
Exploiting the Pandemic: Corporate and Elite Profiteering

Communities have a long history of confronting the disasters imposed by corporations and elites. For them, the “emergency” was a reality well before the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, profit-seekers are abusing the situation to advance land grabs and roll back legislation, intensifying the injustices of a destructive economic system.

Over the past several months, governments around the world have implemented measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, such as issuing stay-at-home orders, shut-downs, curfews and/or "social distancing" and quarantine guidelines. Often combined with declarations of states of emergency, such measures have severe negative impacts on the global South, where the majority of people are heavily dependent on the informal economy and live day to day. Government support has been erratic at best for many and it is impossible for this majority to stay safe and isolated. The lack of proper, adequate and context-specific information on how to prevent the spread of the virus, along with the lack of adequately equipped healthcare facilities, has left forest and peasant communities in particular more exposed than ever.

Another side of the pandemic has become increasingly evident: corporations and elites active in the global South, and especially in forested countries, have used the health crisis to enrich themselves even more and expand their territorial control.

Peasant and forest communities in the global South have a long history of confronting the disaster of the investments imposed by profit-seeking corporations and elites: land grabbing, soil erosion and water pollution, the destruction of livelihoods, large-scale deforestation, annihilation of life spaces, cultures and histories, forced displacement, violence, marginalization, criminalization, among countless others. The “emergency” was a reality for those communities well before the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, government measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus are merely intensifying impacts and injustices of a long-established and destructive economic system. Such measures have deepened extreme inequalities between rich and poor, between the North and the South, women and men, and between white communities and communities of colour. In a nutshell, the impacts of these measures are worse for those who already face the violence of racism, classism, patriarchy and oppression. And these same vulnerable communities have been most affected by the devastating Covid-19 disease.

Amidst countless human tragedies, corporations and political elites are abusing the situation to advance land grabs, roll back legislation protecting territories and people, and increase their profits.

In Cambodia, for example, Vietnamese rubber giant Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL) razed the forests of the indigenous Kreung and Kachok communities during the national lockdown, affecting two sacred ‘spirit mountains’, along with wetlands, old-growth forest, traditional hunting areas and burial grounds. (1) In Indonesia, two farmers were killed in March in clashes over a long-standing land dispute with a palm oil firm in South Sumatra province. (2) In Panama, indigenous Guna leader

Rengifo Navas condemned the increase in land invasions and mining exploitation, as well as illegal logging and hunting in many *comarcas* (indigenous territories) during the lockdown. (3) The Indigenous Wampi People in Peru filed a lawsuit against representatives of the GeoPark oil company, arguing that it threatened the health and well-being of the Wampi by allowing unauthorized oil workers to enter their Autonomous Territory. (4) In Uganda, agro-industrial companies backed by police and military forces have forcefully dispossessed more than two dozen small-scale farmers despite a government order to stop land evictions during the Covid-19 lockdown. (5) Meanwhile, a joint venture owned by mining giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto in Guinea backed by the World Bank, relocated more than a hundred families in order to expand a bauxite mine during the government-imposed lockdown. Villagers were moved to a previously-mined hilltop location that lacked adequate housing, water and sanitation, and where arable land was insufficient and livelihood opportunities largely absent. (6) And the list goes on and on.

To make matters worse, the threats, violence, criminalization, persecution and harassment that peasant and forest communities resisting destructive operations in their territories faced before the pandemic, have continued apace during the lockdowns. In fact, confinement is a real risk for community activists given that remaining in one place makes them easily identifiable and vulnerable to potential aggressors. In many countries, an already insufficient level of state protection of activists has diminished significantly, greatly increasing their vulnerability. Colombia alone witnessed a 53% rise in assassinations of social leaders between January and April 2020. (7)

On top of this, national governments put the well-being of corporations before that of their citizens, ever obedient as they are to corporate lobbyists, who have been particularly active during this period.

The oil and gas sector is among those most aggressively demanding (lobbying for) both financial support and deregulation, according to InfluenceMap, which tracks and measures corporate influence over climate change policy. (8)

Governments in several countries have excluded so-called “essential services” from lockdown restrictions. These included mining, fossil fuel, palm oil and timber plantation companies. From Bolivia to South Africa to Malaysia, workers have been forced to risk their health and the well-being of their families and communities living in close proximity to the corporate operations. These “exceptions” have nothing to do with providing “essential services” to society during a lockdown. They are designed to sustain corporate profits.

