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## I warned you and you didn't listen to me: poverty and inequality during the pandemic in Uruguay

### Yo te avisé y vos no me escuchaste: pobreza y desigualdad en tiempos de pandemia, en Uruguay

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### Abstract

In Uruguay, the arrival of COVID-19 coincided with the beginning of a new right-wing government replacing the Frente Amplio. This article analyses the social impacts -particularly the increase in poverty and inequality- that have occurred in the country since the beginning of the pandemic. It concludes that the worsening of the population's living conditions is related to the global crisis situation, but also to the government's responses to the expressions of this crisis in the national context. The government did not listen, despite having been warned: national and international studies, immediately after the beginning of the spread of COVID-19, made clear recommendations on the importance of reducing the

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inequality; social  
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impact of the pandemic on the populations most affected by poverty, alerting the need to reorient public policies in this direction. But the government, consistent with its neoliberal approach, has tended to shift the responsibility for the health and social consequences of the pandemic onto individuals, reducing state intervention. The responses implemented - mostly monetary aid - are limited in terms of amount and duration, and have been accompanied by a discourse of suspicion towards the recipient populations. In this sense, the government has focused on economic growth -for which the reduction of state intervention is key- and on the generation of employment, without discussing the conditions of existence of the working poor or the characteristics of the jobs that would allow them to live effectively out of poverty. Problematizing these aspects of social policy in times of health crisis is relevant for Social Work, given its professional insertion, as the demands of the population grow and become more acute at the same time as the resources to respond to them weaken.

## Resumen

En Uruguay, la llegada del COVID-19 coincide con el inicio de un nuevo gobierno de derecha que sustituye al Frente Amplio. El artículo analiza los impactos sociales -particularmente el aumento de la pobreza y la desigualdad-, que se han producido en el país desde el comienzo de la pandemia. Se concluye que el agravamiento de las condiciones de vida de la población tiene relación con la situación de crisis mundial, pero también con las respuestas del gobierno frente a las expresiones de dicha crisis en el contexto nacional. El gobierno no escuchó, pese a haber sido avisado: estudios nacionales e internacionales, de manera inmediata al comienzo de la propagación del COVID-19, realizaron claras recomendaciones sobre la importancia de reducir el impacto de la pandemia en las poblaciones más afectadas por la pobreza, alertando la necesidad de reorientar las políticas públicas en este sentido. Pero el gobierno, consecuente con su impronta neoliberal, ha tendido a trasladar a las personas la responsabilidad por las consecuencias sanitarias y sociales de la pandemia, reduciendo la intervención estatal. Las respuestas implementadas -ayudas monetarias en su mayoría- son acotadas en términos de monto y tiempo de duración, y han estado acompañadas de un discurso de sospecha hacia las poblaciones receptoras. La apuesta del gobierno, en ese sentido, ha estado centrada en el crecimiento económico -para lo cual la reducción de la intervención estatal es clave- y en la generación de empleo, sin discutir las condiciones de existencia de personas

**Palabras Clave:**  
COVID; pobreza;  
desigualdad;  
protección social;  
Uruguay



trabajadoras pobres ni las características de los empleos que les permitirían vivir efectivamente fuera de la pobreza. Problematizar estos aspectos de la política social en tiempos de crisis sanitaria es relevante para el Trabajo Social, dada su inserción profesional, en tanto crecen y se agudizan las demandas de la población al mismo tiempo que se debilitan los recursos para responder a las mismas.

## Introduction

On March 13, the first cases of COVID-19 were announced in Uruguay. This was done by President Lacalle Pou, candidate of the National Party, who had assumed the presidency on the 1st of that month. His election was made possible by the agreement made with four other right-wing parties, putting an end to 15 years of leftist and/or progressive governments under the Frente Amplio.

This paper aims to analyse the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Uruguay, one year after the announcement of the first case of infection, focusing on the significant growth of poverty, indigence and inequality in the country. This is considered relevant in itself given the current crisis, but also as an indication of the way in which the government conceives access to social protection. It is concluded that this increase has to do with the world situation, but also with the government's responses, which -despite the announcements- have been very weak, and fundamentally relate to its strongly liberal orientations. This is even more serious as these impacts were highlighted by national and international research.

