

Scientific Research and COVID-19: The COVID-19 Barometer Project

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The current pandemic has forced a sudden and unimaginable turnaround on everyone, at all levels. Our lives, primarily in the way we behaved and related in the different aspects of our professional and personal lives, have been strongly influenced and changed. In the most critical time of the first wave of the pandemic in Portugal (April), for instance, people delayed medical care for fear of being infected, and that confidence has still not fully been restored. Now, we are still in the middle of this pandemic, not knowing when and how it will come to an end.

Focusing on scientific research, within the framework of this scientific journal, the paradigm is also very, very interesting. Scientific research processes usually have a relatively long development time. For example, it is common that the design of a project takes 2 months (or more) to be elaborated, then 6 months (or more) to be evaluated, and finally, once approved, the project lasts 2 or 3 years. The direct gain for society usually is not immediate either. Sometimes, the results of the projects are “just” intermediate phases (small steps) that one day can be adopted or transformed (complemented) into something directly useful to society.

The imperative and urgent COVID-19 research, which involves numerous areas, has changed this way of work-

ing, by requiring the investigation and the response to be available as soon as possible, at least in part. We gained the notion of urgency in research because the results are needed today, so that they can be useful now, which is not the challenge and the usual framework of scientific research. In sequence, there will be parallel and complementary research within “the usual timeframe,” in order to assess the interventions made now, this knowledge being useful for possible future pandemics. Nevertheless, it is essential that academia actors, completely motivated and available to help, continue to create policy-specific synergies and to respond with robust information and knowledge to this emergency.

A concrete case: the NOVA National School of Public Health, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic, through the COVID-19 Barometer, launched 3 days after the declaration of the State of Emergency in Portugal, seeking to contribute, timely and swiftly, to the challenges posed by the global pandemic. Since Public Health is our mission, it is natural (and also expected and mandatory, in my opinion) that the School urged to organize itself in order to be useful and effectively contribute to enlarge the knowledge about this pandemic, reorganizing all its research to prioritize

this challenge. Ours was not the only University to do so, many others also reorganized parts of their research aims, but in our institution, this commitment was (and still is) almost total.

With this project, ENSP-NOVA offers society effective data and scientific analysis on the pandemic, with the purpose of actively contributing to its understanding, ensuring a support tool for decision-making and generating robust knowledge, which can be useful in future situations.

This project is organized in 4 different areas: Epidemiology, Occupational Health, Policies and Interventions, and Social Opinion, with a multidisciplinary team of about 35 researchers, which includes Public Health and Occupational Health doctors, epidemiologists, statisticians, economists, sociologists and psychologists, and others.

Your contribution has been (and is very) relevant and comprehensive, for example, in the Social Opinion analyses, people's perceptions of the pandemic, in terms of behaviors, mental health, loss of income, agreement and adherence (or not) to specific measures proposed by health authorities and the government, and the problem of access to health services, among others. In the area of Occupational Health, there was first a focus on the health effects on health professionals and after that on the conditions and consequences of telework. Modeling the national epidemic curve, comparing it with other countries and identifying critical areas, has been the focus of the

epidemiology group's work. The scope of the group of Policies and Interventions has been striking: from the comparison with other countries on different perspectives (trends, measures, consequences) to the potential excess of mortality, and even the risk factors for more complex situations (like hospital admissions, need of intensive care, or death), among others. The identification of inequities or the proposal for a phased opening (in May) were some of the pioneering works of the Barometer (at a national level, we were the first to study and discuss these subjects).

The project already promoted international COVID-19 research networks, namely with Brazil and the Emirates, and, at a national level, important partnerships for the success of the project, specifically with healthcare institutions, patient associations, and representatives of the health professions. The results are evident considering the several scientific articles that have already been published, the projects approved by our national Foundation for Science and Technology, the news in the media, and even with our School as an entity regularly consulted by decision makers.

The research paradigm has changed, in the sense that it now promotes new directions of pursuit, with different goals, in parallel with the "classical time framework." Meanwhile, the academy's relationship with society has been profoundly altered, in terms of recognition and usefulness, which I hope is something that will be maintained and that will become even more robust in the future.