

# When informal work and poor work conditions backfire and fuel the COVID-19 pandemic: Why we should listen to the lessons from Latin America

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## Abstract

Latin America is among the regions with the highest incidence of COVID-19 where the pandemic is creating a humanitarian crisis. In this Commentary we aim to reveal underlying problems of this crisis, that may be an underestimated global driver of the pandemic and a serious risk to health and healthcare systems. We set the focus on informal work and related poorly regulated sub-contracting which create poor work conditions as one dimension of the social determinants of health. We use the examples of Germany and Brazil, as opposite sides geographically and concerning the pandemic, to highlight a need for greater attention to these risks and for systematic inclusion in health systems resilience. In both countries, informal work may turn into hot spots of COVID-19, thus reinforcing social inequalities on a grand scale both nationally and globally. Our two contrasting country cases thus reveal a global threat that should be treated as such. There is much to learn for Europe and the world from Brazil and Latin America on what happens when informal labour and poor work environments backfire during the COVID-19 pandemic. We should listen carefully to these lessons.

**KEYWORDS**

Brazil, COVID-19 pandemic, Germany, informal work, pandemic hot spots, poor work conditions, social determinants of health

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Latin America is among the countries with highest incidence of COVID-19 and the pandemic is creating a humanitarian crisis,<sup>1</sup> exacerbated previous vulnerabilities and improved inequalities. There is an urgent need for paying greater attention to this humanitarian crisis globally, and especially in Europe. However, Latin America's painful experience also illuminates problems, that may be an underestimated global driver of the pandemic.<sup>2,3</sup> This is the case of informal work and related forms of poorly regulated sub-contracting. We would like to use the examples of Germany and Brazil, as opposite sides geographically and concerning the pandemic, to highlight the risks of poor work environments and argue for a systematic inclusion in health systems resilience.

Germany is an example of a country that manages COVID-19 comparably well, with high-resource and established welfare and healthcare systems, political leadership and trust of the population, and comparably low influence of populist parties.<sup>4</sup> On the other side, Brazil is a sad example of a country that became one of the pandemic epicenters. Even with a robust public health system, the country was never able to control the crisis properly.<sup>5,6</sup> The negationist president used populist measures, did not provide enough resources, and never faced the problem seriously, leaving the population in a very critical situation.<sup>7</sup> The consequences are very well known. However, even with so different governments and realities, informal work may turn into hot spots of COVID-19, thus reinforcing social inequalities on a grand scale both nationally and globally.

## 2 | LABOUR MARKET CONDITIONS AS DRIVERS OF THE PANDEMIC

This brings labour market condition as drivers of the pandemic into perspective, yet the risks of informal labour markets may show up differently. In Germany, with its strongly regulated labour market both nationally and through European Union (EU) law, poor labour market conditions are masked behind badly paid sub-contracted migrant workers, mostly from Eastern European countries. One important example are the slaughterhouses and industrial meat production. After the first wave of COVID-19 the cases went down to overall very low numbers during the European summer, but several local outbreaks were reported from slaughterhouses in different regions of Germany.

It was supposedly no coincidence that the most severe outbreak happened in the largest slaughterhouses, causing about 1400 positive cases within a short period and a local lockdown. The employment situation in this sector (as well as animal health) were since long a matter of public concern. Very poor work and housing conditions and a high level of sub-contracted work with low salaries were repeatedly reported in the media. Migrant workers from Eastern EU countries, especially from Romania, make up for the majority of workers, who are often put together in small rooms and isolated from the community. Language problems, economic pressures and fear of losing the job often prevents them from making use of legal rights. They may even go to work when sick. During the pandemic, these workers had little, if any chance to properly apply the COVID-19 social distancing restricting and there were reports of poor personal protection equipment. Sub-contracted work not only puts individual workers at high risk, but also communities because contract tracing was often not fully possible.<sup>8</sup>

In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, informal work is widespread and positively associated with other vulnerabilities and social inequalities, such as low wages, lack of labour rights, poor access to health services, and poor housing conditions. The data from Latin American countries show, how the higher degree of deaths and

contagious of COVID-19 is correlated to the higher degree of socio-economic vulnerabilities<sup>9,10</sup>; poor and black people die more often.<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons is that these citizens live in small houses in the periphery or favelas, with high demographic density, where it is impossible to practice physical distance policies or isolation. Simultaneously, informal workers cannot do quarantine, even when they get sick, as their daily work is a measure of survival.

Furthermore, as many poor citizens live in the periphery, they have to use (crowded) public transportation and cross the city to work. They meet many people and, due to the informal condition of their work, it is not possible to trace their contacts. Informal work is also positively associated with a lack of security in workers' jobs and poor access to personal protective equipment. Research with public health and social workers in Brazil shows how employees with sub-contracts are less provided with PPEs and are more exposed to bad working conditions.

### 3 | WHAT PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS MAY LEARN FROM THE CONTRASTING COUNTRY EXAMPLES

Of course, comparing the situation between the EU and Latin America based on Germany and Brazil does not seem to be fair, as the COVID-19 pandemic is hitting Latin America so much stronger than Germany. However, if Germany and Brazil seem to be so different politically and in terms of the pandemic, but both facing severe outbreaks due to poorly regulated work and poor work environments with often high numbers of migrant workers, this highlights an important driver of the pandemic. Our two contrasting country cases thus reveal a global threat that should be treated as such and considered in future pandemic preparedness planning and policy. It is important to understand better, how the pandemic interacts with work conditions, and more generally with the social determinants of health.<sup>12</sup> On this backdrop, there is much to learn for Europe and the world from Brazil and Latin America on what happens when informal labour and poor work environments backfire during the COVID-19 pandemic. We should listen carefully to these lessons.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

This review does not consist of human subject research; no further ethical considerations are reported.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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