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Eva Bahl

Lucas Cé Sangalli

# Migration research in Brazil in times of Covid-19

**Conversations with Alejandro Goldberg, Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves, Ercílio Langa, Kassoum Dieme and María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar**

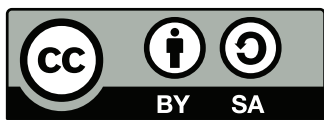
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## Abstract

We conducted these interviews with fellow social scientists who do research on migration and asked them about their research experiences in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic. They are from Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, Mozambique, and Senegal and are currently based (at least partially) at different academic institutions in Brazil. The interviews took place between April and June 2021. During this period, Brazil had more than 500,000 registered Covid-19 deaths, one of the highest rates in the world. Since 2019, the government of President Jair Bolsonaro has gone from openly targeting teaching and research in sociology to deliberately denying scientific evidence of the effects of the pandemic in Brazilian society. In terms of academic cooperation, our conversations with these researchers can be seen as a positive outcome of the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Although the restrictions to our fieldwork were challenging, we were aware that it was a huge privilege to be able to keep working in Germany with our well-funded academic contracts – yet another example of the deepening of global inequalities in the production of knowledge in “Covid-19 times”. We see these interviews as a way of broadening the scope of empirical research on migration during an especially challenging period for scholars working in and on Brazil. It was an opportunity to have an exchange with these colleagues and to learn more about their research.

**Keywords:** Brazil, Covid-19, Migration research, Migration and Health, Social vulnerability and exclusion, Social Inequalities, Civil Society

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# Migration research in Brazil in times of Covid-19

## Challenges, opportunities, and new research routines

Eva Bahl  
Lucas Cé Sangalli

We conducted these interviews with fellow social scientists who do research on migration and asked them about their research experiences in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> They are from Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, Mozambique, and Senegal and are currently based at different academic institutions in Brazil (you'll read more about them in the CV at the end of each interview). The interviews took place between April and June 2021. During this period, Brazil had more than 500,000 registered Covid-19 deaths, one of the highest rates in the world. Since 2019, the government of President Jair Bolsonaro has gone from openly targeting teaching and research in sociology<sup>2</sup> to deliberately denying scientific evidence of the effects of the pandemic in Brazilian society. In terms of academic cooperation, our conversations with these researchers can be

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and Spanish and translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> soziologie.de [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

seen as a positive outcome of the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Like all of them, we are migration researchers. We're based at the University of Göttingen in Germany but our fieldwork on the biographies and migration courses of irregularized migrants took place in Brazil. Lucas Cé Sangalli comes from Brazil and came to Germany in 2018 to write his PhD. Eva Bahl was born and socialized in Germany. Together, we conducted fieldwork in Brazil between September and November 2019 as part of a research project led by Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal (University of Göttingen) entitled "Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany – processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration" (2019-2022, funded by the German Research Foundation). Even though our second phase of fieldwork in Brazil – planned for 2020 – did not take place, we remained in contact with academics we had met there and established new (online) contacts. Although the restrictions to our fieldwork were challenging, we were aware that it was a huge privilege to be able to keep working in Germany with our well-funded academic contracts – yet another example of the deepening of global inequalities in the production of knowledge in "Covid-19 times". As Ercílio Langa, professor at the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab), told us in his interview, the transition to online academic activities had an important impact on knowledge exchange between colleagues in the Global South but also with colleagues in the Global North. This has to be seen in the Brazilian context: there, being able to live on the income from doing academic research can be seen as a privilege enjoyed by only very few researchers. These professionals are often employed in richer cities and prestigious universities. This means that the great majority of people doing research in Brazil are at the margins of funding opportunities for travel abroad (or inside Brazil) to conduct fieldwork, as well as for participating in conferences. Thus, we see these interviews as a way of broadening the scope of empirical research on migration during

an especially challenging period for scholars working in and on Brazil. These interviews offered an opportunity to have an exchange with these colleagues and to learn more about their research.

A renewed interest in the topic of migration has developed amongst social scientists in Brazil following the arrival of migrants from Haiti, Senegal, Syria, and Venezuela in recent decades. Our series of expert interviews includes sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists from different backgrounds who currently work with people who have migrated to Brazil. We tried to interview colleagues at different stages of their careers and from different regions and institutions. Most of them described in one way or the other how the unwillingness of the federal government to take substantial action against the coronavirus based on scientific evidence has strongly affected their livelihoods and those of the people around them. Besides this, all our interviewees spoke about the challenges of doing research under pandemic conditions (and indirectly Bolsonaro's government), the methodological adaptations they have to make to keep their research activities going, and to make sure online classes reached a wide number of their students. They also spoke about personal losses, the fear of dying alone in Brazil as a migrant, the negative impacts on their everyday routines and those of migrants in Brazil, and they stressed the ways in which the people they work with and do research on have been able to overcome challenges and difficulties. Several of the changes in the situations of migrants mentioned in the interviews resonate well with our own research results (see for example our report on our research in Brazil<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> Bahl, Eva; Rosenthal, Gabriele (eds.). Forthcoming. Navigating through increasing social inequalities in times of Covid-19: Research report on interviews with migrants in the Middle East and Western Europe and migrants and indigenous people in South America. *Global Migration Studies*, No. 4. Göttingen: Centre for Global Migration Studies.

Below we will introduce some of the topics that we talked about in the conversations with our fellow researchers and that we consider important to an understanding of the current situation of migrants (and consequently migration research) in Brazil.

### Effect on migration movements to and from Brazil

Besides making social inequalities globally (and regionally) more evident, the colleagues we interviewed made clear how the pandemic has affected migration processes to and from Brazil and which important transformations in the perceptions of Brazil by migrants could be observed: they switched from considering it as a “powerful” economy and destination country for migrants – related to the high demand for workers in the wake of international sporting events (when Brazil hosted the 2014 FIFA Male World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympic Games) – to that of a place from which migrants and Brazilians alike want to escape. At the same time, several national governments in the Americas closed their borders because of the pandemic. This led to the further precarization of migration routes. Borders which were legally crossed without the services (and costs) of smugglers before the pandemic, are now more expensive and dangerous to cross. Overall, there has been a process of illegalization of different forms of movement throughout the continent during the pandemic. But with this closure of borders, migrants and smugglers found new ways to overcome the restrictions on their movements. On the level of discourse, these migration movements northwards were also related to the idea that the Biden administration would have a more welcoming migration policy to the US.

Based on their research, our colleagues described the consequences of the devaluation of the Brazilian currency (Real) against the US dollar. This directly affected the livelihoods of people living in Brazil, and especially their



ability to continue sending remittances to their families at home. Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves, director of the Scalabrinian Center for Migration Studies (CSEM), and Kassoum Dieme, doctoral candidate at the University of Brasília, discuss these issues in their interviews.

