

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Third Sector in Brazil

El impacto de la pandemia del COVID-19 en el tercer sector en Brasil

*Maria Ochab**

FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND JOURNALISM
MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY
LUBLIN, POLAND
maria.ochab@umcs.edu.pl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0061-3558>

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon that has already claimed millions of lives and has generated an enormous health, social and economic impact across the globe. The world has been confronted with two simultaneous crises: a humanitarian crisis and a crisis of the rule of law, both of which have severely undermined human security, particularly in countries that, even without the disruption caused by the pandemic, have been far from perfect in providing their citizens with a sense of security on many levels. In such circumstances, the role of civil society and third sector organizations is increasingly important. They try to supplement the insufficient means provided by state institutions and reach out to the most vulnerable sectors of society. However, NGOs, due to the specific nature of their functioning and sources of funding, are also particularly vulnerable. An illustration of the multifaceted problems the third sector faces because of the pandemic is presented with Brazil as the example. The article analyzes that country by taking into consideration two factors – a difficult situation caused by the pandemic as far as human security is concerned in its various dimensions, as well as the political aspect related to the role of the Brazil's president in view of this extraordinary challenge. The hypothesis is that the reluctant attitude of the president towards civil society rooted in his political authoritarian views hinders the functioning of the third sector. The question is to what extent Bolsonaro's decisions impact the activity of Brazilian NGOs in times when the country needs them most. The theoretical component of the article refers to the notions of human security and the third sector.

* Master's Degree in Iberian Philology from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland. PhD course in Political Science, UMCS. Research interests: international cultural relations, cultural diplomacy, human security, civil society in Latin America.

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RESUMEN

La pandemia del COVID-19 es un fenómeno que ya se ha cobrado millones de vidas y ha generado un enorme impacto sanitario, social y económico en la escala global. El mundo se ha enfrentado a dos crisis simultáneas: una crisis humanitaria y una crisis del Estado de Derecho, y ambas han socavado gravemente la seguridad humana, sobre todo en países que, incluso sin la perturbación causada por la pandemia, han estado lejos de ser perfectos a la hora de proporcionar a sus ciudadanos una sensación de seguridad en muchos niveles. En tales circunstancias, el papel de la sociedad civil y de las organizaciones del tercer sector es cada vez más importante. Tratan de complementar los insuficientes medios proporcionados por las instituciones estatales y llegan a los sectores más vulnerables de la sociedad. Sin embargo, las ONG, debido a la naturaleza específica de su funcionamiento y sus fuentes de financiación, también son especialmente vulnerables. Un ejemplo de los múltiples problemas a los que se enfrenta el tercer sector es su situación en Brasil. El artículo lo analiza teniendo en cuenta dos factores: la difícil situación provocada por la pandemia en lo que respecta a la seguridad humana en sus diversas dimensiones, así como el aspecto político relacionado con el papel del presidente del país ante este extraordinario desafío. La hipótesis es que la actitud reticente del presidente hacia la sociedad civil, enraizada en su visión política autoritaria, dificulta el funcionamiento del tercer sector. La pregunta es hasta qué punto las decisiones de Bolsonaro impactan en la actividad de las ONG brasileñas en los momentos en que el país más las necesita. En cuanto al componente teórico del artículo, se refiere a las nociones de seguridad humana y tercer sector.

PALABRAS CLAVE: COVID-19, seguridad humana, pandemia, Brasil, Bolsonaro, tercer sector.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is a phenomenon that has left a huge mark on the functioning of economies and societies across the globe. It is difficult to compare the current situation to the course of any other pandemic in the past. The globalization of the modern world has facilitated the transmission of the virus because of the easy mass movement of people enabling the spread of the virus, while on the other hand, the ability to share information and knowledge has allowed scientists to quickly identify the threat and create vaccines. In turn, access to information on the Internet and keen interest, both on the part of ordinary citizens – worried about their health – and politicians – willing to gain popularity by taking advantage of the generalized fear as well as dissatisfaction with the introduced restrictions – have caused an unprecedented-

ed rise in conspiracy theories, the emergence of anti-vaccination movements and increased distrust in any institutions or scientific authorities.

