

Turning the uncertainty of the pandemic into certain opportunities

Convertir la incertidumbre de la pandemia en oportunidades ciertas

Transformando a incerteza da pandemia em verdadeiras oportunidades

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an abrupt and disruptive episode occurring at planetary level. It altered our daily lives in so many ways that it is reasonable to expect that our previous “normal life” will never return, and that impacts will emerge with greater or lesser intensity in the next years. Simultaneously, the crisis caused by the pandemic opens up possibilities to modify central aspects of human life that previously seemed unchangeable. Last year, a Mexican colleague and I wrote an opinion note⁽¹⁾ focusing the attention on the window of opportunity for changes regarding the habits of production, circulation and consumption of food in Latin America in the face of increased social exclusion and environmental deterioration. That note, written

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during the first semester of the pandemic, highlighted that confinement measures adopted in many countries could threaten food supply, worsening preexisting conditions for poor and vulnerable groups. To the extent that the global agri-food system operates on a planetary scale, just like the pandemic, scarcity of food or high prices could impact food access for many people. However, weakening an international homogeneous system may empower the capacity of countries, or the peoples within them, to begin defining their own agricultural and food production policies in congruence with their socio-economic, cultural, and ecological contexts. Perhaps in that way the diets of “ordinary people” would be less dependent on decisions made thousands of kilometers away from their livelihoods.

As a paradox, the pandemic could open up opportunities to enhance food sovereignty amplifying already existing initiatives. These comprise transition processes towards alternative agricultures and resilient food systems, promotion of short market circuits and local suppliers, increasing urban food gardens, reinforcing policies for family and peasant agriculture through public procurement, among other examples. Innovating to guarantee nutritious and accessible food could emerge as a positive externality remaining in post-pandemic scenarios.

Now that the world has experienced more than a year of pandemic, I take the opportunity of this brief editorial to follow up on the idea of a necessary transformation in light of the accumulated effects of the crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. The following paragraphs rely on some of the contents of the Human Development Report 2020 (HDR)⁽²⁾ published last December.

In short, the main argument of HDR is that we are causing planetary and social imbalances that destabilize the global system we rely on for survival. Further, it states that pressures on the planet are so intense that the accumulated alterations of ecosystems, being long warned by many scientists, will continue causing amplified passages of unfamiliar pathogens from other species to humans, such as the case of this pandemic. Therefore, a transformation seems urgently needed in the way we live, especially tackling inequalities in human development and cooperating with nature.

Now, in the midst of the current pandemic, we wish to return to the so-called *normality*, even though there was nothing normal in many aspects of our previous life... we were only used to them. Going back to “normal” is not desirable nor acceptable for many communities already suffering the effects of stacked crises: climate change, social inequalities, food insecurity, biodiversity and cultural losses. These impacts are higher for women, ethnic groups, and children.

Agriculture is one of such areas showing potential for transformation and triggering critical reflections regarding research goals. Technology and innovation have a role to play addressing complex problems with multidimensional approaches. In this sense, HDR emphasizes the need to jointly consider social and ecological spheres to address the interconnectedness of socioecological systems. In order to provide more equal and sufficient wellbeing for all social groups, it is necessary to think of socioeconomic, environmental, commercial, and political dimensions evolving together. Obviously, promoting changes at the planetary level requires long-term systemic transformations in production, processing and distribution of agricultural products. Meanwhile, concrete actions can be taken at local and regional levels to deal with the pandemic today, which can contribute to the construction of more autonomous food systems, improving the quality of diets with a higher consumption of fresh foods than processed products: demand and support local policies of food production and circulation, buy direct from the farm whenever possible, eat fresh colorful meals with seasonal ingredients.

Undernourishment and food insecurity affect about 50 million people in Latin America. This is a huge number of people facing difficulties in accessing food, especially meat, dairy products, fruits and vegetables. Their daily intake is insufficient to provide the levels of food energy necessary to maintain an active and healthy life. The link between nutrition, well-being and health is self-evident. Our immune system is strengthened with sufficient quantities of fresh, healthy, nutritious food. The relationship between food consumption and health becomes more evident by the fact that high-risk conditions for covid-19 are directly

linked to diets and the way we eat. Thus, an insufficient or poor-quality intake produces both malnutrition and overweight and obesity, which have been identified as high-risk factors for the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

To favor an inclusive transformation pathway, the HDR highlights the need to empower agency. This involves expanding people's ability to participate in decision making, and to make individual and collective desired choices. It also argues that values can change in order to enhance equity, foster innovation and implant a sense of stewardship of nature. We, the university community, have plenty opportunities involving research, teaching and intervention in which agency and environmental values can be nurtured. Of course, some of us also need to learn at both individual and social levels.

Doing everything just the same will not take us to normal, it will take us backward. The challenge to overcome the multiple effects of the pandemic crisis with the least possible damage is enormous... in part because effects are yet to be seen. We probably need to change the framework for many actions, commit and engage with collective thinking, and collaborate and create new pathways. Transformations will not multiply exponentially like the expansion of the new coronavirus, but in so many different places transitions towards more autonomous agri-food systems are already taking place. We can monitor that the transition towards a new normality takes into serious consideration strengthening production systems to foster a just socioecological sustainability.

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