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# After testing times, Brazil is back

## Synergy between public health system principles and foreign policy must be resumed

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The return of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva as president represents an opportunity for Brazil to rebuild its public health system (SUS) and resume its leadership in global health, relaunching cooperation with the global south. However, President Lula will face even greater challenges than those in his previous presidency (2002-10), considering that Brazilian public health was recently described by experts as “scorched earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Since 2016, the national health services have experienced relentless cuts in public funding. This has led to substantial decreases in the number of services provided by SUS, an increase in indicators of child malnutrition and maternal deaths, and the downgrading or withdrawal of successful programmes such as people’s pharmacies, community health agents, and the response to HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most disturbing examples of the decay is the Brazilian national immunisation programme.<sup>3</sup> After nearly half a century of progress, vaccination coverage of the population, including all World Health Organization recommended vaccines, dropped from 73% in 2019 to 67% in 2020 and 59% in 2021, far from the desirable level of 95%.<sup>4</sup> The childhood vaccination rate fell from 93.1% in 2019 to 71.5% in 2021, placing Brazil among the countries with the lowest coverage in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Another important challenge was the devastating effect of covid-19 in Brazil with nearly 700 000 deaths and more than 36 million reported cases since early 2020.<sup>6</sup> The botched federal response included official recommendations of ineffective treatments such as chloroquine and ivermectin, delay in purchasing vaccines, the boycott of public health measures adopted by local governments, and the wide dissemination of fake news by public agencies.<sup>7</sup> The previous president, Jair Bolsonaro, even disseminated false associations between covid-19 vaccines and HIV, and between wearing masks and pneumonia.<sup>8</sup> In his inauguration speech on 1 January 2023, Lula stated that “the responsibilities for this genocide must be investigated and must not go unpunished” following due process and a broad right of defence.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the ministry of health’s historical importance as head of the SUS, controlling resources for more than 5000 municipalities, technical staff were replaced by military personnel, and health policies were guided by ideological and religious principles rather than scientific evidence during the covid pandemic.

## Rebuilding

The immense challenge of rebuilding SUS is now in the hands of Nisia Trindade Lima, the first woman to lead Brazil’s health ministry and immediate past president of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz). The foundation is one of the most important Brazilian research institutions, a frontrunner in international cooperation in health, and an established vaccine manufacturer for the national system. Trindade, who played a decisive role in ensuring access to vaccines against covid-19, is a respected social scientist with extensive experience as a civil servant and in management, able to assemble an experienced and highly qualified team.

In her inauguration speech, Trindade announced the reversal of all guidelines that “offend science, human rights, and sexual and reproductive rights” and that “have reduced the ministry’s technical statements to a conservative and science denying agenda.”<sup>10</sup> One of these norms is an official guidebook based on religious beliefs, minimising the risks of pregnancy in adolescence and affirming that “abortion is always a crime,” even for the rare cases allowed by Brazilian law (pregnancies resulting from rape, that are a risk to the woman’s life, or with an anencephalic fetus).

Opposition to women’s sexual and reproductive rights has been a critical element in Brazil’s foreign policy in recent years. It has defended conservative agendas, abandoning its historical role as a leader of progressive causes in global health.<sup>11</sup> The new government is expected to rapidly resume the former synergy between the principles of SUS and its foreign policy, defending agendas such as the limitation of intellectual property rights in favour of public health and an emphasis on the social determinants of health.

Brazil is also expected to relaunch its successful cooperation with the global south. Particularly influential in South America, its initiatives were described as a “quiet revolution in health diplomacy,”<sup>12</sup> producing coordinated action in international forums such as the World Health Assembly and creating a South American Institute of Government in Health (ISAGS) focused on training leaders in the region.<sup>13</sup> Brazil should also become a leader in vaccine diplomacy, building on its position as a vaccine producer for the region, and should facilitate the development of a regional system for responding to health emergencies.<sup>14</sup>

The timing of Brazil’s comeback could not be more appropriate as the World Health Organization is currently negotiating reform of the International Health Regulations and pandemic treaty.<sup>15</sup> The world needs leaders who have faced the challenge of free and universal healthcare for all, as is the case of the

SUS, with all its achievements and setbacks. Brazil is also able to warn the international community about the threat posed to human life by far right political ideologies.

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