This discussion is considered very relevant for Social Work given the close link between the profession and social policies. These policies are, at the same time, a space for the provision of goods and services, but also for professional insertion. This ever-present reality becomes particularly relevant in situations of crisis and change in government orientation.

In order to construct this article, secondary sources were analysed, which made it possible, on the one hand, to account for the information available to the government at the onset of the pandemic, and on the other hand, to identify the measures implemented and the governmental discourses built around them. In the first case, it includes national and international research on the probable effects of the pandemic. In the second, it analyses existing information on the website of the Ministry of Social



Development, press conferences held by government authorities and press releases, in order to reconstruct the measures that appear scattered and reiterated. The Budget Law is included, since it expresses the general political orientations of the government.

The first part of the article conceptualizes social protection and its relevance. Then, it is analysed in Latin America and particularly in Uruguay. This is followed by the main outlines of the projections and policy recommendations made during 2020. The fourth part focuses on the social situation in the country, one year after the beginning of the pandemic and the government measures adopted. The discussion of these measures, identifying issues that transcend the Uruguayan reality, is carried out in the following section. The document closes with a conclusion.

### **What is meant by social protection?**

Danani and Hintze (2011) understand social protection as a central part of the conditions for the reproduction of the labour force, which implies the life of the entire population in capitalist societies and which, from the point of view of individuals, compromises the needs for the reproduction of life.

Thus understood, social protection systems serve contradictory interests, are built in processes of disputes and correlations of forces (Bueno and Preuss, 2020). They depend on theoretical, political and ideological conceptions, which translate into different ways to meet basic human needs. This means that they are not static, having moments of expansion and retraction, depending on conjunctural and structural elements.

Beyond expansion or retraction, the capacity for social protection must be questioned, which will imply criteria of greater or lesser socialization in the satisfaction of needs. This implies considering which needs, how much and to what extent they are satisfied and for which sectors they are provided by the system. Then, focusing on the quality of this satisfaction, its modalities and guarantees. These express the degrees and types of security of protection and, therefore, the reduction or not of the uncertainty to which people are exposed. Finally, it also includes the political-cultural contents that emerge from the processes of construction of legitimacy, policies, institutions and demands, cutting out the problems that require State intervention (Danani and Hintze, 2011).

The ways in which these disputes are settled will give rise to state institutions and policies that may tend to provide security to the lives of all people, or make it depend on

the private capacity for individual assurance. This occurs in the liberal orientation, where the citizenry sees itself as having the capacity to take advantage of market opportunities. In this market, those who work would have the possibility to choose. This justifies the restriction of public benefits and services with a universal orientation, limiting state intervention to vulnerable populations. This perception will also lead to valuing extreme effort or survival strategies as merits of individuals. To this can be added the solidarity of civil society, organized to assist these vulnerable sectors (Grassi, 2018a).

This centrality of the State and access (or not) to welfare does not imply that it is the only area to be considered. According to Martínez (2008) the capacity to manage risks depends on socioeconomic and gender stratification. The former refers to the different possibilities people have to generate income and possess different resources. It is strongly conditioned -although not totally determined- by labour markets. The second assumes that resource allocation practices are organized around the sexual division of labour. Thus, the incorporation of women into paid work, without sharing unpaid work, stands out.

In capitalist societies, mercantile exchange is the main practice of resource allocation and access to goods and services depends, fundamentally, on income. But this allocation also takes place through the State and through unpaid work (mainly female) in the family (Martínez, 2008). When the state expands its participation in welfare, the role of the family and the community is reduced. This contributes to the autonomy mainly of women, historically responsible for care (Bueno and Preuss, 2020).

## **Social protection and welfare in Latin America and specifically Uruguay**

It is of interest here to visualize the form that protection and welfare have taken in Latin America, focusing on the Uruguayan reality.

