

Emergency in the department of Amazonas, Colombia, due to the threat by the COVID-19 pandemic to Indigenous peoples

Leticia, 10th May 2020

More than a month ago, the traditional healer William Yukuna, *maloquero*¹ of the urban indigenous council of Leticia, CAPIUL, moved ahead to treat the spirit of the Coronavirus disease² with a ritual for “curing the world.” At the end of it, he warned about the consequences this disease would bring to indigenous peoples of the department of Amazonas. This happened a week before the United Nations declared the severe threat that the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes for the health of indigenous peoples. Further, the UN requested the Member States and the international community to urgently include the specific needs and priorities of indigenous peoples in the strategies to address the global outbreak³.

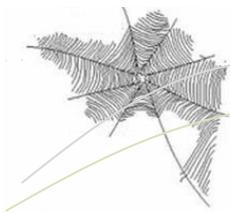
During the ritual, the Elder Yukuna pointed at the place from where the disease will enter Leticia, city located in the Amazonian border of Colombia with Brazil and Peru. As he indicated, on April 8th 2020, the Brazilian city of Tabatinga reported the first case of COVID-19, without receiving proper attention by their head of state, Jair Bolsonaro, who insists in undervaluing the pandemic. Nine days later, the pandemic reached Leticia, the Colombian capital of Amazonas. From that moment, the already existing hospital crisis in the area aggravates. Up to May 10th, there were 311 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Tabatinga and 510 in Leticia, a total of more than 1340 confirmed cases in the tri-border area, and more than 840 probable cases of COVID-19 in Leticia.

The projections of the National Statistics Department (DANE) for the current year, based in the national census of 2018, estimates the population of the department of Amazonas as 79,020 inhabitants. Close to 57.7% of the population self-identifies as part of one of the 26 Indigenous groups that live on this territory. These peoples are present in both the urban areas of the 2 municipalities (Leticia and Puerto Nariño), and in the scattered settlements in indigenous lands that belong to one of the 8 non-municipal areas of the department. The DANE estimates that the municipality of Leticia has 49,737 inhabitants, and that 29.2% of them live in rural settlements, mostly indigenous. The indigenous municipality of Puerto Nariño has 10,239 inhabitants, and 37% of them live in the urban area. According to the last report of the Secretary of Health of the department of Amazonas, released on May 10th, the capital city concentrated 96.7% of the confirmed COVID-19 cases, 108 of them being Indigenous. The remaining cases are 15 members

¹ *Maloquero* is the person in charge of the *maloca*, the traditional communal house, also the “House of Knowledge”, where dances are rituals are performed.

² In Indigenous cosmogonies, diseases have a spirit. This spirit needs to be calmed down, appeased, cooled down, so it does not continue to harm peoples’ health. (Explanation given by the Elder Yukuna)

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>



of 4 different Indigenous groups. In sum, the report shows that, to that date, the lives of 123 Indigenous peoples of the department are threatened by the outbreak. Additionally, we may not lose sight of the cases that have yet to be confirmed or identified.

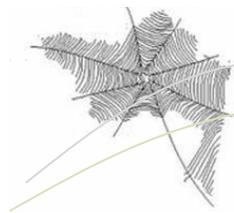
As of May 8th, the official reports account for more than 1193 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the tri-border area, including: 430 confirmed cases, 1021 probable cases, 21 deaths, and 23 deaths under study, all in Leticia. Of those 21 deceased, 4 are reported to be Indigenous by the local government authorities, although the monitoring by Tejama and the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) count a total of 12. These discrepancies in numbers reflect the ongoing problem of not including Indigenous peoples in urban context in many of the official census and current COVID-19 reports.

The last two reports about COVID-19 released by the Secretary of Health of Amazonas have made an attempt to differentiate when the confirmed cases are linked to Indigenous peoples. However, it is not clear yet to which ethnic groups these peoples are part of, how many have deceased, how many are possible cases and to which neighborhood or organization the affected urban Indigenous belong to. Only in the city of Leticia there are more than 8,000 Indigenous peoples. As a consequence of the lack of statistic information about the infection spread among the urban Indigenous, wrong decisions may be executed, in detriment of the effectivity of the implementation of the protocol that has been designed to protect the health of the Indigenous peoples of the department, and limiting the ability of the Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs) and Indigenous councils to manage key information to respond to the emergency.

So far, apparently, the pandemic has not reached other indigenous territories of the Colombian Amazonas. However, there is a latent risk for infection along the borders of Brazil and Peru, in theory closed since March 17th. The family ties and the social and economic relationships woven between the border settlements persist despite attempts of a quarantine, that has been in place for more than a month in Colombia. Sadly, the local governments of Leticia and Tabatinga have been unable to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the border areas due to a lack of transborder policies and coordinated prevention measures. As a result, the fast proliferation of sick people has saturated the attention capacity of the health centers in the area.

