

Introductory Editorial

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On December 31, 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of the presence of viral pneumonia in the city of Wuhan, the sprawling capital city with over 11 million inhabitants (20 million including the hinterland) of the landlocked province of Hubei in central China.

We are, therefore, crossing the threshold of two years since the origin and the subsequent spread, first in Wuhan and then on a global scale, of the disease defined by WHO - on February 11, 2020 - COVID-19 (COroNaVirus Disease-2019), associated with a strain of coronavirus that had never been previously identified in humans, also called by WHO severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) and that, like two other coronaviruses identified in the last two decades, has caused serious outbreaks of fatal pneumonia.

Since the beginning of this tragic affair - which by the end of December 2021, according to data reported by the WHO, had recorded more than 280 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally, more than 5.5 million deaths associated with this disease and a total of more than 9 billion doses of vaccine administered globally, but only 8.3% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose.

From a development perspective, it should be made clear in advance that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a break from the beautiful world of before COVID-19 period, and it is not only an accelerator of pre-existing processes and problems. The COVID-19 pandemic poses also new challenges, forcing to change both perspectives on the future world, which implies a change of vision and policies, but also to address new problems that change the perspective of solutions.

The issue of inequity in vaccine distribution is just the tip of the iceberg of a knot of persistent asymmetrical relationships and inequities between and within countries.

There are similarities across territories, in terms of problems and, as shown during the pandemic, in terms of solutions.

COVID-19, for different regions in different countries worldwide, shows that we all live in a world increasingly interconnected and criss-crossed by the same problems, such as public health, equal opportunities, decent jobs, climate change, sustainability.

Similarities are clear, but contextual specificities matter a lot at the same time. This makes difficult to simplify and to find general rules. This essentially implies that one size does not fit all.

The regional and local impact of the COVID-19 crisis is highly heterogeneous, even within the same territory. The regional and local impact of the crisis has been highly asymmetric within regions of the same country. Some areas in each region, particularly the more vulnerable ones, such as deprived urban areas, suburbs, and distant (from the centre) remote areas have been harder hit than others. Certain vulnerable populations, too, have been more affected.

This is beyond the traditional distinction between urban and rural areas. Within each zone there are clusters of disadvantaged people and areas, because there is economic and social inequality, which has a strongly territorial nature too. There is inequality in terms of income distribution, physical, human, social and environmental assets and capital.

Subnational governments – regions and municipalities – are responsible for critical aspects of containment measures, health care, social services, economic development and public investments, putting them at the frontline of crisis management and recovery plans.

The public sector role is essential. As Karl Polanyi said, the market economy would not have come into existence but for the State; the State was critical in establishing key institutions of the market economy. Various laws, rules and traditions and a big amount of bureaucratic and administrative control are always involved. The pre-COVID-19 crisis in terms of inequality, the lack of social cohesion and poverty was the product of deliberate State action.

During the last two years, the COVID-19 emergency induced government to adopt national laws but here there is the need for distinct measures for different areas and segments of the population (with different needs), beyond the tensions occurred between central and regional governments. It is crucial, for the sake of recovery, to start from mutual problems, common destiny, trajectory, although based on differences and specifically targeted measures.

Today, more than ever, it is essential to rethink healthcare spending as a real investment for the future and not as a problem of wasting limited financial resources with crowding-out effect on other usages. National policies have traditionally focused largely on economic growth; this policy of ‘unaimed opulence’, as Drèze and Sen called this strategy, made societies more vulnerable and fragmented; this means the need for a reorientation of cultural and political vision.

The same is true for the environment, which has practically been considered subordinate to economic growth: when the conditions of sustained growth allow it, we can speak of environmental sustainability, otherwise economic growth is the priority.

Despite the very modest results - in terms of courageous innovative efforts - obtained in the recent global climate summit in Glasgow, known as COP26 (India and China weakened the language on phasing out fossil fuels, historical polluters refused to accept their liability for damage caused by extreme weather, and

OECD leaders failed to honor climate pledge), the pandemic requires a reconsideration of mainstream development strategies and policies. The strategy based on high-density urban settlements dedicated to the production and consumption of services is not sustainable. Hence, this reflection requires sociologists, economists, geographers, urban planners and architects to rethink the idea of cities, their function and link to the rest of the country.