The precarity of people who depend on informalized activities

Restrictions on commerce due to sanitary regulations brought more precarity to the huge number of people who relied upon the informalized market (around 41.6% of the Brazilian economy in 2019<sup>4</sup>). Many could not stay home (as restrictions demanded) since their income came mainly from informalized activities which meant they could not rely on any support structures. As Alejandro Goldberg, visiting professor in the postgraduate program in collective health at the University of Brasília, explained in his interview, many migrants had to work despite a higher risk of infection, thus increasing their vulnerability. New threats were added to old threats for these marginalized populations.

The threat of hunger returns to center stage in livelihoods in Brazil

Food insecurity has once again become a reality for many who live in Brazil, as shown in the interview with María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar, professor at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The increase in the price of food, a frail economy, and an unequal fiscal policy on the part of the federal government have been unable to cushion the economic impacts of the pandemic for vulnerable groupings in Brazilian society – and that applies to most of the Brazilian population. As María del Carmen says very pointedly in her interview, the pandemic will

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<sup>4</sup> [agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br](https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

probably take a huge toll in the decades to come – not only for migrants. Its impact has been felt more strongly by historically marginalized groupings, especially those living in stigmatized regions, such as Northeastern Brazil. These marginalized groupings have been even less visible during the pandemic, as the interview with Ercílio Langa shows. He wanted to interview pregnant African migrant women living in the countryside of Bahia. Because of the pandemic, he could not interview them face-to-face and was forced to change the focus of his investigation. In his interview, Alejandro Goldberg identifies an overall shift in the academic focus of the social sciences towards understanding how people cope with infectious agents in their everyday life in contexts of social vulnerability. We point to the fact that populations that were already difficult to access before the pandemic became even more remote in terms of academic outreach.

The fear of losing loved ones at a distance or of dying alone

Ercílio Langa mentions in his interview his fear of being infected by the coronavirus and dying in Brazil, far from his Mozambican family. As one of the countries in the world with the highest number of deaths, it is easy to imagine that people living in Brazil will find it hard to deal with these losses in the decades to come. The fear having to cope with illness far from the family or networks of support is a defining aspect of the everyday concerns of many migrants and Brazilians alike during the pandemic. María del Carmen reflected in her interview on the way sanitary restrictions have hindered processes of mourning. Despite the global inequalities that affect all of us, an especially burdensome aspect of the pandemic for all who are living physically far away from their families is the threat of our own death or the death of those we love.

## In the absence of the state: the power (and necessity) of civil society

Despite the very negative outcomes of the pandemic, our colleagues point out different ways in which civil society and organizations of migrants living in Brazil help to mitigate the threat of hunger, the loss of relatives, and the greater precariousness of working conditions. Alejandro Goldberg points to the solidarity structures and networks of care that migrant groups have built up. Civil society organizations have assisted people by distributing food baskets. And there have been important campaigns for the regularization of migrants in Brazil and pressure for new legislation in the field of healthcare statistics, as María del Carmen told us in her interview.

Due to the changing character of the pandemic and the restrictions that have come with it, as well as to the enduring global inequalities that sustain unequal access to vaccines and different regimes of mobility control for different groups of people, it is difficult to imagine how the issues raised in this series of interviews will develop in the next few years. We will do our best to stay in contact with and keep learning from our colleagues who are doing migration research in Brazil – despite all barriers imposed by the administration of Jair Bolsonaro to the consolidation of scientific knowledge, especially in the social sciences.

“I analyze the impact that the pandemic has had on people and how these groups responded, organized themselves and took care of each other.”

Interview with Dr. Alejandro Goldberg, University of Brasília, Brazil / National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina



Dr. Alejandro Goldberg

**Could you tell us a bit about your current work situation?**

I am currently teaching as a visiting professor in the postgraduate program in collective health at the Universidade de Brasília. And in addition, I am an independent researcher at CONICET (National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina), in the Institute of Anthropological Sciences, Social Anthropology Section, of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Recently, the second wave of the coronavirus was declared in Argentina. The restrictions on mobility also apply to work, and of course to the operation of schools and other public institutions. So, at this time my work situation is that I am forced

to telework and to perform my work as a researcher and professor at a distance. That is to say, from my home basically because mobility is restricted. What does this mean? Well, especially for anthropologists, since the foundation of anthropology is fieldwork, working from a distance obviously implies limitations, and a need to adapt and reconfigure the re-

search methodologically. In my case the question is how can I observe the social groups, the immigrants that I work with, through digital media of different types, how can I do what is known as virtual ethnography or digital ethnography?

Before the pandemic, I used to do field work in the street with my research subjects, with the people and their organizations, that is what I love most, what I like most, and what justifies my work or my profession.

For me, it has meant that I have had to adapt, and that has not been easy, but despite everything I have been able to carry on with my research in different ways.

**What is the current status of your research and what particular project(s) are you participating in or coordinating?**

My current project focuses on health from an anthropological perspective. I am investigating migratory processes which include immigrants in irregular situations, asylum seekers and refugees. It is a comparative study. The cities I have chosen to study are São Paulo, Brazil; Lisbon, Portugal; Buenos Aires, Argentina and Barcelona, Spain. Four cities in four different countries that have strong migratory, colonial, historical-political, social and linguistic links. So, it is a comparative study between these four cities to investigate the situation of different groups of immigrants and their health situation. I analyze the impact that the pandemic has had on people and how these groups responded, organized themselves and took care of each other.

**Could you tell us about the migrant population you are working with and doing research on, and about their situation before the pandemic?**

My study subjects are obviously not uniform. We are not talking about a homogeneous group because we are not talking about homogeneous study units, either. Rather, they are very diverse: these people live

in and come from latitudes, countries, with different historical and socio-cultural processes. Although they do share some aspects, such as social inequalities within these cities at the spatial, geographical, class level. And the differences in migration laws in each country, and their impact on people's way of life, housing, work, or access to health. And within this great diversity that I am trying to analyze in a comparative way, the groups of immigrants are not the same. At the beginning, when I started this research, which has been going on for two years – although it has been transformed, redefined, especially after the appearance of the coronavirus and the pandemic – I started by investigating Syrian migrants in a refugee situation or asylum seekers in the four cities. Among them there were different realities, depending on whether they had – or did not have – refugee status. And it also made a difference whether they were asylum seekers in the city of Barcelona or in Lisbon – the conditions that they experienced at the level of rights and support as asylum seekers were better in Barcelona than in Lisbon. Not to mention São Paulo or Buenos Aires – which were worse. And then I began expanding this universe because I came into contact with other social groups of immigrants, for example, in the case of São Paulo, with Congolese people, Haitians and Venezuelans, whose numbers have increased a lot in the past three years – especially in São Paulo and other cities in Brazil, as well as in Buenos Aires and other cities in Argentina.

**And how has their situation changed due to the pandemic over the course of the past year?**

It's obvious – and this is not something that I have discovered or revealed by myself – how the coronavirus outbreak has impacted negatively in all spheres and areas of daily life of these immigrant groups. I have observed certain situations and I have tried to follow this up, first ethnographically and then through a virtual or remote ethnography due to the conditions of quarantine and the pandemic.