Sátyro et al. (2019) point out that Uruguay presents a relatively stable social welfare matrix overtime. Filgueira (2015), analyses what happened during the Import Substitution Model, where the State acquired unprecedented centrality in most of the countries of the region. This has very diverse expressions, distinguishing between stratified universalism, dual and exclusive regimes. Uruguay, together with Argentina and Chile, belongs to the first group. These authors point out that, in these countries, the social protection matrix -based on the formal labour market- was historically characterized by high levels of coverage of goods and services, including health and social security, but with highly stratified

quality and extension. They also had a public education system with the highest levels of expenditure and coverage in the region, being the first policy to achieve universal status.

From the 1980s onwards, new development strategies were put into practice, under the guidance of the Washington Consensus (Bueno and Preuss, 2020) and the weak welfare state was deeply questioned. The deregulation of the labour market, the reduction of labour costs and the partial remercantilisation of the coverage of the risks of active life are promoted, creating or extending private management (Midaglia and Antía, 2017). In addition, social security, health and education benefit the capabilities of individuals in the market and encourage individual insurance (Filgueira, 2015; Sátyro et al., 2019). The social protection agenda focused on poverty reduction. The State would only intervene when the family, the community and even the market failed. This intervention was to be punctual, emergent, selective and focused (Bueno and Preuss, 2020). One of the major expressions of this was the creation of Conditional Transfer Programs (CTP) with strong support from multilateral agencies.

Based on the reform processes, Martínez (2008) distinguishes three types of welfare regime: the productivist state, the protectionist state and the informal family-based regime. It is in the latter that the author places Uruguay together with Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama. The author argues that all Latin American regimes are, to some extent, informal, which implies that part of the population depends on family and community arrangements to assume practices that correspond to markets (particularly labour markets) or to the State. This is particularly acute in the third cluster, although the countries of clusters 1 and 2 also have large contingents of the population unprotected from the labour market and public policy, and families and social networks deploy strategies to fill these gaps. Likewise here, unpaid female work makes an important contribution to the production of well-being. This is expressed in the performance of each regime, indicating greater effectiveness in state regimes than in family regimes, with higher levels of poverty and worse social indicators (Martínez, 2008).

At the beginning of this century, several countries in the continent took over left-wing and/or progressive governments, with greater State responsibility as a central axis. They promote more redistributive and universalist reforms than in previous years and affect the agenda implemented (Sátyro et al., 2019). This greater responsibility, according to Quiroga and Juncos (2020), is observed in economic, social and international policy. This was favoured, starting in 2003, by the increase in prices and volumes of agricultural exports, extractive industries and metals.



Bueno and Preuss (2020), Midaglia and Antía (2017) and Sátyro et al. (2019), highlight the investment of the State in education and health; also in social assistance, incorporating excluded sectors. Together, these processes led to a decrease in poverty and extreme poverty. Although the tone is expansive, according to Filgueira (2015), the openness and liberal model will not be totally suppressed. The period also escapes that of the import substitution model and involves non-contributory components and the expansion of coverage and risks covered by the State, such as care and support in reproductive stages.

Martínez and Sánchez-Ancochea (2016) note that the transformations were positive in terms of coverage, but gaps persist in sufficiency and equity between contributory and non-contributory programs. This promotes a highly segmented social incorporation in the continent with great inequality in income distribution and with large socioeconomic gaps in the distribution of women's time between paid and unpaid work.

Cantu (2015) constructs a typology of welfare regimes for this period. He groups the countries into four, with Uruguay together with Argentina, Brazil and Costa Rica. These have less informality, even though one third of the economically active population is not formalized. They also have a structured participation of the State in social protection, although stratified by the fragmentation of social security and informality. Within this protection, social assistance makes it possible to contemplate those excluded from the previous model. Beyond this, the private sector is relatively important, given the private social security regimes. In short, the author characterizes this group as state-owned, stratified and liberal. This differentiates it from the second group, which is moving towards the construction of a liberal state. In the remaining groups, the State is weaker and, therefore, the scope of social policies is smaller and informality is greater. One group responds to this reality with emigration and remittances, and the other with family-based strategies.

