

Contributions to a strategic debate on collective health: from the fight against pesticides to the need for greater involvement in the agroecological field

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WELCOME TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF 'SAÚDE EM DEBATE', whose theme is 'Health, Pesticides, and Agroecology' and which was built to contribute to a strategic debate, seeking to deepening the understanding of more critical theoretical, practical, and epistemological approaches aimed at strengthening agroecology and reducing the harmful effects of pesticides on health, the environment, and society. We sought to reflect on the relationship between these elements and the field of collective health, with a view to promoting a transition towards food systems that provide socio-environmental justice, food and nutrition security and sovereignty, sustainable territories, and health.

The deepening of the structural crisis of capital reveals a 'civilization and planetary crisis', which materializes in the expansion of social inequities, with concentration of income, increase in extreme poverty and hunger; and in the destruction of ecosystems, deteriorating the health of populations. At the center of this crisis is the hegemonic mode of production of agribusiness, which depends on the use of chemical inputs, environmental and workforce exploitation, breeding of transgenic seeds and which pushes for the weakening of regulations aimed at protecting the environment and human health.

As a result, Brazil has been experiencing a period of setbacks, with a reduction in social and environmental protection rights, conquered through historical struggles, which culminated in the 1988 Constitution. The deep economic, social, environmental, sanitary, and ethical crisis in which the country is inserted threatens democracy and is aggravated, as of 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, which was used as an 'opportunity to pass the herd' to further reduce the State's role in social, environmental, and human health protection

As immediate results, we can observe the dismantling of the pesticide regulation system and the accelerated release of those substances, including obsolete products in the national market; the weakening of monitoring and inspection systems¹; the dismantling of public policies to encourage agroecology and organic production; the disruption of channels for civil society participation in public policies; the exponential increase in deforestation and fires; the delegitimization of scientific knowledge and the persecution of researchers; cutting funding for the Unified Health System; and the militarization of the Ministry of Health.

The impacts of this production model are not evenly distributed in the territories, affecting more severely peasants and traditional peoples and communities, who are under strong attack by the contamination of water, soil and air, loss of biodiversity, attempts to legalize land fraud and illnesses and deaths related to exposure to pesticides. Brazilian biomes are in an accelerated process of devastation.

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We highlight, for instance, systematization and data analysis that point to the ecocide of the *cerrados*², the central biome of our country, and the unprecedented recommendation that the Human Rights Council for the United Nations (UN) received – in periods considered democratic – to open an investigation into the Brazilian government on human rights violations and environmental crimes. The report presented, on an official visit to Brazil, in December 2019, by the UN special rapporteur for human rights, concludes that the country is moving away from international solidarity, presents a set of setbacks related to human rights that require urgent attention and if the situation is not controlled, the possible national catastrophe could progress to a phenomenal regional and global tragedy, with the destruction of the climate³.

The costs of attacking the guarantees of social, environmental, and health protection, the legal order, and the Welfare State are high, both for health and for the environment; and the search for other modes of production and relationships with nature that reduce the impact of this model is urgent and necessary in contemporary society.

We start from the premise that it is not possible to conceive the precariousness of conquered rights, materialized in more protective legislation for health and the environment, considering the principle of prohibiting social regression, a basic assumption for the existence of a Democratic State.

This reveals the current importance of the set of agrobiodiversity experiences, which are increasingly articulated in networks around the agroecological movement for the health of the population and the planet, but which also teaches about different ways of being in the world, of relating to nature, ways that are solidary and inclusive, concrete alternatives to overcome the paradigms faced by humanity.

At the time this journal is published, two years and six months have passed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hits humanity in the context of the recognition of a global syndemic of hunger, overweight and obesity, and climate change⁴ due to the causal relationship maintained with the neoliberal food system, which express the consequences of the aforementioned structural crisis and are intensified by the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2. There is no vaccine against hunger or climate change, overcoming these serious crises necessarily involves a radical and rapid transition of (agri)food systems. That is what international reports produced by dozens or hundreds of experts around the world conclude on food and nutrition security, climate change, biodiversity, and ecosystem services published in recent years⁵. The agroecological approach has been gaining prominence in some of these reports, thanks to the advancement of knowledge production, to which the health field has much to contribute⁶.

It is in this scenario of threats and resistance that this special issue on 'Health, Pesticides, and Agroecology' is inserted, seeking to stimulate the production and dissemination of knowledge about the role of collective health in the fight against pesticides and against a sickening model of agriculture. It also seeks to think about how the field of public health can contribute to the construction of agroecology as a technical-scientific approach consistent with a set of practices in resistance, in a civilizing political movement to face current challenges.

The studies present in this special issue cover both reflections and critical approaches to the categories, epistemologies, and practices that shape scientific activity and the involvement of the field of public health in such themes. These have been dedicating to analyzing the conjunctural aspects that drive this production model, as well as revealing the impacts of pesticides on health and the environment, making increasing efforts aimed at formulating more protective public policies, as well as territorial experiences for the promotion of the human right to adequate food and aimed at the emancipatory promotion of health.

We believe that the objectives proposed for this issue of 'Saúde em Debate' have been achieved. With the composition of 38 texts, which involve the efforts of dozens of researchers

from different institutions, this journal contributes to understanding the place of Brazil and Latin America in the global food system and its different effects on health, at different scales. Furthermore, it also contributes because of the concepts and methods used. Access to articles that reflect on topics that are little addressed or even unpublished in public health journals is significantly expanded. We emphasize the importance of establishing bridges and convergences between collective health and agroecology, understood in its epistemological, theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and practical dimensions. We hope that, in different ways, this work strengthens the approximations between the fields of health and agroecology.

Collaborators

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