And when I talk about health it's from a holistic perspective, not only physical health but also mental health, emotional health, housing, relationships. To explain that a little bit: in an earlier study I investigated the spread of tuberculosis among Bolivian workers in Buenos Aires. A disease, a virus or bacteria, a particular infectious agent, had a major impact on certain groups of the population. I studied Bolivian migrants who work and live in clandestine workshops, in precarious conditions, with overcrowding, work overload, insufficient and poor food, situations of violence, and so on. This helps the bacteria to circulate in those environments. And I used the same kind of approach with the virus issue, let's say with the coronavirus, right.

The social phenomenon that migrant bodies are fragilized by the contexts of social vulnerability in which they live has been studied in other countries, such as the USA or Brazil: the highest mortality was found in the most precarious groups with the worst living conditions – and therefore health conditions – for example, African Americans or groups of irregular Latino immigrants in the USA. Precarious living conditions, precarious work, complete labor exploitation... these factors will lower the immune system of a person, which means that this virus is more likely to enter the body and have a more serious impact. This is something that has been studied by classical epidemiology and in a way medical anthropology adds a pathologizing environment to it. This refers to a context of social vulnerability that favors this kind of diseases and does not favor the integral health of these people – but not because of their ethnicity, their place of origin, their skin color, but because they live as migrants in these precarious conditions. And because they are denied – by a racist migration law – the right to health care, as well as to decent housing, a decent job and access to health care or education. So, this is roughly the focus of my research and what I've been able to observe at a general level in these four cities.

### **And what are the migrants' responses to the pandemic?**

Now here is what I am also studying because I think it is important. In the face of all this, what happens in the face of all this? Do migrants die, do they let themselves die, do they suffer, are they only victims? Because they are victims of a system, of immigration laws – some more racist than others, of labor exploitation, of violence, especially women who suffer doubly from this situation because they also have to care for children. What I'm interested in studying are the responses that these social groups have. That is to say, how do they organize themselves in the face of this? For example, if they are denied the right to health care, what do they do? They generate mechanisms of response to various ailments. In this case: a virus. And that's possible to analyze, both at the level of response, of care, concerning different ailments, in this case to counteract or to protect oneself from a virus, like the coronavirus. But also responses in the sense of organizing and taking care of themselves, mechanisms of self-care and mutual care. It's knowing how to cope, for example, with the hunger that this generates. Because many of these migrants in the four cities that I am studying, the ones that I've interacted with and am working with, are migrants working in the informal economy. Let's say they can't afford to lock themselves up and strictly comply with quarantine rules, because if they don't go out to work, to earn their daily bread, they won't survive. Many of them answer my questions about how they have reacted, how they have behaved in this quarantine situation: "Look, I have to go out anyway because I'm gambling: either I'll get infected and get sick and die, or I will starve myself and the children that I have to feed."

This is what is perhaps not always understood or cannot be interpreted in the right way from the point of view of Eurocentric rationality. As researchers or social scientists from the Global South, with our condition, with our biography, with our reality – let's say these are realities that we know and it's a necessity and a duty to bring this kind of reality to light.



Well, that's what I've inquired about in the four comparative cities of study. These situations and these responses and actions, this praxis of the different immigrant groups. I repeat: with differences – there was the case of the Senegalese. Well, obviously they can react in a more efficient way, or cushion the negative impacts of the pandemic, because they are very well organized and united. It is easier for them to react than for other groups that are, let's say, in a different place. If they do not have organizational networks or such a strengthening of the social fabric, well obviously there will be a greater negative impact on their living conditions. My research is about this two-dimensionality, the impact on the one hand, the responses on the other hand. Not only at the health level, but also at the social, labor, relationship, etc. levels.

**Thank you very much for sharing these insights with us!**

**Alejandro Goldberg** is currently teaching as a visiting professor in the postgraduate program in collective health at the University of Brasília, Brazil. And he is an independent researcher at CONICET (National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina), at the Institute of Anthropological Sciences, Social Anthropology Section, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. His current research project is “International Migrations, Refugees and Health from a transnational perspective”.

He has a master's degree in Medical Anthropology, and a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology specializing in Medical Anthropology and International Health, from the University of Rovira and Virgili, Spain. He did his PhD research on health, illness and care processes of Senegalese immigrants in Barcelona. He has done extensive fieldwork in Argentina, Cuba, Spain, Italy, Brazil and Portugal in the field of medical anthropology and has published widely on topics like migration and health; racism, social vulnerability and exclusion.

“I don’t know whether I am more afraid of becoming infected with the coronavirus or of our president throwing us into an anti-democratic ‘adventure’”

Interview with Dr. Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves, Scalabrinian Center for Migration Studies (CSEM)



**Could you tell us about your current work situation and that of your colleagues? And how the pandemic has affected your activities?**

I started my work at the Scalabrinian Center for Migration Studies (CSEM) in Brasília in March 2020, already in the context of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic – especially the need for social distancing. I am the director of the Center and at the same time I work as a researcher. The work team consists of eight people with different work schedules. Some team members have not resumed face-to-face activities since

the beginning of social distancing. Others resumed on-site activities at the end of 2020 with reduced face-to-face work schedules at the Center.

Our workload did not decrease during the pandemic. At the same time, working conditions initially planned as temporary were incorporated into our collective and individual work routines. The administrative technician and I maintained a face-to-face work regime in the Center. I particularly chose this modality to better manage my time and activities, as well as to maintain a kind of separation between my work and my domestic environment. My colleagues have dealt with remote work in different

Dr. Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves

ways. Especially women who are mothers found it very difficult to manage their work and production at home while dealing with domestic activities (childcare, housekeeping, preparing meals, etc.), even if they could count on sharing tasks with their partners.

In the evaluation by the work team at the end of last year, positive aspects of remote work were listed, such as no time lost due to the need to commute, the better quality of food prepared at home, increased familial interaction, and flexibility in organizing working time. On the negative side, there was a feeling of more pressure to produce, the difficulty of coordinating virtual meetings with others living in the same space, overlapping of public and private spaces, not being able to interact face-to-face with the team, and reduced opportunities to exchange ideas and share work-related difficulties.

In my case, I had high expectations of working with my new team and becoming more familiar with the research going on at the Center. I expected to participate in events and to do fieldwork. It was a bit frustrating. At the same time, the need to constantly reschedule activities and the uncertainties regarding one's health, the well-being of family members and friends, and of the coworkers themselves put me in a state of almost permanent surveillance and suspension. My routines started to integrate other concerns and rites, such as the constant sanitization of the body, objects and spaces. I had to learn to deal with different communication technologies. Despite the incorporation of social distancing in routines, the communication with people and groups through digital platforms brought new possibilities of academic and political action and exchange.

**Could you tell us how your research has changed since the beginning of the pandemic?**

Before the pandemic it was possible to do fieldwork, especially interviews with migrants. We replanned the research at our Center, especially the

activities intended to be done in the field. Likewise, it was possible to follow more easily the logic of the migrant's movements before the pandemic. They were more "predictable" according to national or economic profiles.