Despite this trend of prioritizing corporations and foreign investments, governments could well soon be facing a flood of lawsuits from corporations demanding compensation for measures taken during the pandemic. From private water companies to highway toll firms or utility businesses, the trade deals and agreements for international investments expose governments to litigation even during a global pandemic, simply because corporate profits are placed at risk. (9)

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also take advantage of the pandemic to advance their agendas

Despite the damage that the World Bank and the IMF have caused, particularly across the global South, by imposing neoliberal policies, structural adjustment plans and loan conditionalities, they are now portraying themselves as “experts”, standing ready to guide the world through the Covid-19 crisis. (10)

These multilateral organizations seek to play a major role in the national governments’ decision-

making processes with respect to the economic direction that countries will take. Yet, both have always played a key role in facilitating privatization, the far-reaching and destructive activities of corporations, the financialization of nature, and the debilitation of national welfare safety nets - including the now so evidently dysfunctional public health systems, among many others. They are, in other words, key allies in the corporate quest for ever-increasing profits.

The IMF has responded to requests for emergency aid from over 80 countries. However, the few loans that have been granted are tied to controversial conditionalities (that is, domestic reforms that must be introduced before funding is released). These reforms include further weakening of labour protections and promoting privatizations. (11) For its part, the World Bank is "assisting" 100 countries in their fight against Covid-19. However, much of this support has gone to the Bank's private-sector clients, and no provisions have been made to ensure that healthcare financing will not support privatization of such provision, which has been a notorious policy of the World Bank in the past. (12)

But extraordinary things happen

Clearly, most of the pandemic responses provided by national governments and financial institutions are not about taking care of people or workers, but about helping companies and shoring up neoliberal economies. It is also clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is not an isolated event: the capitalist-patriarchal, classist and racist system that dominates our respective societies is as much part of the current emergency situation as is the novel coronavirus itself.

And it is largely the same people who have felt the most terrible and damaging impacts of this profit-seeking system, who are now ensuring that no-one is left behind. Extraordinary things are happening among neighbourhoods and communities. From peasant movements distributing free-food to those in need to community-based initiatives designed to halt the spread of the virus, to communal meals prepared and distributed on the streets and self-organized community markets that while allowing for social distancing provide healthy food and basic needs.

If we want this crisis to be a turning point towards socially and ecologically just societies, along with collective responses to restart economies that place the well-being of ordinary people before that of corporate profits, the pandemic has to be understood as a symptom of an emergency that the majority of the world's population has been experiencing for way too long.

In the months leading up to the Covid-19 outbreak, millions of people throughout Chile rose up to protest the harsh and brutal impacts of neoliberal policy on that particular society. A graffiti message painted on a city wall during that time certainly holds true today: *"We can't return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem."*

(1) EcoBusiness, [Vietnamese rubber giant razes indigenous lands as Cambodian government grapples with legacy land issues](#), June 2020

(2) Farmlandgrab, [Land conflicts flare across South-East Asia during coronavirus lockdowns](#), May 2020

(3) Servindi, [Indígenas de Mesoamérica: "Vivimos una nueva ola de colonialismo"](#), June 2020

(4) Servindi, [Gobierno Wampis denuncia penalmente a funcionarios de GeoPark](#), June 2020

(5) Witness Radio, [Multinationals use COVID-19 crisis to violently grab land of poor communities with impunity](#), April 2020

(6) IDI, [World Bank-Backed Rio Tinto-Alcoa Joint Venture Relocates Guinean Village During Covid-19 Lockdown](#), June 2020

(7) International Land Coalition, [Land Defenders can't Catch a Break from Violence during Covid-19](#);

and El País, [El asesinato de líderes sociales en Colombia crece un 53% en el primer cuatrimestre](#), May 2020

(8) Desmog, [Under Cover of Pandemic, Fossil Fuel Interests Unleash Lobbying Frenzy](#), April 2020; and InfluenceMap, [The COVID-19 Crisis and Climate Lobbying](#)

(9) Corporate Europe Observatory, [Cashing in on the pandemic: how lawyers are preparing to sue states over COVID-19 response measures](#), May 2020

(10) Reuters, [IMF chief economist says 100 countries seek pandemic aid; more resources may be needed](#), April 2020

(11) Research Gate, [Softening the blow of the pandemic: will the International Monetary Fund and World Bank make things worse?](#), April 2020

(12) CEPR, [We Can't Trust the IMF and World Bank to Lead the COVID-19 Recovery](#), May 2020