All countries – both wealthy ones, with well-functioning economies and health care systems, and poor ones, where large parts of the population face day-to-day deprivation and inefficiencies in health care – were unexpectedly confronted with enormous challenges, requiring a multifaceted response. All of the above happening in addition to the lack of any prior experience, procedures, knowledge, or research that would allow for efficient action and effective countermeasures to the pandemic. The result was information chaos and disjointed actions by individual governments that tried to introduce restrictions on an ad hoc basis to contain the pandemic. The introduction of more or less restrictive lockdowns was followed by huge losses in the economic activity and constraints on freedom of movement, which in turn created strong dissatisfaction among many citizens resulting in resistance perceived as a struggle to maintain freedom and a fight for temporarily suspended civil rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted the world with two simultaneous crises: a humanitarian one and the one concerning the rule of law. The first one, caused by the spread of the coronavirus, has led to millions of deaths worldwide and it is still taking its toll, despite the development of increasingly effective methods to combat the virus, which is constantly mutating. Restrictions put in place to limit the spread of the virus have also led to a deep crisis in many industries. Of course, the economic impact has been felt most severely by the poorer segments of society. According to the Pan-American Health Organization, COVID-19 was the cause of death for more than 2.4 million people in the Americas, and 22 million people in the region were driven into poverty (OPAS, 2021).

The second major dimension of the pandemic is the crisis of the rule of law. Chaos can easily turn into anarchy and a struggle for particular, selfish interests of individual social or political groups. The response to the lack of stability and security may be the strengthening of tendencies toward authoritarianism or even dictatorship. Such circumstances favor populists. Of course, the currently intensified tendency toward populism is not the result of the coronavirus pandemic. This phenomenon had already been on the rise, but the actual state of crisis and insecurity strongly favors it. Currently, in various corners of the globe, politicians have come to power claiming to have easy solutions for the tough times of today, presenting themselves as men of providence who want to fight against the existing politically correct establishment that does not care about the national interest. R. Eatwell and M. Goodwin (2018) pointed out four basic causes of the wave of populism, which they called 4D: distrust (towards the political establishment), destruction (fear of destruction of religious-based traditional values and the existing way of life), deprivation (of economic resources), and de-alignment (lack of political representation and identification with the existing political parties). One example of a politician who came to power on this rising tide of populism, making excellent use of the

aforementioned factors, is the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The theme of his 2018 election campaign was to fight the corrupt political class and return to traditional conservative values based on religion. He also proposed a simple solution to the security problem by increasing access to weapons and being more lenient in judging the violence used by police forces against criminals.

The assumption of the presidency by Jair Bolsonaro is a very significant fact both in terms of the Brazilian government's policy to combat the pandemic and the situation of NGOs. It is not possible to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities and functioning of organizations representing the third sector without taking into consideration the attitude that President Bolsonaro has towards the concept of a civil society and the place of the third sector in the domestic internal politics.

At this point it is necessary to recall what is included in the term "third sector". In the current model of the state there are three sectors within which it functions: the public sector (responsible for the functioning and administration of the state, carrying out its tasks, managing the budget and guaranteeing continuity of legal governance), the business sector, also called the private sector, gathering entities oriented at making profit, and the third sector, which includes social organizations and various formal and informal associations (gathering both natural persons and legal entities) not oriented at making profit while fulfilling their statutory tasks. The general outline of what the third sector is, presented above, obviously differs in its scope and formal-legal details depending on conditions in particular countries. The concept has also evolved with social, political, economic, or legal changes. In Brazil, one of the first definitions was presented by Rubem C. Fernandes in 1994, describing the third sector as follows:

[...] a set of private initiatives with a public orientation. While the notion of a 'civil society' places us in a complementary and systemic position to the state, the idea of a 'third sector' points the reflection in other directions, without defined frontiers [...] Many of these initiatives are not even registered in any legal instance. They work outside formal controls. Others have institutional registration but do not distinguish between services with the analytical clarity expected from civil agencies. (Fernandes, 1994, p. 127)

The third sector, being the emanation of civil society, plays an important role in a democratic state and may stand in the way of executive power representatives with authoritarian tendencies (such as Bolsonaro himself), who would like to expand the scope of their power beyond the limits imposed by the democratic regime. According to B. Bucholtz, there are three essential roles fulfilled by the third sector:

First, the nonprofit sector teaches the skills of self-government. Second, it inculcates the habits of tolerance and civility. Finally, it mediates the space be-

tween the individual and the other two sectors of society, that is, the “public” or governmental sector and the “private” or “entrepreneurial” or “proprietary” sector. Thus, the nonprofit sector acts as a counterpoise against excessive displays of power emanating from the public or private sectors. (Bucholtz, 1998, p. 556)

Considering the above-mentioned roles of the third sector, one should not be surprised that Bolsonaro sees its representatives as an obstacle to the policies he desires to implement.