**Could you tell us something about the overall political situation in Brazil right now?**

I don't know whether I am more afraid of becoming infected with the coronavirus or of our president [Jair Bolsonaro] throwing us into an anti-democratic "adventure". Here in Brasília, he called his supporters to the streets – against all health guidelines – to try to show he has popular support. The protesters, who blocked a central region near the Planalto Palace [the Executive seat of administration in the capital of Brazil], called for the return of the military regime and the closure of the Supreme Court of Justice (STJ). I think that nowadays no one doubts that he would like to carry out a coup d'état. The question is whether he wants to do this with the support of part of the army or with the militias [paramilitary groups, usually made up of current and former police and military officers]. I think that a lot of the dynamics we experienced in Rio de Janeiro make sense now<sup>5</sup>. Rio is a city in which militias intertwine with state structures, especially the state police. The process of formation of the state's repression apparatus during the Brazilian military dictatorship in the 1960s plays an important role here.

Besides that, the government cut the budget for the population census planned for this year. We won't have a census! This has huge impacts on the topic of migration because we will not have a detailed picture of immigrants living in Brazil. This is especially important if you consider that the last census took place in 2010, before – or at the beginning – of the inclusion of Brazil as a destination on several migration routes.

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<sup>5</sup> Maria do Carmo is referring to a period of fieldwork she spent together with the interviewees in Rio de Janeiro in 2019.

Furthermore, migration control at the borders has become militarized. In May 2021, the army invaded a hostel run by a religious order in a border town in Northern Brazil. The hostel welcomes Venezuelan women and children. The army accused the hostel administration of “violation of sanitary measures and the provision of shelter for illegal immigrants”. They took the nun who coordinated the work to the police station, and the migrants to the Federal Police who were to carry out the deportation processes. The case had many repercussions and was only reversed with pressure from the Federal Prosecutor’s Office and civil society. Some Haitians and some Senegalese try to migrate to the United States, but they face resistance at closed and militarized borders in Peru, Guatemala, Brazil, amongst others. Things are “heated up” here. And we have a long way to go until the next presidential election in 2022.

**Could you tell us more about the current situation on the northern border of Brazil?**

Theoretically, the border remains closed.<sup>6</sup> The restrictions are for access to Brazil by land, which mainly affects migrants in more precarious entry situations, such as Haitians and Venezuelans. The latest ordinance of the federal government restricts the entry of Venezuelans under any conditions. In practice the Venezuelans continue to arrive through the “*trochas*” [irregularized trails] and seek help at the reception centers in Pacaraima and Roraima, on Brazil’s northern border in the Amazon. As the government has restricted their entry, they are not able to start their process of migratory regularization (either refugee claim or residency). Thus, the current scenario is of many Venezuelans in an irregular situation, including children. At the same time, many leave Brazil, to the joy of the coyotes [a person who is paid to bring people across the border in illegalized ways] who are getting rich by “throwing” Haitian, African, Venezuelan, and even Brazilian migrants onto dangerous, expensive, and uncer-

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<sup>6</sup> laprensalatina.com [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

tain routes through jungles and rivers. Many have Mexico as their destination, where they imagine they will cross the border, encouraged by the (mistaken) image of greater flexibility of the Biden administration. In June 2021, the Brazilian government published a new decree (665, June 23) that maintains the restrictions on entry into Brazil for foreigners of any nationality by land, but this time without the condition that specifically restricted the entry of Venezuelans for humanitarian reasons.

**Could you tell us a bit about the situation of the Senegalese and other migrants that you are in contact with? How has their situation in Brazil changed with Covid-19?**

The situation is quite diverse, and the consensus seems to be to move to another country.<sup>7</sup> The devaluation of the Real [the Brazilian currency] in relation to the US dollar has made remittances almost impossible. So many are counting on going to the United States or other countries in Latin America, especially Uruguay.

However, I think that not necessarily everyone who says they want to go, ends up doing so. Among the Senegalese, the process of seeking naturalization and family reunion continues. There is an interesting aspect of minor changes in the work profile. Many continue to rely on self-employment, but diversify their activities so they don't have to rely only on selling in the streets.

The situation of Venezuelans is terrible, especially among the Warao<sup>8</sup>. This indigenous population faces difficulties in Brazil in terms of housing, work, and access to basic health services. These difficulties are connected mainly to the lack of preparation of local authorities and civil society to deal with the peculiarities of these groups. In Brazil they have assumed a dynamic of internal mobility and circulation. Some

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<sup>7</sup> [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>8</sup> [unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

practices, like begging, especially when they involve the presence of children, are looked on with suspicion by the authorities and resented by the non-indigenous Venezuelan immigrants. Their housing habits and community organization do not correspond to the preconceived notions of support for housing in government programs. Besides this, the policies for guaranteeing the rights of the Brazilian indigenous populations are being strongly threatened. The pressure to exploit indigenous territories has gained ground under Bolsonaro's government.

**You come from southern Brazil and currently live in Brasília, in the capital of the country. Does the current situation differ a lot between these regions?**

A lot! I sometimes feel like a foreigner here. The biggest differences for me are in the field of food and climate. In regional terms, Brasília is different from the other cities within the region itself. Designed in the 1960s to be the new administrative seat of the country, today it functions with a series of cities that orbit around the state apparatus integrated into the federal district. The differences in comparison to the south of Brazil concern the organizational dynamics and investments in the productive field. For example, Rio Grande do Sul [in southern Brazil] has a strong presence of smallholder agriculture, meat processing, and metal industries. The central-west region of Brasília has more large properties focused on agribusiness. This form of land ownership is also found in Rio Grande do Sul, but it seems to me that there is a greater diversification of production there. In my opinion, this relates to the migratory dynamics, especially the international dynamics. The perception of participation chances in the labor market seems to be a very important aspect for people who migrate when they choose different regions within Brazil.

**Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us, Maria!**

**Maria do Carmo dos Santos Gonçalves** is currently the director of the Scalabrinian Center for Migration Studies (Centro Scalabriniano de Estudos Migratórios, CSEM), based in Brasília, Brazil. She was the coordinator of the Migrant Assistant Center of Caxias do Sul (Centro de Atendimento ao Migrante, CAM) in Southern Brazil from 2010 until 2018. There, she coordinated activities with migrants, refugees, and applicants for refugee status from different regions, especially from West Africa and Haiti.

She completed her PhD thesis on the Senegalese religious diaspora in southern Brazil in 2020 and currently collaborates as a researcher in the project “Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany – Processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration” at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences at the University of Göttingen, Germany. Her research interests include ethnographical and biographical research, studies on contemporary diasporas, migration and refugees, the Middle East and Islam.



“From being a field researcher, I have become an essayist, a conjuncture analyst.”