It will be in this long-term scenario and with a change of government, in the short term, that COVID and its management will arrive, where the actions arising from the change of government are also important.

### **International and national projections and recommendations**

Poverty, indigence and inequality were realities in Uruguay before the pandemic. So were unemployment, informality and low salaries for formally employed people. Although they existed, they were exacerbated by COVID (National Institute of Statistics, INE, 2020; 2021; Salas and Vigorito, 2021).



This situation has not been reached because of a lack of adequate and timely information. In April 2020, analysing the situation of the continent, the Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLAC, warned that it was very likely that extreme poverty and poverty would grow in the short term. It assumed that the former would go from 11% in 2019 to 15.5% in 2020 and poverty would increase from 30.3% to 37.3%. Likewise, in May, it indicated that there would be a growth in inequality between 1% and 8%. Without considering the effect of the measures announced to mitigate the impact of COVID, it places Uruguay among the countries with a projected increase of between 4 and 4.9% (ECLAC, 2020a; 2020b).

In April and in relation to labour, it indicates that the number of jobs and their quality would be affected. In July, it proposes an upward revision of unemployment, implying an increase of 5.4% with respect to 2019 (8.1%). It adds that, in 2019, unemployment benefits only existed in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Uruguay. A year earlier, only 47.4% of employed people contributed to the pension system and more than 20% of them lived in poverty (ECLAC, 2020a; 2020b).

The organization understands that the crisis disproportionately affects poor and vulnerable people such as those who work informally, have health problems, and are elderly. It also affects young people who are unemployed, underemployed, unprotected and migrants. It also considers that women are in a particularly vulnerable situation, due to their more precarious labor insertion and the increase in unpaid domestic work (ECLAC, 2020a; 2020b).

With the onset of the pandemic, ECLAC (2020a; 2020b) indicated that the faster and more forceful the response, the lesser the negative effects will be and for the short term; it points out two relevant measures. To guarantee income, it proposes monetary transfers, with a minimum duration of three months, although six months or one year would provide better protection to the population. The transfers would be for each person and for an equivalent of one extreme poverty line or one poverty line. In addition, as the crisis affects access to food, it proposes the implementation of an anti-hunger voucher to complement the basic emergency income for the entire population living in extreme poverty, with a value equivalent to 70% of an extreme poverty line.

Similar studies developed in Uruguay raise warnings along the same lines. Bai et al. (2020) analyze unemployment insurance and observe that it does not protect and is not distributed in the same way according to income. Many working people with low wages, even if they have unemployment insurance, could fall below the poverty line, given the



drop in income involved and the composition of households. Likewise, beneficiaries tend to be located in the central part of the income distribution. This implies that those who live in more deprived situations will not have access to social protection through this device, or it will be a partial protection. This is a relevant aspect, since vulnerable groups are particularly affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

In May 2020, Brum and Da Rosa (2020) estimate the short-term effect of COVID and highlight that the number of households and individuals below the poverty line would increase rapidly. They also analyse the measures implemented by the government. At that date, they estimate that transfer policies cushion the increase in poverty by about 20%. In the scenario of poverty increasing to 12.3%, that percentage would fall to 11.6% with the policies. They add that many of the new households that fall into poverty do not receive transfers outside of unemployment insurance.

They understand that this increase can be neutralized with cash transfers that keep all affected households above the poverty line and that the amounts for this are within economic and logistical reach. They conclude by indicating that energetic and sustained action through public policies is key (Brum and Da Rosa, 2020).

Finally, in April, De los Santos and Fynn (2020) pointed out that informality is also a problem in the country, reaching 25% of working people at the beginning of the pandemic. Distance and social isolation are particularly relevant constraints for the informal sector, who need to work daily for subsistence and, in addition, have the largest number of work activities affected by confinement. They note that 69% of those who work informally would not be able to do so in the context of social distancing.