If today's the COVID-19 pandemic compels all of us to recognize that a synergy exists between the profile of economic policy and the state of poverty-reduction, fight on inequalities, enhancement of functionings (which means basic social services and human capital formation) and environmental sustainability, then a radical change of policy is needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows also that it is not a question of national versus decentralized approaches. Any specific balance between public and private health providers, central hospital and territorial decentralized basic medicine services at the level of municipalities, as well as concentration on primary care centres and prevention, makes a difference across municipalities, regions and countries, because the role of sub-national governments may be also significant. Coming back to the first point, it is about going beyond the past ideas. The social and environmental cost of the current trends resulted from the environmental deterioration and social exclusion resulting from the increasing spatial polarisation, with congestion of urban areas and progressive depopulation and degradation of peripheral territories.

More unequal societies are bad for almost everyone within them. Almost every modern social and environmental problem – ill health, lack of community life, violence, long working hours – is more likely to occur in a less equal society.

From another side, we are all on the same boat (pandemic, wars, migrations are global public goods), therefore we must think in terms of common problems, common challenges, mutual learning to face challenges together, because an individual voice (be it that of a single city, region or country) is weak and an alliance and dialogue with others are crucial.

Neoliberal hegemony infected the social fabric and became common sense – such as the idea that the answer and measure of success in life is an isolated individual. In retrospect, it was a socio-economic process that acute observers identified as an anthropological mutation (to cite Pier Paolo Pasolini).

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that we must bring together economic value creation, decent jobs, health, environmental sustainability and the importance of quality time (the ability to reconcile work-life balance) that we have forcibly experienced in quarantine. Moreover, women are continually challenged by the demands of substantial improvement of conditions to lead a life of equality and respect.

COVID-19 has made us aware of some structural fragilities that link environmental imbalances that translate into health imbalances that can in turn produce disasters in the area of economic value creation and work. There are always risks/threats and opportunities to be taken into account, starting with

those that are the subject of wide-ranging political debate within the OECD and the European Union:

- First, an ecological transition. As the majority of world's population lives in urban areas, the environmental degradation produced by cities – such as pollution with Particulate Matter (PM) – threatens the health and quality of life, aggravated the effects of COVID-19 in the most polluted areas and is the main source of carbon emissions.
- Second, incentives for sustainable mobility with frontier technologies. On the digital side, it will be essential to address the potential inequalities that risk deepening in this area.
- Third, transformation implies more than circular economy and means a profound change in agricultural and industrial production and consumption methods.
- Fourth, there is a need for rethinking territorial planning, to make the cities more livable places and the rural areas less remote.
- Fifth, the correct emphasis on the localization of the SDGs implies a correlated conceptualization, implementation and measurement of results as well as efforts to achieve an interconnected, universal and intertwined agenda to replace the silos approach.
- Sixth, the importance of a multi-stakeholder agenda, which must be led by public, private and civil society's entities at national and subnational levels. In this sense the experience of the implementation of Agenda 21 in the 1990s was a particularly significant attempt to promote coherent agreements and initiatives ranging from local and national to global action plans. However, these experiences are likely to be of little impact when they fail to change strategic political plans and key economic interests.
- Seventh, the need for political leaderships, technical capacity and vision.

Linking to the latter, nowadays, in a time when many people highlight concerns about relevance and quality of PhD programs, it is important to support an alternative narrative found in emerging research-action strands and the SDGs challenge is one key area.

Today, we should be witnessing new forms of supporting PhD programs in Africa, Asia and LA&C to influence research momentum and creativity.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the insufficient results of the recent COP-26 on climate change and the challenge of reaching the SDGs by 2030 offer new scope and magnitude of the importance and influence of research action on cultural and political arenas all over the countries.

In contrast to the commonly held idea that the foundations of PhD programs are eroding, we should promote a powerful input, spreading like a pulse through social, economic and environmental intertwined areas and correlated professional domains, and reaching a participatory dialogue with active actors in societal, cultural and political contexts.

Many PhD programs should themselves be filled with hope and find the courage to engage with the challenge of the SDGs issues and such inter-disciplinary challenges.