Interview with Dr. Ercílio Langa, University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab)



Dr. Ercílio Langa

**Could you tell us a bit about your current work situation and that of your colleagues? How has the pandemic affected your activities?**

I teach at the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab), a Brazilian university that hosts students from Brazil and Portuguese-speaking African countries.<sup>9</sup> I’m based at the campus of São Francisco de Conde (Bahia). The faculty is diverse and its members are of different nationalities: Brazilians, African speakers of Portuguese, French, and English, as well as people from all over Latin America and the Caribbean. Besides Brazilian and African colleagues, we have Cuban, Venezuelan, and Colombian professors. It is a rich and multicultural environment, but also

challenging because of the cultural diversity.

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<sup>9</sup> Unilab caters especially for students from Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, Portugal, and East Timor (Timor-Leste). For more details, see [unilab.edu.br](http://unilab.edu.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

The Brazilian Ministry of Education has suspended classes and all face-to-face work at universities, including ours, due to the pandemic. We work remotely, teach online classes from home through different platforms. I teach live lessons online and record lessons in advance, too. Then I upload the videos and share them with the students. It was a challenge to learn how to handle these communication tools. The university offered a course and all the teachers had to take it.

Faculty meetings are online, as well as other academic events. Regarding the bureaucratic processes of the university, such as signing documents, everything is done digitally through the university's system. With the pandemic, our teaching workload has increased significantly. We have more meetings than when the classes were face-to-face. We have administrative work to do in addition to the tasks inherent to the teaching activities. Now, besides reading texts, summarizing them, preparing presentations, and preparing live lessons, we must record lessons in advance, edit them, upload them and make the link available to students. All this is time consuming. Live classes are easier than pre-recorded ones because I can also record them and after an hour I can send them to the students.

**Have you also experienced positive transformations during this period?**

The relationship with my coworkers have deteriorated somewhat because of the stress caused by too much work and meetings. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has facilitated cooperation, eliminated physical barriers, and provided greater contact with colleagues and partners in Africa and Europe, as well as with Brazilian colleagues in other cities and states. During the pandemic new forms of lectures, debates, and academic events have emerged, which are now online and free of charge. Recently, I organized an event with a Mozambican colleague who lives in South Africa. Before the pandemic, this class would have had to be done in person with the costs of travel, food, accommodation, and commuting.

The pandemic has also brought new dynamics to work meetings. It has facilitated some time-consuming procedures, such as writing protocols for meetings and resolving paper-based processes. Now everything has been digitalized. The pandemic has come to save time, money, and energy by forcing us to digitize almost all processes. I can communicate with my students, colleagues, and advisors from home and vice-versa. We don't have to leave home, which saves time and money on transportation and food.

**And could you tell us a little bit about how the pandemic has affected your routine and your life in general?**

I avoid leaving the house. I even went almost a month without leaving the house. I go out only to shop for basic items. I try to comply with safety measures. When I do leave the house, I wear a mask and use disinfectant. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected my life, my physical and mental health, and my family relationships. Since it began, I have spent a lot of time in front of the computer. During the suspension of classes I had many meetings. In total, I attended more than ninety meetings in 2020. I started to become nearsighted and have a lot of headaches, as well as back problems and am a bit overweight.

**Can you tell us about the migrants you work with?**

I work with migrants and people who migrated from Africa and now live in the city of Fortaleza (Ceará) or in the countryside of Bahia, in the municipality of São Francisco do Conde<sup>10</sup>. They are from Portuguese-speaking African countries: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe.

On the one hand, I do research on university students from Unilab or other Brazilian universities and on the other hand, I investigate the situation

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<sup>10</sup> The two research sites are both located in the Northeast of Brazil but are 1000 km apart from each other.

of pregnant women, women who have recently given birth, or who have had a child in the last five years. I am studying the relationship of these women from Portuguese-speaking African countries with the health care units of the Brazilian public healthcare system. I conduct interviews with the women, their partners, and the involved health professionals, such as nurses and doctors.

**And how has the pandemic affected your research?**

My research has been severely affected by the pandemic. I don't leave the house that much. I do online research. I send questionnaires to my interviewees. This is the way I have found to avoid completely stopping my research.

The pandemic has also affected my way of doing research. Because of my background in Social Sciences and Sociology, I have always done fieldwork. I like to conduct participant observation, talk informally with my interviewees in the streets, in their homes, and even in their work environment. The pandemic has changed this – there is the risk of contamination by the coronavirus, the restrictions of travel and social distancing, and masks. I like to walk around in the cities, to ride the buses, to visit people's houses. The pandemic has made this almost impossible. I can't do field research, I can't do interviews, I can't talk face-to-face with my interviewees. My work is ethnographic, with lots of interviews and informal conversations. Few people answer the online questionnaires. I had to change my interview script, modify the questions. It is not the same doing field research face-to-face and doing research using online forms. Before the pandemic, I did longer interviews. With online forms, the answers are simpler. People don't go into details. I can't ask more intimate questions using online forms.

**Can you tell us a little more how the pandemic has affected the situation of the people you work with in your research in Fortaleza (Ceará) and in São Francisco do Conde (Bahia)?**

So far, I have not heard of any infected Africans in Fortaleza or São Francisco do Conde. I keep in touch with them via online social networks. But they are exposed to the virus because they do precarious work, on building sites, as waiters, among others. These sectors have been more vulnerable to infections during the pandemic.

**And how has your own situation changed throughout the last year?**

Because of the pandemic and the fatigue that came with it, I am changing my research focus. My research on migration requires fieldwork, as I mentioned before. It requires walking in the streets, visiting people's houses, observing interactions. So, next year I will do a postdoc on the health of migrants from Africa. However, I plan to change the focus of the research after this course. I will base my research more on literature reviews and documental research. I will also change my research topic.

**Could you tell us a bit more about how the pandemic has led to a change in your research interests?**

I am changing my research field to issues related to Mozambique, my home country. Currently, I am studying the internal and external politics of Mozambique. I am trying to understand the systemic changes that have happened in Mozambique in the last forty years: the civil war, the peace treaties, the elections, governance, and poverty. In this field, the research is essentially bibliographic and documentary. It does not require fieldwork.

From being a field researcher, I have become an essayist, a conjuncture analyst. It is the kind of research I never wanted to do. Since the time of my graduation in Mozambique I have been doing field research, going

from house to house, riding in the bus beside people, talking to people. From now on this will change.

**Could you tell us a bit more about the impacts the pandemic has had on your career, the academic career of a young sociologist living in Brazil?**

I intended to do my post-doctorate abroad, in Mozambique. Because of the pandemic and the uncertainties caused by travel restrictions, as well as uncertainty about vaccines, I decided to do my postdoc at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in Salvador. This university is close to my house. I decided to do the postdoc nearby because I will have less expenses. Some years ago, I planned to do field research with migrants in Africa, but the pandemic worsened my situation and made this almost impossible.

The decision to do the post-doctorate in UFBA was pragmatic and, at the same time, a desperate, hurried decision. I realized that the crisis created by the pandemic would last much longer here in Brazil because of the denial from the government we have. Instead of encouraging prevention measures, such as the use of masks, social distancing and vaccination, the government [of Jair Bolsonaro] did the opposite. The government caused and encouraged gatherings as well as the non-use of masks. Furthermore, the government has always been against vaccination. So, when I understood this, I decided to do my postdoc “at home”. I was lucky because I will do it in a social sciences post-graduate program with a renowned professor who does research in the health area.