In addition, they also consider other factors. Among those who work informally and could work remotely, the rate of overcrowding is 13%, being 5% for those who work formally and can work remotely. In addition, one out of every five informal workers with the theoretical ability to telecommute live in households with at least one Unmet Basic Need related to housing. Among those who are formally employed and are able to telecommute, the figure is 6%. On the other hand, 42% of those who work informally and are able to do so remotely do not have an Internet connection at home, and 36% do not have a computer. These figures drop to 11% and 15% respectively for those who work formally. Finally, they analyse the burden of unpaid work, which is mainly borne by women. Thirty-five percent of those working informally and with the possibility of telecommuting live with at least one child under 12 years of age. In the case of informal women workers, the figure is 41% and 17% live with more than one child (De los Santos and Fynn, 2020).

## Poverty and inequality in Uruguay one year after the pandemic and responses to the pandemic

### *Consequences of the Pandemic in the Country*

In March 2021, the first official data on poverty was announced after the start of the pandemic in Uruguay. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2021), the total number of households below the indigence line was 0.3% in 2020 and 0.4% of people were in that same circumstance. On the other hand, 8.1% of total households and 11.6% of people are under the poverty line. In the Latin American context, these figures are small but imply a very significant increase for the country. They represent 100,000 more people living in poverty, the largest increase in the last decade and a half<sup>2</sup>.

The poverty gap is also growing and, therefore, poor households need more income than in the previous year to reach the poverty line. Finally, inequality is also increasing, with the Gini index rising from 0.383 in 2019 to 0.387 a year later (INE, 2021).

A central element in this increase is the labour market. In 2020, some 60,000 people lost their jobs and unemployment reached 10.3%, being mitigated by the withdrawal of labour activity. The contraction of real wages must also be added, which implies an average loss of purchasing power of 1.7% in 2020. This deepens the decline in average household income, which, having fallen during the previous two years, was 7.1% below the 2019 level<sup>3</sup>.

One of the visible expressions of this process has been the emergence and permanence of soup kitchens and snack bars. A study carried out last year by Rieiro et al. (2020), within the framework of the Universidad de la República, identified about 700 experiences. They add that it is possible that the experiences in small towns in the interior of the country may have been under-recorded, due to their poor communication with other soup kitchens and picnic centres. At that time, on average they operated three days a week, serving 180 portions of food per day for the former and 124 for the latter.

### *The liberal government's responses*

This increase in poverty, indigence and inequality must also be explained in terms of the government's responses. As mentioned above, these should be analysed from the point of view of their capacity to generate, or not, security and the processes of legitimacy to which they are associated.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ladiaria.com.uy/economia/articulo/2021/3/de-los-derechos-al-yoga-un-ano-en-el-mides/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ladiaria.com.uy/economia/articulo/2021/2/el-mercado-laboral-balance-de-2020-y-perspectivas-para-2021/>

One month after the beginning of the pandemic and with a call for the restriction of mobility, the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES) announced the doubling of the amount of the main monetary transfers: the Uruguay Social Card (TUS) and the Family Allowances (AFAM)<sup>4</sup>. Although relevant for families, these amounts are tremendously reduced. *La Diaria*, referenced in footnote 3, indicates that AFAMs represent about 8% of total income among lower income households and this figure drops to 4% in the case of the TUS.

This measure was in line with the recommendations presented, but it also distanced itself from them in an important way; on the one hand, because of the amount involved in the increases and because it was announced as duplicated and unique<sup>5</sup>. The payment was made in two months, not being, therefore, a duplication. This measure, and in this form, was repeated five more times, the last time in January of this year. In March, a duplication was announced, to be collected in April and May, and then extended until July. Thus, the increase in transfers was not announced for the recommended periods, thus nullifying the possibility of becoming a minimum support that would generate a certain degree of security. In a context of uncertainty and crisis, it is difficult to understand the reasons that led the government to this decision. The interpretation that emerges is that of competition between parties, which adds to the government's orientations. The 'announcement of the announcement' and 'announcement of the announced' are installed, which implies that the measures to be taken and those already taken are reiterated on more than one occasion through press conferences and/or communiqués, disseminated through the mass media. In this way, the government appears to be acting in a substantive and permanent manner, which is not observed when announcements are made.