Academicians and researchers from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean must feel encouraged to become protagonists of an intellectually animating challenge for developing a new narrative on local, national and global development.

As usual, the articles in this issue of the e-journal are conceived as a multidisciplinary conversation on development, referring to different countries and continents. Additionally, a growing space is now regularly attributed to the PhD students of the network of universities that have been collaborating for years in this common editorial initiative. This generation of young people is the largest the world has ever known, including current generation of PhD programs in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Based on the concrete example of an existing network consisting of over 40 PhD programs from around 30 countries in the South of the world, and paying a tribute to Albert Hirschman and his propensity to self-subversion by using one of his favourite expressions, we learned to trespass on disciplines, also trespassing on quantitative and qualitative as well as micro and macro data collection and analysis.

Prof. Latif Dramani investigates the relationship between investments and the demographic dividend in Africa. The median age of the population in Africa is just above 20 years, therefore such a young population represents a great opportunity for Africa, offering a paradigm shift in development. In 2017, a publication edited by Hans Groth and John F. May, entitled *Africa's Population: In Search of a Demographic Dividend*, was a contribution to the understanding of perspectives on Africa linked to the concept of the demographic dividend, i.e., the accelerated economic growth and increasing surplus resulting from an expansion of the working-age population with respect to the young dependent population. This concept was based on the analysis of the East Asian "economic miracle", which occurred between the 1960s and 1990s. The question of the first demographic dividend in African countries has become prominent in international development circles over the past 20 years and is at the heart of this article. Based on a composite indicator for monitoring the demographic dividend and sustainable development, this work seeks to identify the priority sectors that need to be addressed in order to increase the demographic dividend, and to measure the amount of investment needed in Africa. In the case of Senegal, the results reveal that education is a priority sector for investment.

Prof. Mohamed Fouzi Mourj, in collaboration with the PhD student Mounia Bettah and the researcher Abdeljaouad Ezzrari, focus on a topic traditionally debated in the field of tax policy, because of its implications for economic inequality, namely the burden of Value-Added Tax (VAT). In 2014, the OECD published a report entitled *The Distributional Effects of Consumption Taxes in OECD Countries*, highlighting the potential growth benefits of shifting the tax mix and questioning the widely held view that the poor are hit hardest by increases in VAT rates. Here, the authors estimate how changes in indirect taxation, particularly VAT, affect differently various groups of household consumption's

structure in Morocco. To do so, they apply the Quadratic Almost Ideal Demand System (QAIDS), a model which can be used to find the relationships that are impossible to discover using single-equation models and to model a nonlinear Engel curve. The research was based on household microeconomic data to estimate elasticities of demand for eight food groups and at the level of five household strata. The results show that, over time, the poorest households have consumed insufficient quantities of nutritious food products such as dairy products, fish and fruit. Moreover, an extension of the scope of VAT to basic products, especially cereals, would affect Moroccan households' consumption patterns, especially the poorest, for cereals as well as for other products rich in nutrients such as fish and fruit.

The article written by Mark Moreno Pascual addresses South-South cooperation, offering valuable information on a reality that has not yet been sufficiently explored, also due to limited availability of comparable data as well as to an ethnocentric bias.. In recent years, fortunately, contributions from the literature on this subject have increased. Over the past two years, at least a dozen volumes and numerous articles have been published. For reasons of space, here we point out as interesting just: (i) the volume edited by Hany Gamil Besada, M. Evren Tok, and Leah McMillan Polonenko, entitled *Innovating south-south cooperation : policies, challenges, and prospects*, which collect chapters on the prospects for South-South Cooperation even as the new global context is upending the post-Second World War global order, emphasizing the importance of China, economic integration, and convergence; (ii) the recent book written by Chithra Purushothaman, entitled *Emerging Powers, Development Cooperation and South-South Relations*, and being born out of the author's Ph.D. thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in which the author shows how countries like China, India or South Africa have always distanced themselves from the Western donors' club and their mechanisms for development finance in least developed countries; (iii) the recent book written by Gian Luca Gardini and entitled *External Powers in Latin America. Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation*, which examines the role of Non-traditional external partners (such as China, Russia, India, Iran, Indonesia, the ASEAN countries, South Africa) in Latin America in the 21st century, which have significantly increased their political and economic engagement with the continent. Here, the author focuses on the experience of partnership promoted by global actors from the South such as China, India, Brazil and Saudi Arabia, in the name of principles of mutual collaboration and self-sufficiency among developing countries. The roots and the characteristics as well as the pitfalls and risks that affect the effectiveness of South-South cooperation are highlighted.