**Maybe you would like to tell us a bit more about your future plans?**

Right now, the most important thing is not to expose myself to the risks of infection by the coronavirus. The health system in Brazil is collapsing. I have seen people I know dying in hospital corridors for lack of treatment.

As an African in Brazil, I hope I won't get infected. I have no family here. If I do, I will certainly die at home or in the corridor of some public hospital. Therefore, I leave home as little as possible and only to buy food.

**Ercílio, we are very sorry for your losses. And we are sad to hear about the terrible situation in Brazil. Thank you very much for your time and we hope to meet you soon in Bahia, with Jair Bolsonaro gone.**

**Ercílio Langa** is an assistant professor at the Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (Unilab), a federal public educational institution which has campuses in the Brazilian states of Ceará and Bahia and admits students from Brazil and Portuguese-speaking African countries and from Timor-Leste. He has a B.A. in Social Sciences from the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, Mozambique), and a master's degree and a PhD in Sociology from the Federal University of Ceará, Brazil.

Ercílio is from Mozambique and has been living in Brazil for over a decade. He does research on the livelihoods of African students and migrants and their interactions with public services in the Brazilian cities of Fortaleza (Ceará) and São Francisco do Conde (Bahia).

“One of the consequences of this situation is a greater precariousness of living conditions, and a decrease in international solidarity due to the lower frequency of money remittances to relatives in the country of origin.”

Interview with Kassoum Dieme, MA, University of Brasília



Kassoum Dieme, MA

**Could you tell us a bit about your current work situation and that of your colleagues? How has the pandemic affected your activities?**

I am a doctoral student and my field research with people from Senegal should have taken place in Brazil (Brasília, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul) and in Canada (Quebec) in the first quarter of 2020. During this period, Brazil registered the first cases of Covid-19. The University of Brasília (UnB) was forced to close several facilities, including its library. With the global restrictions on travelling, I postponed my fieldwork. Meanwhile, I started online “field research” in contexts where either the pandemic situation was

alarming, or personal access was difficult for me because of the health situation.



Besides that, as a member of the Laboratory for Studies on International Migration (LAEMI)<sup>11</sup> at the UnB, I have been involved in field research on Haitian migration in Brasília and Haiti since 2018. With the outbreak of Covid-19, the Laboratory facilities were closed and its members cannot use the space. We continued our activities online in a more moderate format – there is more understanding about the pace of production of the work since we do not know the impacts of isolation on people.

These are the ways we found, individually or institutionally, to cope with the pandemic.

**Could you tell us about the population of migrants you are working or doing research with, and about their situation before the pandemic?**

First, I have to say that my research is still going on. I am doing research on the Senegalese population in Brazil and in Canada. From an occupational point of view, it is quite diverse. The Senegalese are in academia – as students or professors, working as street peddlers in certain parts of the city, employed in private companies, or working as freelancers with small businesses. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the (employment) situation was not the same for all these immigrants. There were those with good incomes and, so to say, financial stability, and those whose monthly income was unpredictable. For those in more precarious conditions of work and income, it was still possible to find ways to alleviate to their situations by sharing rent, working very late at night, and getting support from other people.

**Can you tell us about how the situation of the people from Senegal with whom you work in Brazil and in Canada was affected by the pandemic?**

What we have seen so far is that the everyday life of Senegalese migrants in some parts of Brazil and Canada, like that of the population in general, changed significantly. There are those who started to work online with

<sup>11</sup> [ela.unb.br](http://ela.unb.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

the pandemic. In general, these are the ones with better work conditions, formally employed. Often, they work in public or private education, with stable work contracts. However, we know that one of our interlocutors lost 25% of his income.

On the other hand, those who are self-employed, working as peddlers or owners of small businesses have seen their incomes significantly reduced. Many had to comply with orders from public authorities, who stopped certain commercial activities in public spaces or closed schools and restaurants, for example. Besides the reduction in income, one of the consequences of this situation is a greater precariousness of living conditions for some, and a decrease in international solidarity due to the lower frequency of money remittances to relatives in the country of origin.

An interviewee told me one of his cousins, who lives in Belo Horizonte [Southeastern Brazil] and works in a restaurant, was infected by the virus in his work environment. Despite that, he recovered at home. Others had to limit their movements to reduce the chance of infection for themselves and for others. They did not leave their workplace and their home to visit friends and/or relatives for many weeks, for example. One of the persons we talked to was concerned about mental health because of being indoors and working in the same space for a long period.

Up to now, we have not interviewed anyone who is unemployed, but one of our interlocutors in Canada mentioned this problem.

**Can you tell us about how the pandemic has affected your family and friends in your home region?**

I am from the Ziguinchor region [of Senegal], but I have relatives in Dakar, Tambacounda, and Thiès, just to name a few other regions. I didn't hear of any family members or friends infected by the coronavirus in the region I am originally from. Based on the statistics regarding infections and deaths from the Ministry of Health of Senegal, this region has not been very af-

affected so far. Therefore, it has not brutally paralyzed economic activities, amongst other things.

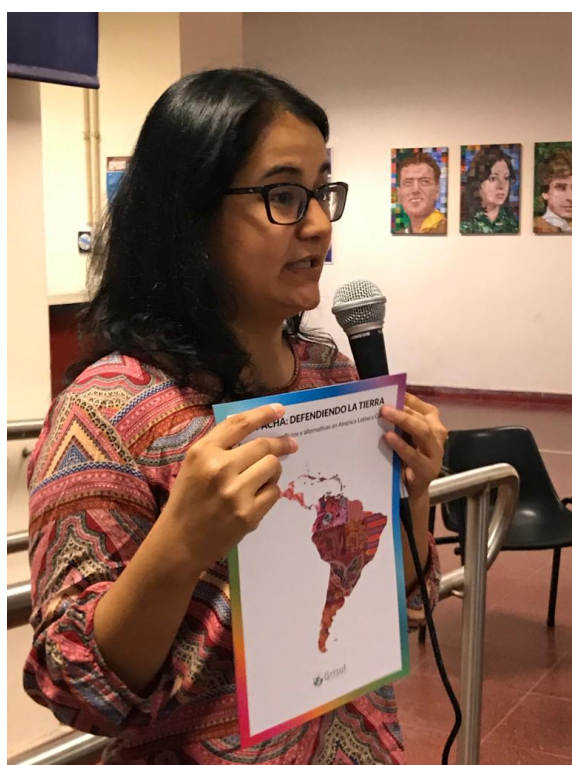
However, the measures taken by the administrative authorities during 2020 and the first half of 2021 to close certain spaces have affected the work of many who live in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. These measures have affected especially women working in commerce, tourism, or in public health. They had their activities paralyzed for a relatively long period. There was unemployment and loss of salaries for several months. Regarding school activities, my siblings and cousins could not study for some months.