The fact that third sector organizations by their very nature operate outside of government structures does not mean that their activities are not influenced by government policies. One should remember that NGOs operate mainly in those areas where the state does not fully play its role. This is especially the case in countries where the social and health care systems are inefficient, and the society is characterized by great economic inequality. Brazil, despite having abundant natural resources and its aspirations to be a global power, still faces many social problems. Therefore, civil society is vigorously developing in Brazil, trying to make up for the state’s inefficiencies as much as possible¹. An example of this can be seen in the actions taken by NGOs since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this article is to present the situation of Brazilian NGOs trying to intervene in areas of human security risk in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. NGOs provide very important support for many Brazilian citizens who, for various reasons, are vulnerable. The actions taken by the third sector are especially important when the security of their lives is threatened in a literal sense because of a rapidly spreading disease for which there is not yet an effective and widely available cure. However, other aspects of human security besides health cannot be overlooked in the current situation. According to the Resolution 66/290, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 October 2012, the notion of human security refers to:

- (a) *The right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential;*
- (b) *Human security calls for people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and*

¹ A brief description of the development of the civil society in Brazil and the impact of the third sector on politics can be found in the article *Cyberprzestrzeń jako środowisko społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Brazylii*, [Cyberspace as an Environment for Civil Society Activity in Brazil] (Ochab, 2018).

- empowerment
of all people and all communities;*
- (c) *Human security recognizes the interlinkages between peace,
development and human rights, and equally considers civil, political,
economic,
social and cultural rights;* (UN, 2012)

Additionally, the Resolution mentions that while the governments have the primary role and responsibility for ensuring the survival, livelihood, and dignity of their citizens, protecting human security requires their collaboration with the representatives of civil society. The author of this text sets forth the hypothesis that the decisions of the Brazilian president and his attitude with regard to the idea of civil society do not support, but actually hinder the functioning of third sector organizations in the face of the pandemic, which is in itself a huge challenge. The first part of the article presents, in general terms, the role of civil society in crisis situations and the difficulties that the third sector has to face during the pandemic. The author will focus on pointing out the difficulties that arise from the specificity of the functioning of NGOs, which makes them particularly vulnerable in such an exceptional situation as a pandemic. These problems will be shown using data related to organizations working in the third sector in Brazil. The author analyzed various reports published by Brazilian NGOs, describing their functioning at the time of the pandemic in terms of the challenges they face. The following part will present Jair Bolsonaro's approach to organizations representing the third sector and the reasons for mutual accusations from both sides, i.e., the president, and the representatives of the third sector.

The third sector in times of pandemic

Civil society is an embodiment of solidarity and self-organization of citizens, who mobilize to act for the collective good, knowing that state structures and institutions are not able to ensure the safety of people in all aspects of their lives. The sanitary crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has vividly demonstrated the failure of the state to ensure human security in countries that, even before the pandemic, failed to meet their obligations, such as access to basic health care or even rudimentary sanitary facilities².

² A significant problem in the fight against the pandemic, especially in the beginning, was the unequal access to vaccines, which was not due to poor organization or inefficiency of governments, but to the fact that the demand for vaccines after their development was much greater than the production capacity. The situation evolved with the rise of anti-vaccine movements, making the problem not so much the availability of vaccines but the ability to reach citizens with an information campaign to convince them to vaccinate. The financial constraints of countries that cannot afford to purchase vaccines are to some extent mitigated by international aid pro-

Pandemic has also hindered those NGOs that fight for citizens' rights and watch over politicians not to break the rules of a democratic state of law. Representatives of the third sector point out that organizations whose role is to look at the government's hands have found themselves in a very difficult position. Now their role is probably more important than ever before because the agents of the state willingly expand their powers and allow themselves to make decisions in an arbitrary, non-transparent way, justifying them by the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. Citizens who live with a sense of insecurity acquiesce to such actions, and politicians are more than happy to grant themselves extraordinary powers (Wygnański, 2020).