Despite the institutionalization of transfers, their expansion was not the path chosen by the government. The central response has been the emergency food baskets, which was also supposed to go in the direction proposed by ECLAC, although it quickly distances itself. This is due to the amount (approximately US\$ 27 and without considering the number of members) and the time in which the measure remains, which also does not allow it to operate as a support that provides minimum future predictability. The baskets began in April and continued during 2020 and 2021. In May of this year, its doubling was announced for that month and for June, when its extension to July was announced again. *La Diaria*, indicated in footnote 3, questions that the targeting is individual and not per household, generating situations of inequity and inclusion errors. As an example, a young person, living in a high-income household,

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.presidencia.gub.uy/comunicacion/comunicacionnoticias/fondo-coronavirus-conferencia>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-desarrollo-social/comunicacion/noticias/gobierno-duplica-monto-tarjeta-uruguay-social-canastas-alimentos>

dedicated to his or her university education and without formal employment, meets the requirements to access the emergency basket. However, a person who is unemployed and receives a disability pension for his or her son or daughter does not meet the requirements. There is no public information that -beyond the number of baskets delivered- indicates the profiles of those who have received them, nor how many have actually been received by each recipient. The decision not to expand AFAM and TUS is very striking for Salas and Vigorito (2021). They understand that in the context of the crisis there should be a rapid increase in the number of AFAMs and TUS.

The situation is also no better in relation to soup kitchens and snack bars. The former Undersecretary of MIDES<sup>6</sup> indicated that they were not encouraged by that agency, as they went against health recommendations. He adds that people will want to continue doing them, although without advancing the reasons that would lead to this attitude. A few days later, the same authority indicated that six days of coronavirus were enough for people to resort to the soup kitchens and picnic areas, expressing the weaknesses of the Frente Amplio governments<sup>7</sup>.

The pandemic did not generate inequalities, but rather made them more visible and exacerbated them. However, this realization has not translated into a self-interpellation of the government. The government has not been able to understand the social reality generated by food problems and, therefore, does not problematize the responses it offers to address these problems. It continues to reaffirm that the solution to these problems lies in solidarity. This is indeed shown by the soup kitchens and picnic centres, but they do so mainly in the face of the social drama and the absence of the State, aspects that do not challenge the government either.

This has led to the fact that support for the soup kitchens and picnic centres has been practically nonexistent, a year after the beginning of the pandemic. This can be seen in Rieiro et al. (2021), who analyse the donors of the soup kitchens and picnic centres. The State is in fifth place and tends to focus on four departments of the country, where specific support strategies were developed.

In addition, from its discursive deployment, the government raises suspicions about those who actually attend. The former Undersecretary indicated the need to have records, given that by starting to control this information, the number of people attending would decrease. He considers the registry to be relevant, given that it is necessary to ensure that

<sup>6</sup> 14 meses después de haber asumido, las tres principales figuras del MIDES (Ministro Pablo Bartol Subsecretario, Armando Castaingdebat y Nicolas Martinelli como Director Nacional de Secretaría), fueron cambiadas.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/politica/castaingdebat-seis-dias-coronavirus-gente-haciendo-ollas-populares-pidiendo-comer.html>

people who do not receive assistance elsewhere are actually attending<sup>8</sup>. He had made a similar statement a month after the beginning of the pandemic, indicating that two days after the recharge of the TUS, the number of soup kitchens decreased by half in some areas<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, in August 2020, the former National Director of the Secretariat stated that the number of soup kitchens had surely decreased due to the measures taken by MIDES<sup>10</sup>.

These are statements that call attention. In November, the President ordered MIDES to carry out a registry of soup kitchens. If such a registry exists, it is not public knowledge. What is more, difficulties were raised by this organization to carry it out. It is not known on the basis of what information a government authority makes such statements such as in April of this year, let alone in the past.