**Thank you very much, Kassoum. We hope to be able to meet with you again soon – in Germany or in Brazil and in a better situation.**

**Kassoum Dieme** is a doctoral candidate in Latin American Studies (ELA) in the Graduate Program in Comparative Studies on the Americas (PPG-ECsA) at the University of Brasília (UnB), Brazil. He does research on Senegalese migration to Brazil and Canada. He holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology (2006) and a degree in Social Sciences (2008) from UnB. He has a specialization in Public Policy from the Federal University of Goiás (2011), Brazil, and a master's degree in Sociology from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) (2016), Brazil. He has been a member of the Laboratory for Studies on International Migration (LAEMI) at the University of Brasília since 2018. His research interests are international migration, gender, race, and work relations.

“In contrast to the precarious response of the Brazilian national and local governments, civil society has been very active.”

Interview with Dr. María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar, Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO)



Dr. María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar

**Could you tell us a bit about the current work situation of yourself and your colleagues?**

I work at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). I am a professor in the Graduate Program in Political Science of this institution. The pandemic has completely changed my routine and that of my colleagues and students. Our classes were interrupted in mid-March and resumed in mid-2020. Since then, my colleagues and I have taught and conducted all administrative, research, supervision, and science outreach activities *online*.

On a personal level, the pandemic has changed many of my habits and my teaching. I know most of my students personally

because they took other courses I taught before the pandemic. In the case of new students, I have dozens of people I know only online, with the challenges this entails. The pandemic has affected classes and students' forms of attending the University – in addition to the fact that it has impacted them negatively at a family level, economically, or in terms of mental health. On the other hand, there are cases in which students from the

periphery mention that online classes allow them to save time and money by avoiding hours of commuting to attend classes [at the University campus in Botafogo, downtown Rio de Janeiro]. Thus, I have observed that the pandemic has generated multidimensional effects – not all of them are negative, at least not entirely.

**Could you tell us about the population of migrants you are working or doing research with, and about their situation before the pandemic?**

I am doing research on migration policies, governance, cooperation, and multilateralism regarding migration. In this context, I have worked with diverse migrant populations. I am currently working on a project concerning the role of civil society, especially that of migrant organizations. In the conversations I have had with representatives of these organizations – and in my own experience of collaboration with some of them – I see that the pandemic has deepened the already precarious situation of migrants and refugees. Besides an increase in unemployment, precariousness or structural labor exploitation, the pandemic has generated and deepened multiple difficulties, such as hunger, lack of resources to pay the rent, or increased gender violence. Additionally, it has significantly decreased the ability of migrants to send remittances to their families. This has provoked the return of some people to their countries of origin and, in other cases, a search for new destinations to emigrate to.

Besides this, the precarious conditions in which migrants live in Brazil have affected not only their physical, but also their mental health. In contrast to this panorama and the precarious response of the [Brazilian] national and local governments, civil society has been very active. During the pandemic, various civil society organizations – especially migrants' associations and collectives – have carried out various assistance initiatives, and fought for health and regularization rights, to name just a couple of their activities.

**And how has your personal situation changed during the past year?**

My situation is very different from the period before the pandemic. Not necessarily worse, but different. I always work at home and leave my apartment only when I need to or to take outdoor exercise. Besides work, outside cultural activities are few, and leisure activities most often take place at home. However, I resumed some activities a couple of months ago. For example, I acted as an international observer at the presidential elections in Ecuador at the beginning of April [2021]. It was my first trip since the pandemic began.

Besides this, my husband and I had Covid-19, but we did not suffer severe symptoms. However, my husband, who is from Rio de Janeiro, lost three family members: two of his grandparents and an uncle.

Apart from our personal situation, we are worried about the present and the future of the country. The disastrous management of the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, and the inadequate responses to the pandemic, have caused more than four hundred thousand deaths [thus far]. Unemployment, poverty, and hunger have once again become very serious problems in Brazil, with no solutions in sight in the short or medium terms.

**We are deeply sorry to hear about these very difficult circumstances and the irreparable losses in your family.**

**Could you tell us a bit more about how the pandemic affected your relatives, friends, and acquaintances in your home region?**

Fortunately, my family and close friends have not suffered serious consequences because of Covid-19 in my home region, but I know several people who suffered with severe symptoms and some have died. In addition, the pandemic has affected the country's economy in general. This has caused further job insecurity and a significant loss of jobs. However,

the situation seems to be improving. I feel reassured now because my parents and my sister have recently been vaccinated. In Italy, where I lived for many years and where I also have part of my family and dear friends, the situation is slowly improving, and fortunately I have not lost any close friends or relatives.

However, the situation here in Brazil is different. As I mentioned before, my husband, who is from Rio [de Janeiro], lost three family members in the same week, and the process was more complicated because of the pandemic. Societies historically have rituals to help people overcome tragedies, like collective mourning. This has completely changed in a scenario like the Covid-19 [pandemic]. People must be buried quickly, with only very few family members present. I believe this dynamic affected my husband's family very much. Apart from infection [with the Covid-19 virus] and the health difficulties experienced by some friends, there have been no other serious consequences in my closest circle.

However, the increase of precariousness and poverty in Rio de Janeiro and in Brazil in general is visible. There is a greater presence of homeless people, and, whether through friends, relatives, or students, we know many people who have become unemployed and are going through very difficult times. The responses from the national and local governments have been insufficient and the situation seems to worsen every day. In this context, the solidarity shown by civil society has been able to partially limit the effects of the pandemic.

**You mentioned that civil society has been very active in the ways it has “dealt” with the pandemic. Could you describe in more detail an example that you have followed or heard about of an association that has helped migrants?**

Civil society organizations – particularly associations and collectives of migrants – are very active in general. Due to a significant increase in precari-

ousness and poverty in the context of the pandemic – which has created a real humanitarian emergency – these organizations and collectives have multiplied their activities. For example, organizations that do not have social assistance among their functions started to do so, by organizing online fundraising campaigns for the purchase of food baskets or to guarantee a minimum income for particular families.

Concomitantly, debates, research, and political actions have taken place to make the situation of migrants more visible in the context of Covid-19. One of the most important actions was to demand data on infections and deaths, because there is no official data on how Covid-19 has affected migrants and refugees in Brazil. After pressure from organizations – such as the Peace Mission (Missão Paz<sup>12</sup>), the Center for Human Rights and Citizenship of the Immigrant (CDHIC<sup>13</sup>), the Space Without Borders (Espacio Sin Fronteras<sup>14</sup>), the Crossed Borders International Forum (Fronteiras Cruzadas – Fontié ki kwaze<sup>15</sup>), the Latin American Presence (PAL<sup>16</sup>), the Social Union of Haitian Immigrants (USIH<sup>17</sup>), the Caritas Reference Center for Refugees in São Paulo<sup>18</sup>, and the Warmís Base Team<sup>19</sup> – we now have some estimate numbers and a bill (PL 26/2020<sup>20</sup>) in the [National] Congress demanding the inclusion of nationality in the records of the Ministry of Health. This is important because the lack of health information about migrants in Brazil is structural and goes far beyond the pandemic. As part of this process, the First National Plenary on Health and Migration<sup>21</sup> will be held in June 2021, during Covid-19 times, to discuss the state

<sup>12</sup> [missaonspaz.org](http://missaonspaz.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>13</sup> [cdhic.org.br](http://cdhic.org.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>14</sup> [espaciosinfronteras.wordpress.com](http://espaciosinfronteras.wordpress.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fontieforum.org> [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>16</sup> [palbrasil.com.br](http://palbrasil.com.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>17</sup> [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>18</sup> [caritassp.org.br](http://caritassp.org.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>19</sup> [warmis.org](http://warmis.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>20</sup> [www25.senado.leg.br](http://www25.senado.leg.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>21</sup> [fsm.org.br](http://fsm.org.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].



of health of the migrant population in the country and to analyze problems and challenges in this field, as well as to propose public policies for its improvement.

