



Tomorrow's CITIES

Urban Risk in Transition

The COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges for Ecuador

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The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed worldwide the multi-dimensional vulnerability of contemporary societies under the neoliberal logic¹. In a previous and insightful commentary², our colleagues from FLACSO Ecuador highlighted the failure of national land use planning and policies as the baseline condition for the weak national response to COVID-19 in Ecuador and for the acceleration of impacts on vulnerable people. The following reflections would like to complement the aforementioned commentary with a preliminary contextualization of the pandemic in Ecuador, to account for structural socioeconomic and political problems of the country and to reflect on its current and future linkages with disaster risk reduction in Quito.

¹ [1] Millán, N., Santander, G. (2020), El virus cosmopolita: lecciones de la COVID-19 para la reconfiguración del Estado-Nación y la gobernanza global, *Geopolítica(s) Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, 11, 251-263.

² [1] Menoscal, J., M Córdova, M. (2020) The Emergence of Covid-19 in Ecuador, *Tomorrow's Cities Comment* #3, April 2020, accessed from <https://tomorrowscities.org/emergence-covid-19-ecuador>

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The pandemic: reiterating inequalities and worsening conditions for urban poor communities

In a turbulent October 2019, social conflicts mounted across the streets of Quito. Ecuadoreans protested against economic measures by the government (supported by the International Monetary Fund) following the sharp decline of global crude oil prices. These protests left nine people dead or permanently injured people³, and revealed to the world the pre-existing socioeconomic tensions in the country.

A few months later, at the end of February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ecuador. In the middle of March the President of the Republic Lenín Moreno imposed lockdown and curfew. In those weeks, the crude oil price plummeted again (-43% between January and March 2020). A new crisis was on the horizon, with the threat of new restrictive economic measures by the government and of protests across the streets. The government adjusted its agenda to respond to the pandemic, while Ecuadoreans had to cope with the challenges posed by the virus.

Ecuador is paying a high economic and social burden from COVID-19, like the whole of Latin America⁴ which became the most impacted world region in June 2020 with especially high death rates recorded in Brazil and Peru and in Amazonian Indigenous groups⁵. At the time of writing, Ecuador - a country also affected by long-term disease outbreaks such as dengue⁶ and tuberculosis⁷ - has had over 50,915 cases and 4,246 deaths⁸. Like in many countries worldwide⁹, the virus rapidly spread across the most important urban areas of Ecuador. The pandemic severely hit the Southern province of Guayas, which has had around 15,000 cases (35% of the total cases) and 1,575 deaths. Most of the cases in the province of Guayas occurred in Guayaquil, the most important economic centre in Ecuador, with 9,981 cases and 1,054 deaths. The Financial Times¹⁰ reports that in the whole country excess deaths have been 21,500 (+122%) during the pandemic, while in the province of Guayas there has been 14,200 excess deaths (+276%). The province of Pichincha is the second most affected, with 6,983 confirmed cases and

³ <https://www.elcomercio.com/pages/muertos-protestas-octubre-ecuador-decreto.html>

⁴ https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45337/6/S2000264_es.pdf

⁵ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/justicia-ecuador-coronavirus-amazonia-enfermedad.html>

⁶ Burki, T. (2020). COVID-19 in Latin America. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 20(5), 547-548

⁷ Silva, G., Pérez, F., & Marín, D. (2019). Tuberculosis en niños y adolescentes en Ecuador: análisis de la notificación, las características de la enfermedad y el resultado del tratamiento. *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública*, 43

⁸ <https://coronavirusecuador.com/> Data updated at 29th June 2020

⁹ Salama, A. M. (2020). Coronavirus questions that will not go away: interrogating urban and socio-spatial implications of COVID-19 measures. *Emerald Open Research*, 2(14), 14

¹⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/a26fbf7e-48f8-11ea-aeb3-955839e06441> Data updated at 17th June 2020

484 deaths. Almost all these cases and deaths occurred in Quito (6,372 cases and 448 deaths), with a sharp increase of +467% between 1 May and 22 June.

The pandemic has had strong impacts on the poor population of Ecuador. Social distancing measures and a three month economic standstill will likely increase poverty across the country. Citing a report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion Iván Granda claimed the pandemic might cause an increase in poverty (+5%) and in extreme poverty (+3.6%) in comparison to 2019¹¹. The Internal Revenue Service of Ecuador estimated private sales declined by \$6,271 million in March and April 2020 alone across the country, with a value of \$14,000 million in May. Quito, where growth in poverty rates has been the highest in recent years, is the hardest hit, with a near 50% reduction in private sales of \$4,378 million in April 2020 in comparison with total sales of \$9,818 million for the same period in 2019¹².