Another aspect attracting attention generates deep concern, since it refers to the construction, or not, of the legitimacy of social protection. The aforementioned statements are not based on the legitimacy of the assistance and the right to guaranteed minimums, but on the suspicion of abuse of the people receiving assistance and attending the pots. It is strange what attracts their attention and/or what they affirm. Given that people resort to the pots, in the absence of resources to solve basic needs, it is very reasonable that, by collecting the transfers for a few days, people solve their food problem at home. It is worth asking why the same reflection is not made more days after the collection of the TUS or the food basket. The assessment of benefits is made without any questioning of their quality and their capacity to reduce insecurity. The insufficiency of the benefits is never mentioned as an explanation for the need to resort to more than one of them.

These guidelines are expressed in budgetary terms. ECLAC (2020b) examines the fiscal effort of the measures announced in 17 Latin American countries and places Uruguay in last place. It also analyzes the adequacy of the measures, comparing the amounts of emergency cash transfers with the poverty and extreme poverty lines. Between March and December 2020, in no country in the region was the average monthly amount equal to the value of the poverty line, and in only 6 of 16 countries did it border or exceed the extreme poverty line. In Uruguay, transfers not only did not exceed the extreme poverty line, but also ranked in the worst position. It also does so in relation to the poverty line. Estimated spending as a percentage of GDP on non-contributory measures

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.teledoce.com/programas/desayunos-informales/primer-manana/armando-castaingdebat-no-podemos-politizar-la-asistencia-alimenticia/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.presidencia.gub.uy/comunicacion/comunicacionnoticias/conferencia-castaingdebat-acuerdos>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/la-comida-solidaria-menos-ollas-populares-pero-aun-son-miles-los-que-necesitan-un-plato-de-comida-202082917230>

and monetary transfers in 28 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean shows that in Uruguay it is 0.14, among the countries with the lowest values (ECLAC, 2021).

## Discussion for Uruguay and beyond

What has been presented so far allows us to visualize four key aspects to problematize the Uruguayan reality, but also beyond it.

In the first place, it should be emphasized that history does not deny politics. Uruguay is one of the countries on the continent with the greatest development of social protection mechanisms, associated with the broadest labour formality. Beyond the 'path dependency' -as it was presented-, the governments' orientations advance (or try to do so) in different directions. Among other aspects, the pandemic confirms the limits and inequalities involved in cutting back protection and welfare in the market and the family, and the centrality of the State -even with its limitations- in these matters.

In Uruguay, COVID and the government started within a welfare regime, which expanded the actions of the State, with impacts (albeit insufficient) on the labour market, sectoral policies and monetary transfers. The government transforms these results into data, isolated from the action of the State, which is permanently questioned. Clearly this will not address persistent inequalities, and instead will tend towards a welfare regime centrally oriented to the market, families and communities. The consequences of these processes have never led to an improvement in welfare for the great majority.

Secondly, the way out of poverty is centrally placed on work, and for this, the relevance is in economic reactivation. This is not due to chance, but to the ideological orientations of the current government. Even in the context of the pandemic, the Budget Law indicates that it seeks to stimulate economic activity and thus generate employment in the private sector. For this, it is necessary to reduce the fiscal deficit and a sustainable trajectory of public accounts (Poder Ejecutivo, 2020). Grassi (2018b) will say that the economy is an inescapable terrain of social problems, but politics channels and distributes the benefits and sacrifices. This distribution is not natural and involves entirely political considerations, even if expressed in anti-political terms.

This bet is made without analysis of the experiences of economic growth, which did not translate into improvements in welfare, nor of the failure of policies that bet on 'spillover', nor the conditions that jobs must have to make it possible to live out of poverty.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/gobierno-anuncio-apoyo-explicito-a-ollas-populares-pero-mas-de-un-mes-despues-no-lo-concreto-20214814440>



As Grassi (2018a) points out, employment problems are centrally treated as issues of economic performance. A bet is placed on work without taking care of those who work.