Although in each country the impact of the pandemic on NGOs depends on several country-specific factors, it is possible to list some common hurdles for NGOs that stem from the very nature of how the third sector works, such as the reliance of NGOs on volunteer labor. When analyzing the impact of the pandemic on NGOs, the following three main areas can be identified: operations, finances, and people. Clearly, the restrictive lockdowns put in place to combat the spread of the virus limited almost all NGO activities in the initial phase of the pandemic. NGOs working in the fields of culture, art, and tourism suffered the most from the restrictions. Social welfare NGOs, on the other hand, experienced a large increase in demand for their services. It is worth mentioning that after the initial stagnation, the impulse to return to activity or develop it in new directions resulted from the introduction of online activities. It happened especially in the sector dealing with educational services. Of course, online activities also have their limitations, e.g., lack of digital competence or access to adequate equipment (both on the part of the recipients and the organizations). The second area affected by the pandemic is finance. The pandemic has had a devastating effect on the economies. Many NGOs have lost their sources of funding, and assistance in the form of government subsidies offered by the government is not available to all. At the same time, the recipients have often had to give up their activities due to job losses, for example. Donations from people who were more willing to support NGO initiatives before the pandemic crisis have definitely decreased. The third major factor affected by COVID-19 is human resources. Some organizations have to give up hiring people due to the suspension of activities and financial difficulties. Also, some volunteers have given up supporting the third sector for fear of their health. On the other hand, new people have entered the field, feeling obliged to help those particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the diseases caused by the virus. One must not forget the impact of the pandemic

grams such as COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access). However, aid to poor countries is still not sufficient. After the death toll of COVID-19 reached over two million lives, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the UN, stated in his speech: "In the memory of those two million souls the world must act with far greater solidarity [...] COVID-19 cannot be beaten one country at a time [...] Our world can only get ahead of this virus one way – together. Global solidarity will save lives, protect people, and help defeat this vicious virus" (Guterres, 2021).

on the mental state of citizens, impacting both those who provide services in the third sector and those who use them. Long-term isolation, lack of direct interpersonal contacts, a sense of threat and hopelessness lead to an increase in problems such as depression, difficulties in interpersonal relations, and violence in families. All the above-mentioned problems affect the third sector – to a varying extent, depending on local conditions – in all countries. According to a survey conducted among 805 NGOs from 152 countries, 93.07% of them have been negatively impacted by the pandemic (CAF America, 2021). The organizations surveyed indicated the following main challenges they expected to face due to the pandemic (from top-down): 72.54% reduced contributions, 53.09% restricted travel, 40.74% increased costs, 39.82% beneficiary relations, 38.11% staffing disruptions, 26.02% communications, 25.89% operations, 20.50% grant compliance, 16.29% broken supply chain.

After presenting the general view of the third sector facing the pandemic, the next part of the article will outline the current situation of NGOs in Brazil. This country – with its natural resources, wealth, and political ambitions – ranks among the world’s middle powers, but it is still one of the most inequitable countries. This is one of the reasons why, when politicians fail to address the pressing issues afflicting all groups of the inhabitants, civil society enters the stage. On the one side, there are foundations with huge resources which can contribute significantly to the well-being of their beneficiaries³. On the other end of the scale, there are small entities, with hardly any material resources, or with single volunteers, who can offer only their time, energy, and enthusiasm in order to help solve some particular problems. Nonetheless, in the face of a pandemic, any kind of help turns out to be invaluable. Some large entities provide their invaluable input in the form of expertise and social intelligence to other organizations and the public sector, while small entities could offer their “on the ground” experience and agility in undertaking initiatives.

It is difficult to estimate with precision how many entities representing civil society there are in Brazil as different methodologies may be used in calculating their number depending on their legal personality and other factors, but according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, there are about 780,000 nonprofit organizations (IBGE, 2019). They provide enormous help to the Brazilian society in various fields: advocacy; giving visibility, promoting discussions, and making social problems public; researching and monitoring human rights abuses; promoting sustainable development; addressing issues such as poverty, equality, and climate change; humanitarian aid for those who suffer from being affected by conflicts, natural disasters, fam-

³ Brazilian Association of Fund Raisers runs a website “COVID-19 Donations Monitor”, where they gather and publish current information on who is donating, what is being donated, where to the donations are going, and to which causes. The current data are as follows: \$ 1,377,780,403 donated in response to COVID-19; 731,974 donors. These numbers show the scale of aid provided by representatives of civil society (ABCR, 2022).