Another important action in the pandemic context is the “Regularization Now” (Regularização Já) campaign for the immediate, permanent, and unconditional regularization of migrants in Brazil. The campaign initially emerged in Spain and assumes that no human being is illegal, and that, among vulnerable people, migrants in irregular situations are one of the most affected groups – without documents they have no access to social benefits. They have no rights to any kind of medical care in some countries and are more vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity. In principle, healthcare access in Brazil is not a problem because the Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde) should provide universal healthcare. Despite this, the lack of regularization prevents [some] people from accessing programs like the Emergency Financial Assistance (Auxílio Emergencial<sup>22</sup>) created by the [federal] government in the context of the pandemic – they face multiple problems in accessing public services and have their rights seriously limited.

In Brazil, the campaign was promoted by the Grassroots Team Warmís and supported from the beginning by several collectives of migrants and refugees, such as the Canicas Project<sup>23</sup>, Cio da Terra – Collective of Immigrant Women<sup>24</sup>, the Network of Lesbian, Bisexual and Pansexual Immigrant Women (MILBI<sup>25</sup>), Presence of Latin America (PAL), African Diasporas, Project Sí, Yo Puedo<sup>26</sup>, the Association of Bolivian Residents in Brazil<sup>27</sup>, and the International Forum Crossed Borders. Over time, this

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<sup>22</sup> [help.unhcr.org](https://help.unhcr.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>23</sup> [linktr.ee](https://linktr.ee) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>24</sup> [facebook.com](https://facebook.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>25</sup> [facebook.com](https://facebook.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>26</sup> [facebook.com](https://facebook.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>27</sup> [facebook.com](https://facebook.com) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

campaign acquired a transnational character and gained space in Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina. The organization of online petitions and collections of signatures, livestreams on online social networks, debates, and artistic performances were central to the promotion of this campaign. One of its main results was the creation of a bill (PL 2699/2020<sup>28</sup>) that “institutes emergency measures of migratory regularization in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic”.

In this very complex context, I would like to highlight that despite all the attacks that science and public education suffered [from the federal government] in Brazil, academia and particularly several institutions that have research groups working on migration and refugees, or professorships specialized in the topic, such as the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair<sup>29</sup>, have been particularly active. Their role has been important, whether organizing debates, supporting organizations through social assistance and advocacy, or producing research reports and newsletters, for example.

**You mentioned the “multidimensional effects” of the pandemic – that not all these effects are necessarily negative. Could you tell us a bit more about the positive effects you have observed?**

Regarding the multidimensional effects I highlighted earlier, I believe that the pandemic has allowed greater interaction between groups and organizations at the national and international levels, for example. It has not only been possible to increase the exchange of experiences, and to learn more about different trajectories of work and activism, but also to coordinate them. An example of this process is the “Regularization Now” Campaign that I mentioned before. The creation of joint initiatives has increased remarkably, and events and campaigns with the participation of international guests has become the norm.

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<sup>28</sup> [camara.leg.br](http://camara.leg.br) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

<sup>29</sup> [acnur.org](http://acnur.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

There has been an increase in international collaboration in academic initiatives, too. One project that has emerged in this context and in which I am participating, along with dozens of researchers from the Americas, is the (In)movilidad en las Américas – Covid-19 project<sup>30</sup>.

Another example is the increase in calls for solidarity beyond borders. In a context of organizing online campaigns to help vulnerable populations – whether migrants or not – it is now common to create mechanisms to enable international donations and to receive help from people living in other countries. I have no data to confirm this, but it seems that in this *online* context it has become easier to break down barriers between the internal and the external. As a result, the volume of donations has increased, at least in some projects.

**María, thank you very much for accepting our invitation to take part in this interview.**

**María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar** is a professor in the Political Science Post-Graduation Program at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil, and currently has a scholarship for top-scoring graduates from the Research Support Foundation of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ). She holds a master's degree in Contemporary Latin American Studies and a PhD in Political Science from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. María completed her postdoctoral studies in political sociology at the Universidade Estadual do Norte Fluminense Darcy Ribeiro (UENF) in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is a member of the Latitude Sul Platform, the International Relations and Global South Research Group (GRISUL) of UNIRIO, and the Interdisciplinary Center for Migratory Studies (Núcleo Interdisciplinar de Estudos Migratórios) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She is an editor of *Latinoamérica21* and member of the Network of Women Political Scientists “Red de Politólogas – No Sin Mujeres”. She teaches and

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<sup>30</sup> [en.inmovilidadamericas.org](http://en.inmovilidadamericas.org) [accessed: September 14th, 2021].

## Interview with Dr. María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar

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does research on the following topics: international migration and human rights; multilateralism, cooperation and regional integration; environment, development and climate change.

## About the Authors

**Eva Bahl** is a researcher at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences, University of Göttingen. She has worked in the research projects “The social construction of border zones: A comparison of two geopolitical cases” (2014–2019) and “Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany – Processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration” (since 2019), both funded by the German Research Foundation. In her PhD thesis she investigated the memory practices and constructions of belonging in the Spanish border towns Ceuta and Melilla. Her research interests include interpretative research methods, ethnography, biographical research, migration and border studies, historical sociology and collective memory. Contact: [ebahl@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:ebahl@uni-goettingen.de)

**Lucas Cé Sangalli** did his master’s thesis on constructions of belonging of migrants from Haiti in southern Brazil at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil in 2015. Since 2019, he has been a researcher in the project “Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany – Processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences, University of Göttingen. He has been awarded a grant for doctoral studies by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). His doctoral project deals with changing belongings of people from Darfur (Sudan), along their migration courses to Europe. His research interests include biographical research, sociology of knowledge and figurational sociology, family sociology, and research on migration and ethnicity. Contact: [lucas.sangalli@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:lucas.sangalli@uni-goettingen.de)

# Global Migration Studies

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University of Göttingen  
Centre for Global Migration Studies  
Heinrich-Düker-Weg 14  
37073 Göttingen  
Germany

+49 (0)551 39 25358  
cemig@uni-goettingen.de  
<https://www.cemig.uni-goettingen.de>