Ironically, the COVID-19 has allowed to make visible the social, economic, political and cultural gaps that for many years the Colombian State has left unneatened, and which affect directly to the daily lives of the indigenous population. Assuming homogeneity in these conditions has caused big impacts in the community lives of the Indigenous. For those who have been in Indigenous communities, in the *malocas* and the *mambaderos*⁴, even if only in Leticia, know that many of the activities indigenous peoples carry on take place in small spaces like the Houses of Knowledge (*malocas*) the multifamily households, *mambaderos* and communal headquarters. In

⁴ *Mambadero* is the place where *mambe* (coca powder) is produce and consumed, and conversations take place.



these places, food, *mambe*, *ambil*, *caguana*⁵, and others, are shared from hand to hand. All these activities encompass the cultural universe of Indigenous peoples.

Because of all these, the contention measures against the virus are short-sighted. It is unrealistic to expect Indigenous peoples to suddenly change their cultural and social habits. Even less to expect Indigenous family members to not go out to the streets seeking for their families' daily sustenance. Despite the quarantine intention, this situation has continued during the pandemic, largely, due to the lack of an effective attention and firm commitment to improve the living conditions of the low income, marginalized and most vulnerable peoples.

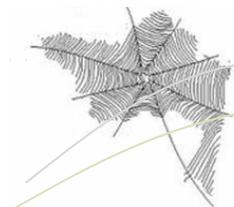
With the first case of COVID-19 in Leticia, the crisis that for years has been afflicting the city's Hospital "San Rafael" has become evident. This is the only public health center in the department. Unfortunately, this situation has caused that, in 15 days, the outbreak took the lives of 7 people, and possible 13 others. Some of them were not able to even be assisted by medical personnel, or, under such dire conditions been transferred to Bogotá. These human losses, the quick spread of the virus, the collapse of the health systems in the tri-border, and the limitations that the Amazonian population face to be properly assisted during the quarantine, all has triggered this serious emergency in the Amazonas.

In the past days, the call *SOS Amazonas* has contributed to the intervention of the national government in the management of the hospital in Leticia, as there were not even minimum conditions to assist sick patients with COVID-19 or any other disease. Regardless, the municipality of Puerto Nariño and the non-municipal areas, present worse conditions to face COVID-19 than Leticia. These areas have severe difficulties for medical attention as a result of the long distances between indigenous communities and the urban centers. Therefore, if urgent and coordinated measures that are appropriate for the reality of the region are not taken soon, the indigenous communities along the Amazon borders and in their territories will face tremendous hardships.

Call to Action

In the face of the emergency that we are living in Leticia, the members of the organization Tejiendo Amazonas - Tejama, we make an alert call for the imminent threat that COVID-19 represents for the health of the Indigenous population that lives in the urban areas and the Indigenous territories of the Amazon. As children, grandchildren and inhabitants of this territory, we join to the call of Elder William Yukuna and other traditional authorities of the department of Amazonas. It is mandatory to take urgent and differential measures that guarantee the care and protection of Indigenous peoples' lives, and by extension, of their territories.

⁵ *Mambe* and *ambil* are ritual substances made of coca and tabaco, respectively, and *caguana* is an Indigenous drink made of manioc starch and fruit juice or water.



By these means, we communicate the call of Indigenous voices to the National and Local Government, so that they immediately respond to the crisis that could cause, again, the ethnocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon. We request that the Colombian and border governmental agencies take action with commitment and in coordination with the Indigenous Organizations and Councils, and other social, private and public, organizations. Likewise, we make a call to the international community and international organizations so that they help to combat the dark scenario caused by the impacts of COVID-19 in the region, especially on Indigenous peoples, with actions of technical, scientific, and financial cooperation.

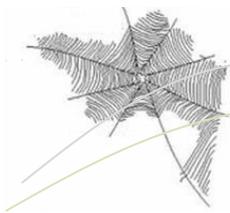
It is undeniable that to defeat and overcome this situation, greater efforts and measures of mitigation with intercultural focus are required, in order to respond to the reality of this region of Colombia. In that sense, we highlight as indispensable that the governmental institutions manage communication strategies and assistance with a differential approach towards Indigenous population, taking care of their needs and priorities that have already been expressed by the Indigenous organizations. In addition, we request that the policies and protocols developed by Indigenous authorities are immediately socialized and implemented, and that the actions carried out by the local communities are strengthened in order to counter the impacts of this crisis on the Amazonian population.

This is an emergency call, but also one of hope. Once we join the efforts of the citizens, and the ones of the civil, indigenous, local, national and international organizations to win this unexpected battle that threatens the lives of the Amazonian population, our family. We hope that our voice will be heard through different means and in different spaces, with the aim of having an impact towards immediate action that responds to the needs of Indigenous communities. We trust that, together, we can overcome this crisis and mitigate its consequences.



Photo: Angela López-Urrego

Asociación Tejiendo Amazonas - TEJAMA



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