies or applied at different scales of government. In association with the goals for sustainable development, they may indicate paths that guide the creation of new jobs in search of a world with less social inequality, in which international cooperation prevails not only at extreme moments, such as the one we are witnessing, but as a balanced way of offering adequate living conditions to the planet's population, as well as to other forms of life.

The challenges are right before our eyes. To face them without courage would be to return to a pattern of social organization that has proved disastrous in social and environmental terms. Multilateralism can be a strategy for seeking new directions, despite the expected resistance.

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