ine, extreme poverty, and more. Obviously, in times of extreme disasters, such as a global pandemic, the main effort is directed at mitigating its impact on society and dealing with the most urgent needs. In the case of the pandemic, three areas required the most urgent intervention: health care in all its dimensions, the provision of a minimum livelihood for people who lost their earning capacity due to lockdowns and general economic crisis, and the problem of digital exclusion, which became very acute, especially in the field of education. According to the Projects Base prepared by the Group of Institutes, Foundations, and Enterprises GIFE, among initiatives for emergency actions related to tackling COVID-19: 48% covered the area of health and welfare, followed by social assistance and development/combating poverty and hunger (36%), support for institutional strengthening of public management (29%), and 22% concerned education (GIFE, 2020).

NGOs in Brazil, similarly to what happened in other countries, experienced the greatest constraints and difficulties in the initial phase of the pandemic when state authorities imposed the most severe restrictions on movement and interpersonal contact, and the public was not prepared to move its activities online to the extent that they do it today. A survey conducted by Agência do Bem, which coordinates the activities of 800 NGOs in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, found that among the organizations that participated in the survey in early April 2020, only 1% maintained their normal activities after the beginning of the pandemic, while 72% stopped them completely. In relation to the community context in which they work, 89% observed a serious deterioration in the subsistence conditions of the families they serve, indicating a need for immediate help. What is more, they suffered a huge loss of financial and other support for their activities. Only 15,6% responded that their resources stayed on the same level as before (Agência do Bem, 2020). Another survey, conducted on 18–31 May 2020 among 1760 entities representing civil society, indicated that the main negative impacts of the pandemic may be listed as follows: the decrease in fundraising (73%), the distance and difficulty of communication with the public served (55%), the decrease of active volunteers (44%), and the stress and overload of the teams (40%) (Mobiliza, 2020, p. 5).

While describing the activities of the third sector in the face of the pandemic, one should not forget that alongside the problems and challenges faced by NGOs, the pandemic also revealed the strengths of civil society, one that did not fail during the ordeal. The sense of widespread threat to life by the coronavirus has triggered a huge wave of sympathy, mobilization, and generosity on the part of those organizations or individuals who have the means to help others whose life situation has dramatically deteriorated during the pandemic. Brazilian Fundraisers Association has prepared a report concerning the reaction of Brazilian charity foundations to the problems related to COVID-19. It demonstrates a whole range of activities and entities which contributed to diminishing the impact of the pandemic. Moreover, apart from gathering the

quantitative data, the report indicates significant qualitative changes in the functioning of the third sector, induced by the current situation. The three most relevant ones are:

- 1. Foundations supported the activities of the field with resources and provided their expertise to company CSR projects;*
- 2. The innovative use of digital crowdfunding platforms has increasingly been used to raise money, while the use of public data to support resource allocation decisions has become usual practice; and*
- 3. Changes to patterns of collaboration between foundations and other nonprofit organizations are underway, allowing for more horizontal and trusting relationships and improving the agility and effectiveness of social projects. (Lucca-Silveira et al., 2021, p.71)*

The report claims that considering the input of some Brazilian foundations, they “were elevated to quasi-public institutional status in 2020, regarded as social entrepreneurs able to transform and leverage social change by using planning and executing capacity to promote social goods” (Lucca-Silveira et al., 2021, p.74). Many of the large foundations shared not only their resources but also organizational, managerial, and technical skills (new digital technologies, such as, for example, online platforms for fundraising and crowdfunding). It is worth mentioning that less bureaucracy was observed and at the same time more mutual trust and collaboration among different entities or donors and recipients of funds could be noted. That led to faster, more efficient decision-making and the execution of projects (GIFE, 2021).

To a greater or lesser extent, all third sector organizations have had to adapt their activities to new circumstances and show flexibility, innovation, and persistence to continue their activities. For example, organizations working in the field of education. They needed to set up online learning but even if they had the infrastructure, often the target audience, mostly school children, did not have the technical facilities to participate in online classes. For example, Instituto Ramacrisna, recognized as one of the best NGOs in 2021, in order to continue its mission found a solution for those needing the online access by buying 600 phone chips for the students. This allowed them to use the internet even though they did not have computers at home. Another problem was the formal obstacles. The managers of Fundamig (Federação Mineira de Fundações e Associações de Direito Privado) indicate that many of the NGOs had to adapt their bylaws to be able to hold virtual assemblies and submit the documentation to registry offices, which also suspended their activities during that period (Vasques, 2021).