The section dedicated to articles by PhD students of the network of the International Doctoral School on the SDGs collects three additional contributions.

The first, written by Minh Tien discusses the practical situation of strikes and the legal enforcement in dealing with unlawful strikes which have commonly

occurred in Vietnam. Since the end of the 1970s, when many Asian countries – including Viet Nam, but also China – embarked on a policy of market-oriented economic reforms and opening up economies to trade with the Western economies, violations of workers’ rights and labour disputes, individually and collectively, have been on the rise. Almost 15 years ago, Jie Shen published a book entitled *Labour Disputes and Their Resolution in China* and analysed origins, characteristics, and methods of resolution set against the wider background of the economic reform and the impact it has had on employment and non-employment relations, trade unions, labour contracts, tripartite consultation, labour arbitration and labour litigation. Analyzing the specific case of Viet Nam, this article considers international principles and views of different countries on labor dispute resolution as the basic to provide recommendations for the improvement of legal regulations on strike resolution of Vietnam.

The article written by Fekkaklouhail Safia, in collaboration with her PhD supervisor Prof. Mohamed Fouzi Mourj and the researcher Ezrari Abdeljaouad, analyses the factors explaining the propensity of Moroccan migrants to carry out remittances’ transfers and the money amounts involved. The authors measure the impact of these remittances on the households’ welfare and their investments in human capital by using microdata provided by household living standards surveys. Remittance flows have been “recognized” by much of the international literature and community as a key international financial flow for development of low- and middle-income countries only in the last twenty years. All the more so, its importance and resilience became apparent in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic: based on data from the World Bank’s most recent report, entitled *Recovery. COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens: Migration and Development Brief*, in 2021 remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are projected to reach \$589 billion, registering a 7.3% annual increase, and this recovery follows the resilience of flows seen in 2020, when remittances recorded only a modest 1.7% decline to \$549 billion, in the face of one of the deepest recorded global recessions. Remittances now stand more than threefold above official development assistance and, with the exception of China, more than 50% higher than foreign direct investment. It is, therefore, very interesting to analyze the phenomenon in Morocco and the authors present a counterfactual analysis through the James Heckman’s two-step statistical approach to assess the determinant and the amount of remittances and the matching method to assess the impact of these remittances on the population’s living conditions. The results show that the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the migrants are not sufficient to explain the transfers and although remittances are beneficial for a good number of Moroccan households, the question of their sustainability remains unanswered.

The article written by Rocío Duarte Recalde focuses on a concrete case of a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program, which have become increasingly popular in low-income countries, particularly in Latin America. In the context of the health and socioeconomic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, CCT programs are expected to play an even more critical role in the nation’s

social protection system in Latin America. A recent paper written by Marco Stampini, Pablo Ibararán, Carolina Rivas, and Marcos Robles and published by the Inter-American Development Bank, entitled "*Adaptive, but Not by Design: Cash Transfers in Latin America and the Caribbean Before, During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic*" shows that governments in LAC countries implemented 111 new cash transfer interventions during the pandemic crisis, increasing average coverage to 34% of the population (in particular, among the moderate poor and the vulnerable population, while it remained unchanged among the extreme poor) in 12 countries with available data. Therefore, the contribution of this author, who analyses the Tekoporã Conditional Cash Transfer program, becomes very interesting. In 2005 the government of Paraguay launched this program to improve access to education and health services and enhance nutritional outcomes for extreme poor households, by promoting an innovative partnership between civil society and government to achieve greater transparency and accountability in the money transfer process. What makes the article's perspective original is its interest not so much in analyzing coverage, beneficiaries, effectiveness and impact, but in exploring the political implications. Questions of how CCT programs affect institutional frameworks, challenge inter-institutional coordination, interact with the needed development of technical-administrative capacities and what effects they have on the active participation of the population in decision-making processes make the content of this article very intriguing.