The third aspect arises from the way in which public responses are announced by the government and amplified by the media. Public statements focus on the number of beneficiaries and the total amounts invested or to be invested. But it is necessary to problematize the responses, not only from the point of view of their existence, but also from the point of view of the capacity of social protection. Recognizing here the importance for those who receive them, the minimal socialization of the responses to the needs that poverty entails should be highlighted. Contributing to the denial of this discussion is the suspicion of abuse on the part of the poor. The prejudices in relation to these seem to be shared and confirmed by the authorities, and therefore also, the prejudices that this entails. As Grassi (2018b) points out, assistance has been accompanied by concern about the abuse of those who live on it without working, and therefore, the demand for control and unique records of beneficiary people. He notices in the government of Mauricio Macri an aspect also present in Uruguay, and it is a gradual and imperceptible sharpening of this look:

The State's social interventions once again play a decisive role, but not in the dismantling of safety nets, but in the reinforcement of an individualistic view of social life, which is stretched like a dark cloak over the conditions in which they are generated, reproducing the assumption that everything depends on one's own effort (Grassi, 2018b, p. 173).

The last aspect to be noted also arises from the government's orientation, which focuses on freedom and autonomy, understood basically in opposition to the State. The Budget Law proposes a new approach that seeks to empower people and provide them with greater freedom. To this end, the least possible coercion from the State and social policies, which are seen as generating dependency and welfare (Executive Branch, 2020), should be sought. It is the responsibility of the people who know the behaviors to be adopted, and it is a personal matter not to do so. The unequal conditions for freedom and autonomy are not discussed, nor the responsibility that corresponds to the State.

This orientation is maintained even in pandemic contexts, even in the face of dramatic expressions. Returning to Grassi (2018a), he will say that the public discourse of the former President of Argentina ignores the empirical reality. This is not improvisation, but the result of an elaborate strategy that avoids talking about reality and politics, while reaffirming to tell 'the truth'. A truth in which one can (must) believe, but there will be nothing to prove, because its contents must be left out of the communication (p. 88).



## Conclusions

The new Uruguayan government took office on March 1 and immediately declared the presence of the pandemic in the country. This article analysed the responses that the government has developed in relation to the pandemic, particularly those oriented towards those living in poverty. Poverty, as in the rest of the continent, has increased, along with problems in the labour market and inequality. These responses are seen as indicative of the way in which access to welfare and social protection is understood.

It is understood that the problems mentioned have to do with the reality generated by COVID, but also with the measures adopted by the government. These, announced on several occasions by the authorities, install the image of a permanent response to reality. Moving beyond the headlines, it is observed that many of them take a long time to be implemented, others are for minimum terms and all of them are tremendously insufficient. In addition to the image of a government responding, there is the idea of doing so adequately and sufficiently.

Analyzing the orientations of governments and their expressions in social policies is very relevant for Social Work, given the close link between the two. As a space for the provision of goods and services, in the current context, social policies tend to weaken, based on the questioning of the State. This occurs at a time when the demands on public responses are increasing. Given its professional location, Social Work is witnessing the worst expressions of the crisis, with weakened resources to respond to it.

But social policies are also a space for professional insertion. In addition to the aforementioned tensions, there are those arising from the working conditions themselves. The change of government implies a redesign of social policies, which also has an impact on the continuity, or not, of professional work and its conditions. This may generate effects on the possibilities of making one's voice heard, resulting in the restriction of margins for action. It is necessary to consider the conditions in which the work is carried out, not as a fact external to the professional practice, but as a constituent part of it. From this double circumstance, it is necessary to advance in the denunciation of the living conditions, the insufficiency of the implemented answers and the denunciation of the working conditions. Beyond individual actions, these are essentially collective processes.

It is necessary that social workers, and more broadly the citizenry, remember that the song that gives its name to this article, then indicates 'I warned you and you did not let me convince



you'. This is the reality of the Uruguayan government, of course, but here the costs of not being convinced are infinitely more dramatic, since many of them were and are avoidable.

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