The above picture of the Brazilian third sector at the time of the pandemic is just an outline of the situation that NGOs have had to face during this extremely difficult situation. The aim is to point out different ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their functioning. The next part of the article touches

upon another problematic issue for the third sector. It is rooted in president Jair Bolsonaro's attitude toward organizations representing civil society.

Jair Bolsonaro vs civil society

During the electoral campaign and after he assumed the presidency, Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly expressed his critical attitude towards NGOs. He often attributed bad intentions to them and even accused them of crimes. He made attempts to limit their activity, for example by introducing monitoring over their activities or obstructing the adoption of measures aimed at alleviating financial problems faced by NGOs.

His hostile attitude towards organizations representing the third sector became particularly evident during the environmental threat posed by the fires in the Amazon. The third sector all over the world is particularly sensitive to ecological issues because threats to the climate are global, and governments and powerful corporations are more interested in economic development than in protecting nature. For this reason, the low effectiveness of the fight against Amazonian rainforest fires sparked criticism of the Brazilian government around the world. During a live speech, the president stated that he sought to get rid of the "cancer" that he believed NGOs to be. He also rejected the NGOs' proposed expansion of indigenous peoples' territories to 20% of the Amazon. He was outraged that their demands would lead to the collapse of the agricultural industry (ISTOÉ, 2020). In addition, at the UN Summit in September 2020, Bolsonaro claimed that certain NGOs were committing crimes against the environment both in Brazil and globally. He did not clarify which organizations he meant or provide any evidence for his words. He also suggested early on that NGOs may have been behind starting fires in the Amazon to draw attention to the issues they are fighting for (Mazui & Gomez, 2020).

In order to restrict the activities of NGOs, besides public criticism, the president has made efforts to gain some control over organizations representing the third sector, which by their very nature are supposed to operate independently of the government. Upon taking power, Bolsonaro imposed a new responsibility on the Government Secretariat. According to the fifth article of Provisional Measure 870, one of its new attributions was to "supervise, coordinate, monitor and follow up the activities and actions of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in the national territory". However, Bolsonaro was unsuccessful in getting the ordinance passed, as Congress amended it by granting the Government Secretariat the power only "to coordinate the Federal Government's interaction with international organizations and civil society organizations operating in the national territory, monitor the actions and results of the Federal Government's partnership policy with these organizations and promote good practices for the enforcement of applicable legislation" (Medida Provisória nº 870).

This was not the only victory of the NGOs over the president. Representatives of the civil society had already warned repeatedly during Bolsonaro's election campaign that his government would lead to restrictions on civil rights and freedoms. Nonetheless, his actions have not discouraged NGOs from fighting for the causes they are committed to. After 1,000 days of Bolsonaro's rule, one of Brazil's ONGs has compiled a list of 10 presidential electoral promises that civil society activism has managed to block. The list includes the following: qualified immunity for police officers in the "anti-crime" package; the above-mentioned Provisional Measure 870/2019 aimed at supervision of activities of NGOs; a presidential decree to dismiss 11 experts from National Mechanism to Combat and Prevent Torture; Ministerial Decree 666/19 that gave the Federal Police the power to take arbitrary decisions on the summary deportation of migrants; temporary suspension of a decree no. 9,785/2019, one of many aimed at changing the Disarmament Act; denouncing the inaction and the failures of the federal government and demanding the preparation of an emergency plan to control the pandemic on indigenous lands; Provisional Measure 928 interfering with the Freedom of Information Law; Repeal of the National Security Law; Provisional Measure (No. 1068/21) facilitating the spread of false and hateful content on the internet (Conectas, 2021).

In the face of the pandemic the divergence of goals and views between the president and NGOs has not decreased but has increased. Bolsonaro has repeatedly come under criticism for his approach to the coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken by the government to mitigate the crisis caused by its spread. His policies have been criticized not only by Brazilian NGOs but also by international organizations such as Human Rights Watch. Here are the allegations against Bolsonaro (only those related to the pandemic have been selected):

President Jair Bolsonaro tried to sabotage public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19, but the Supreme Court, Congress, and governors upheld policies to protect Brazilians from the disease. [...]

