



Open Letter from the 5th Brazilian Meeting of Social Movements to Fight Infectious and Neglected Diseases-

Brazilian Social Forum to Combat Infectious and Neglected Diseases

The Brazilian Social Forum to Combat Infectious and Neglected Diseases was established in 2016 in Brazil, as a broad democratic articulation of social movements and organizations, associations of people affected by different types of diseases, along with universities, foundations and research institutes, students, health professionals and citizens who support the cause. Throughout its five years of existence, it has acted as a space for representation, support, learning, empowerment, articulation and visibility focusing on the defense of the human and social rights of people and communities affected and / or living with infectious and neglected diseases. Since then, representatives from organisations combating Chagas disease, leishmaniasis, leprosy, schistosomiasis, viral hepatitis and lymphatic filariasis have joined forces and their collective experiences, particularly to defend the national Unified Health System (SUS).

Within global reach, these health conditions are particularly highlighted in Brazil due to their high disease burden and the number of deaths caused, and because they are strongly linked to structural poverty, associated stigma, limited access to diagnosis and treatment in health services. Furthermore, there is a low investment in research or advances in technologies for new diagnostic methods, drugs and monitoring of people affected in all stages of disease . As a result, the negligence granted to the affected people and their territories stimulates the continuity of the diseases year after year.

These challenges have been further intensified by the critical context of the emergence of COVID-19 linked to global crises, not only related to health, but also in political and economic terms, leading to a greater disparity in poverty and social

inequalities. Moreover, the political, economic, health and social crises have reached unprecedented levels. The Brazilian government has openly weakened control measures such as the practice of social distancing and the use of masks, in addition to promoting the lack of coordination between the spheres of government for the development of actions. Despite all these issues, the 5th Meeting of the Brazilian Social Forum to Combat Infectious and Neglected Diseases was decided to be held in 2020 in order to define positions regarding the Brazilian government's disastrous policy for the control of the pandemic. Thus, on December 10th, 11th and 12th, the meeting happened in a virtual format as a strong collective construction, having as main topic: **“The effects of the pandemic on health care access for Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) in scenarios of socioeconomic inequalities: The role of leaders and the society’s mobilization”**. Such movement in favor of the meeting was rewarded with more than 300 pre-registrations and more than 1,200 views, live, through the YouTube channel during the three days of the event.

The presentations and debates fostered discussions about the various obstacles to be overcome. From the inefficiency of COVID-19 combating policies aimed at the most vulnerable populations, to the limited access to health services for the diagnosis of people affected by infectious and neglected diseases, also for the treatment and follow-up services, and even to the critical inequality expressed by the difficulties to access internet and digital technologies, which still persists in large parts of Brazilian society.

By the time this letter was finished, Brazil had reached approximately 8.8 million cases and 215 thousand lives lost to COVID-19. In this context of great suffering, dismay, disinformation and revolt of our society, the importance of continuing to build the Unified Health System is reinforced by the need of strengthening it. This necessarily involves controlling the national expenses and broadening financial and management investments. The lack of national coordination for health actions has also been felt in other situations, such as: in the failures in the supply of medicine for the treatment of leprosy and in the availability of tests for genotyping for HIV infection and hepatitis C. In addition, within other sectors with a direct impact on health, we can mention the disastrous environmental policies, the economic liberalism advance in the economy with

the generation of high unemployment rates and the restriction of social rights, and the limited international policies that isolate the country from global initiatives.

Facing the urgent need to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in the country, particularly concerning the health of people affected by infectious and neglected diseases and to guarantee the universal right to health of all Brazilian women and men, the Brazilian Social Forum for Confronting Infectious and Neglected Diseases drafted this letter based on the debates held at this 5th meeting.

On January 30th, 2021, World Day for Neglected Tropical Diseases, we urge government officials from different spheres and the entire Brazilian society to:

- i. Defend the the Democratic State governed by the rule of law and the unrestricted respect for democratic institutions;
- ii. Defend and demand the establishment of a more solidary and fair society, in order to abolish the conditions of inequality in which the Brazilian population is inserted, in regards to health, education, housing, employment and quality of life, as a whole;
- iii. Defend and demand the adoption of public policies that contemplate health in an integral and intersectoral manner and include the necessary dimensions of inclusive, social and human development for the effective confrontation of infectious and neglected diseases;
- iv. Defend, as a matter of urgency, the return of the economic emergencial aid of R\$ 600.00 for people in conditions of social vulnerability in the country, aiming to reduce the impact of the crisis and in order to strengthen measures of social distance to contain the spread the new coronavírus;
- v. Defend the consolidation of universal, integral, equal and free SUS (health system) to everyone in Brazil, which necessarily involves the valorization of health workers and the immediate revocation of Constitutional Amendment 95 of 2016, guaranteeing adequate financing to meet all health needs of the Brazilian population, including those related to the control of COVID-19;
- vi. Defend the guarantee to comprehensive health care access through SUS to all and everyone in the country, ensuring the inclusion of people affected and / or living with infectious and neglected diseases;

- vii. Defend and demand the implementation of policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic based on scientific evidence, particularly by a consistent national vaccination plan aiming for a free, timely, and universal access throughout 2021, coupled with the strengthening of epidemiological surveillance, considering the national specificities regarding vulnerability to the disease;
- viii. Defend and demand the use of the National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, aiming at the development of strategic research focused on the inherent needs to the control of infectious and neglected diseases, including accurate diagnosis, safe and effective treatment and the reduction of its psychosocial impacts;
- ix. Defend the Public University as a policy advocate that promotes teaching, research, freedom of expression and human and social development, as well as its adequate financing;
- x. Defend and demand the right to universal and free access to essential medicines to treat infectious and neglected diseases;
- xi. Urge the responsible authorities for the timely and constant supply of leprosy treatment drugs, which are currently lacking;
- xii. Defend the strengthening of Brazilian public laboratories, which are essential for the production of vaccines, medicines and other supplies to meet the needs of SUS;
- xiii. Denounce and confront the greed of the pharmaceutical industry which has profited from essential medicines and vaccines, such as those developed against COVID-19, neglecting the needs of vulnerable populations, within the current model of health innovation system;
- xiv. Defend the suspension of pharmaceutical monopolies on essential technologies to face COVID-19 through Bill 1462 of 2020 and the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights (waiver) made by India and South Africa in the context of the World Trade Organization (WTO);
- xv. Defend and demand the guarantee of social participation in the conduct of health policy, as well as the strengthening of health and social assistance councils, which includes the effective participation of people, movements and organizations that combat neglected and infectious diseases in different

- instances, especially those of social control (conferences and health and social assistance councils, etc.) to support political decision-taking about social rights and health;
- xvi. Stimulate / promote initiatives / strategies for overcoming the stigma associated with neglected and infectious diseases and for the empowerment of people, movements and associations in the perspective of the Constitutional Right to Health;
 - xvii. Stimulate, articulate and promote governmental and non-governmental actions that increase the visibility of the epidemiological situation of infectious and neglected diseases, both in relation to their distribution and to their social determinants;
 - xviii. Defend and demand transparency and seriousness in health communication carried out by Brazilian health authorities, including health communication actions on care for people with neglected and infectious diseases;
 - xix. Defend and demand the digital inclusion of the entire Brazilian society, in the face of tensions and evidence produced by the COVID-19 pandemic;
 - xx. Articulate and promote the training of communities, movements, leaders and local professionals for the development of health and education actions that include popular health education;
 - xxi. Articulate and stimulate the realization of technical and scientific events and studies addressing infectious and neglected diseases, encouraging the participation of people, associations and organizations directly affected and / or involved with the central topic of the Forum;
 - xxii. Articulate initiatives alluding to the World Day of Neglected Tropical Diseases, to strengthen actions and strategies to deal with neglected diseases.
 - xxiii. Articulate, promote and stimulate the creation of associations of people affected by Covid-19, in order to offer support to affected populations in different socioeconomic and demographic contexts.
 - xxiv. Include, among the priority groups for vaccination against COVID-19, people affected by neglected diseases who have an increased vulnerability to develop severe respiratory syndrome due to infection by the Sars Cov-2 virus, such as: people affected by Chagas disease, people being treated for leprosy reactions,

people with visceral leishmaniasis with comorbidities, people with viral hepatitis and other people with other NTDs associated with chronic conditions.

Thanks to SUS, a true patrimony of the Brazilian people, thousands of lives have been saved in the pandemic by COVID-19. This letter from the 5th edition of the Brazilian Social Forum to Combat Infectious and Neglected Diseases reaffirms the urgent need for a new political agenda for the country that respects democracy and, above all, respects life.