The pandemic has also limited everyday livelihood opportunities and worsens life conditions of the most vulnerable communities in Quito, such as low-income and unemployed people, off-pay workers, and migrants. Almost half of the COVID-19 cases in Quito have been concentrated in 10 neighbourhoods, with six of these neighbourhoods located in the southern part of the city, such as Chillogallo, Guamaní, La Magdalena. These neighbourhoods share characteristics that potentially facilitate infections including high population density, poverty and higher rates of informal jobs¹³. In Quito the pandemic posed a dilemma to the 22,000 estimated informal workers (e.g. street vendors) that survive on a small daily income with no social security measures. If they stay at home, they do not have enough money for everyday food or medicines; if they go to work (for example to sell masks and gloves across the street) and infringe government measures, they could spread the disease or be infected, and risk being arrested¹⁴. They are also at further risk due to respiratory infections; urban dusts, viruses and bacteria accumulate on protective masks and might enter into the body if masks are not replaced regularly¹⁵. On 26 May, together with university students and workers' unions, informal workers protested across the streets of Quito (and other cities) against the government lock down

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<https://www.inclusion.gob.ec/ministro-ivan-granda-informa-a-la-asamblea-nacional-sobre-acciones-mias-durante-emergencia-sanitaria/>

12 <https://www.planv.com.ec/historias/sociedad/uno-cada-cuatro-ecuatorianos-son-pobres-y-luego-la-pandemia-seran-mas>

13 <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/quito-parroquias-contagios-pobreza-aglomeraciones.html>

14 <https://lahora.com.ec/quito/noticia/1102314423/vendedores-informales-de-quito-deben-trabajar-pese-al-miedo-al-coronavirus>

15 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/05/18/coronavirus-ecuador-venezuelans>

measures¹⁶. In this way, the pandemic has evidenced the structural conditions of socio-spatial segregation in urban areas and highlighted its contribution in reproducing vulnerabilities.

Venezuelan migrants and homeless in Ecuador run the same risks due to their lack of formal employment opportunities and limited access to food, housing and social services. The Association of Venezuela in Ecuador (Asociación Venezuela en Ecuador) estimates that 80% of Venezuelan families in the country are in a “condition of extreme vulnerability”¹⁷. The psychologist Monica Salgado, based in Quito, revealed in the New Humanitarian that during the pandemic the risk of domestic violence increased for the Venezuelan migrant population¹⁸. In some areas, claims of domestic violence have risen about 40%.

Affected communities have shown formal and informal solidarity networks which have emerged within and across neighbourhoods to support those who are most in need¹⁹. For example, the national newspaper El Comercio reported that in some neighbourhoods in the southern part of Quito (e.g. San Blas, Ciudadela Tarqui, Los Cipreses, Chillogallo) communities self-organized to clean public spaces and provide food and basic needs for poor families or elders with no support²⁰.

Politics and conflicts in responding to the pandemic

In its essence, the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered as a disaster. It is a severe interruption of everyday life, associated with exposure to a hazard event and underlying conditions of vulnerability and lack of capacity²¹. Worldwide, disasters have often proven to foster political conflicts and lead to the adjustment of multi- and cross-level politics²². Like many disasters, different types of political conflicts also characterized the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52814371>

¹⁷ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/quito-riesgo-contagio-mendicidad-coronavirus.html>

¹⁸ See Footnote 15

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<https://www.revistaamazonas.com/2020/04/01/cuando-quedateencasa-no-es-una-opcion-una-lectura-feminista-de-la-reproduccion-social-de-la-vida-en-la-pandemia/>

²⁰ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/covid19-combate-union-vecinos-quito.html>

²¹ Lavell A., Lavell C., COVID-19: Relationships with disaster risk, its concept and management, https://www.desenredando.org/public/2020/Lavell_2020-05_Covid-19_and_Disaster_v3.0.pdf

²² Pelling, M., & Dill, K. (2010). Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes. *Progress in human geography*, 34(1), 21-37

Just one day after the lockdown began, on 18 March, Guayaquil's municipal vehicles occupied the international airport's runway to prevent the landing of a humanitarian flight from Madrid (no passengers, only crew) that the next day should have repatriated European citizens from Ecuador. With this move, the Mayor of Guayaquil, Cynthia Viteri, openly confronted the government's decision to authorize the landing, taken by the Vice President of the Republic Otto Sonnenholzner. COVID-19 has revealed systemic tensions within the highest levels of Ecuador's political class: the Minister of Health Catalina Andramuño resigned after tensions with the Minister of the Finance Richard Martínez around insufficient funds available for the health sector to respond to the pandemic. In May, the director of the Servicio Nacional de Gestión de Riesgos (SNGR) Alexandra Ocles also resigned after an investigation around the purchase of 7000 food kits²³.