President Bolsonaro downplayed Covid-19, which he called "little flu;" refused to take measures to protect himself and the people around him; disseminated misleading information; and tried to block states from imposing social distancing rules. His administration attempted to withhold Covid-19 data from the public. He fired his health minister for defending World Health Organization recommendations, and the replacement health minister quit in opposition to the president's advocacy of an unproven drug to treat Covid-19. [...]

Poor access to health care and the prevalence of respiratory or other chronic diseases made Indigenous people particularly vulnerable to complications from Covid-19. [...]

In June, Congress passed a bill forcing the government to provide emergency healthcare and other assistance to help Indigenous people cope with the

pandemic. President Bolsonaro partially vetoed it, but Congress overturned the veto. [...]

In July, President Bolsonaro vetoed legislation requiring the use of masks in prisons and juvenile detention facilities, but the Supreme Court found the veto had violated procedural rules and ordered that the legislation be implemented [...]. (HRW, 2021)

One of the tasks of NGOs and civil society, in general, is to critically evaluate the policies implemented by the authorities. In fact, the president, who has been downplaying the health risks caused by a coronavirus in many public speeches, sometimes, under pressure from the public, would back down from some of his statements or mitigate his stance. He did so, for example, during a speech on national television on March 31, 2020, when there were protests across the country organized spontaneously by the citizens, the so-called *panelaços*. Accused of being more concerned about the economy than the health of his people, he tried to soften some previous statements by appealing for unity in the face of the threat. He said “We are facing the greatest challenge of our generation. My concern has always been to save lives, both those we will lose to the pandemic and those that will be lost to unemployment, violence, and hunger” (Schreiber, 2020).

Exerting pressure on politicians is one of the tools third sector organizations can use, because sometimes a visible loss of support from the public, especially before an election, is the only way to convince a politician in power to change his mind. Bolsonaro will most likely seek re-election in October 2022. According to surveys, 53–55% of Brazilians disapprove of the administration, 24% consider it regular, and 22% think it is “good or great”. In the polls, Bolsonaro is in second place, but the distance to the other candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, is enough for Lula to have a chance to be elected president in the first round (Valor Económico, 2021).

Another tool of direct pressure on politicians is the threat of impeachment. In the case of President Bolsonaro there were more than one hundred impeachment petitions presented to the Chamber, none of them effective, so far. One of them, so-called “super petition” was signed – apart from representatives of different opposition parties – by various third sector entities, for e. g., Central of Popular Movements (Central de Movimentos Populares CMP), the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra MST), the Homeless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto MSTs), and the National Students Union (União Nacional dos Estudantes UNE), the Black Coalition for Rights (Coalizão Negra por Direitos) and the World March of Women (Marcha Mundial de Mulheres), Brazilian Association of Jurists for Democracy (Associação Brasileira de Juristas pela Democracia ABJD), the Brazilian Press Association (Associação Brasileira de Imprensa ABI), the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil APIB), the National Council of

Christian Churches of Brazil (Conselho Nacional de Igrejas Cristãs do Brasil Conic), among others. The petition signatories accused Bolsonaro of multiple crimes, but here are those related to COVID-19:

In the petition, the grounds presented in 122 (one hundred and twenty-two) previous complaints are renewed, and elements are added regarding the disastrous conduct of the federal government in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, causing more than 500,000 deaths so far, the scandal of prevarication in the face of accusations of fraudulent purchase of the Covaxin vaccine, and the most recent official acts and public statements generating institutional instability.

a) Crimes against the existence of the Union (art. 5, items 3, 7, and 11 of Law no. 1.079/1950), arising from the repeated and senseless manifestations of hostility publicly promoted by the President of the Republic towards a foreign country, aggravated by the delicate context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in which international collaboration is imposed as an essential requirement for obtaining scientific aid, acquisition of supplies, and access to mass vaccination.

d) Crimes against internal security (art. 8, items 7 and 8 of Law no. 1.079, of April 10, 1950), in face of the negligent and frivolous omission of the head of state, when he failed to comply with his legal obligation to take steps determined by federal laws [...] dangerous disregard of the seriousness of the health emergency decreed by the federal government itself, to perpetrate intentional sabotage of the social precautions and governmental measures that are indispensable to contain the devastating effects of a health catastrophe [...]

e) Crimes against probity in administration (art. 9, items 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, of Law no. 1.079, of April 10, 1950), resulting from his attitude towards illegal, unwise, and senseless acts carried out by numerous subordinates [...] This is exemplified by his behavior when faced with the recent accusation of fraudulent purchase of the Covaxin vaccine, in which the President failed to take the necessary steps to promote the investigations [...]

f) Crimes against the safekeeping and legal use of public money (art. 11, section 5, of Law 1079 of April 10, 1950). [...] The President dedicated public resources to medicines with no proven efficacy, refraining from executing a minimally effective communication plan that would encourage the observance of measures to contain and prevent the contagion of the disease, such as the use of face masks and respect for social distancing, in addition to clarifying the inconvenience of crowds. (Poder 360, 2021)

Even if the initiators of the impeachment petition were aware that they did not have the majority in parliament to carry out the procedure, getting the message through by publicizing the allegations, was important.

The President has also made policy decisions that did not make life easier for NGOs. One such unfriendly gesture was vetoing Bill 4113/20 which estab-

lished norms for partnerships between the public entities and the third sector for the duration of the state of public calamity due to the pandemic. Segundo Florence, the deputy who presented the bill, indicated that, up to that point, the third sector had not yet been contemplated in any specific legislation to face the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposal was as follows: partial or total suspension of the activities of the third sector because of the pandemic shall not affect the validity of the transfers while the state of calamity lasts. Neither shall the non-fulfillment of goals and results initially foreseen. The bill also guaranteed the minimum transfer of 70% of the partnership resources, with a review of the work plan, goals, and results. The project also suspends the need to return public funds for contracts and agreements while public administration measures related to the pandemic last. After the end of the measures, the refund can be divided into up to 96 monthly installments without interest. To be able to make the installment payment, the institution must prove losses and difficulties related to the pandemic. The president justified his full veto by saying that “the proposal creates mandatory expenses without presenting the estimated budgetary and financial impacts, in disregard of the limit of public spending and the laws of fiscal responsibility (LRF) and budget guidelines” (Agência Câmara de Notícias, 2020). The presidential veto was overruled, and the law entered into force. As a gesture of appreciation for the role and plight of NGOs, politicians rejected the veto on the grounds that it was in the public interest.

Conclusions

The article was an attempt to describe in general terms the situation of the third sector in Brazil in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the important aspects of this context is expressed in the hypothesis that the attitude of the president of the state has a great impact on the activities of NGOs. This hypothesis is substantiated by presenting how Jair Bolsonaro’s attitude towards civil society hinders the activities in the area of the third sector and contributes to the deepening of the humanitarian crisis related to the outbreak and continued impact of the pandemic.

The multifaceted crises caused by COVID-19 can be labeled a once-in-a-generation experience, as never before has such an event occurred on a global scale. More than two years after the outbreak of the pandemic, despite becoming accustomed to its presence, we are still unsure when it will be possible to declare its termination and take stock of the damage caused by it. In fact, it seems almost impossible to be able to do so, because of the scale and the multifaceted effects of the pandemic. Additionally, the mutations of the coronavirus that appear over time raise fears that we will have to get used to the recurrence of successive waves of pandemics, perhaps not as severe as the first one, but still causing damage. The only useful effect of a pandemic is to learn

its lessons for the future and to be better prepared for the coming disasters that scientists, climatologists, and economists predict. Societies in which citizens have always had to rely largely on their own efforts to keep themselves and their families safe because they cannot depend on much help from a corrupt or inept political class, have developed a certain resilience in crisis situations. An example of this is the ability to mobilize civil society in Brazil. There is even a certain optimism among the representatives of the civil society, based on their experiences from the struggle with the pandemic, about the future expectation – 42% of them expect that the donation culture in Brazil will grow – with a focus on social assistance and health – and 27% believe it will increase in general (Mobiliza, 2020, p. 6). However, the larger the scale of the crisis, the more areas of life it covers, and the more difficult the situation of the lowest-positioned groups in stratified societies is. In such circumstances, it is very important not to give up on solidarity and not to adopt the attitude that only the strongest shall survive. It is the time to recognize the importance and invaluable input of the civil society and horizontal community cooperation of the grassroots social organizations.

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