With presidential elections scheduled for 28 February 2021, political debate in the coming months could be polarized around the response to the pandemic, as occurred for example after the earthquake in 2016 in Manabí and Esmeraldas provinces²⁴. There is uncertainty around who might be the most relevant political actors in the coming months, but it might be important to see how those who have been in the spotlight during the pandemic, such as Otto Sonnenholzner, Jorge Yunda Machado (Mayor of Quito) and Cynthia Viteri, will work towards gaining consensus. Meanwhile, in early April, the National Court convicted Rafael Correa, the previous country's president (2007-2017) and leader of the Movimiento Revolución Ciudadana, and his staff on corruption charges, sentencing him of eight years in prison and 25-year ban from political activity. Correa is a controversial political figure, but retains strong support in Ecuador and has been vocal in the media, criticizing the government response to the pandemic. In an interview, Correa argued²⁵ that the verdict was an attempt to inhibit his participation in the general election in 2021, an important moment for the country. Correístas might therefore use the skirmishes of these months to organize and structure their political agenda.

Post-pandemic and disaster risk reduction

Moving beyond the current situation, a diverse range of strategies, policies and measures at multiple levels and sectors can be developed and implemented, with consequences for the everyday life of those most in need. Socioeconomic measures touching upon health,

²³ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/ocles-renuncia-riesgos-director-salazar.html#>

²⁴ See Meléndez, C., & Moncagatta, P. (2017). Ecuador: Una década de correísmo. *Revista de ciencia política*, 37(2), 413-448, and Waldmueller, J. M., Nogales, N., & Cobey, R. J. (2019). Assessment of local adaptive capacities in the context of local politics after the 2016 Ecuadorian earthquake. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 35, 101062

²⁵ <http://www.rfi.fr/es/am%C3%A9ricas/20200416-rafael-correa-me-quieren-impedir-participar-en-las-pr%C3%B3ximas-elecciones>

social services, job market, taxation, resource management and international trades will influence – directly or indirectly, positively or negatively- disaster risk reduction in Quito and Ecuador. For example, in June the government released the new *Ley de Apoyo Humanitario* (Law of Humanitarian Support) that establishes new regulations and possibilities for job contracts, negotiations, and pensions²⁶ with implications for future natural hazard related disaster events. Analysing whether this measure will provide benefits or further challenge for workers will support a better understanding of vulnerabilities. Still the political debate, as exemplified by this new law, is focused on responding to the crisis instead of addressing underlying root causes in urban planning and economic inequality, or in improving transparency in decision-making and accountability in political processes.

Since the end of April, the introduction of a “traffic light” system across the country,²⁷ through which each Municipality can decide autonomously to gradually ease its lockdown based on red, yellow, and green lights, will be of great importance to understand challenges and opportunities for the implementation of centralized disaster risk reduction measures at the local level. Also, narratives and discourses around responsible behaviours by citizens and politicians, taking place throughout Latin America²⁸ (including Ecuador), will have impacts on the production or reduction of vulnerability for urban poor communities in Quito. This experiment in decentralisation of risk management opens scope for decentralised approaches to risk reduction, and greater visibility and perhaps enhanced role for the urban poor in these processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic response has not yet learnt from disaster risk reduction the value of working on root causes though bringing the vulnerable into decision-making contexts. There has been advances in the decentralisation of decision-making that opens opportunities for reflection post-COVID-19 on the ways in which risk response and reduction might be balanced between central and local government. This might be a place to engage with the wider (and deeper) conversations on shifting from managing risk through organised response towards a proactive lowering of risk through vulnerability reduction to natural hazard as well as health related risks. All the aforementioned issues

²⁶ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/registro-oficial-vigencia-ley-humanitaria.html>

²⁷ <https://srvportal.gestionderiesgos.gob.ec/portal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5ecd2baea7024774b72765fb764d3690>

²⁸ <https://lasillavacia.com/silla-llena/red-caribe/la-narrativa-de-la-indisciplina-racista-y-clasista-76450>



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are key components for the coproduction and the contextualization of disaster risk reduction in Ecuador²⁹, and therefore should be part of the investigation in the Quito Hub.

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²⁹ Rebotier, J. (2016). *El riesgo y su gestión en Ecuador: una mirada de geografía social y política*. Centro de Publicaciones, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador

Forino, G (2020) The COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges for Ecuador, *Tomorrow's Cities Comment* #7, June 2020, accessed from <https://tomorrowscities.org/covid-19-pandemic-and-its-challenges-ecuador>