

## Wars and other current challenges for health and life

### Las guerras y otros retos actuales para la salud y la vida

---

**Marcos Arana-Cedeño.** Defensoría del Derecho a la Salud / Centro de Capacitación en Ecología y Salud, México. IBFAN, International Baby Food Action Network, coordinador en América Latina y El Caribe.  
Email: [observatoriosalud@gmail.com](mailto:observatoriosalud@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8119-3507>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.71164/socialmedicine.v18i2.2025.2147>

*April 22, Earth Day*

Sixteen years ago, *Social Medicine* published a special issue dedicated to the theme of War and Health. This issue was organized to commemorate the first anniversary of the adoption of the Social Determinants of Health report. The editorial of this special issue was written by Victor W. Sidel and Barry S. Levy under the title *The Health Consequences of the Diversion of Resources to War and War Preparedness*.<sup>1</sup> Although the text, published in September 2009, pointed out in detail the outrageous military spending of countries and the consequent reduction of resources available for health and other economic and social rights, the editorial mentioned with some optimism that the U.S. military budget had been reduced and that this fact could mark a downward trend. However, a little more than three decades later, we see that the world finds itself in a new and frenetic arms race that not only threatens to reduce the budget for health, education and humanitarian aid to minimum figures, but also fuels several armed conflicts that have generated political tension that places the planet in a situation of very high risk of a military conflagration of much greater dimensions.

On the other hand, the brilliant editorial mentioned above was written only three years after the publication of Al Gore's report, *An Inconvenient Truth*,<sup>2</sup> a document that for the first time made public what scientific studies from various parts of the world had pointed out decades earlier: the concentration of large quantities of carbon gases in the atmosphere, a product of human activity, will have serious consequences on the climate, health and life on the planet. It took several more years

for clarity to emerge regarding the enormous amount of greenhouse gas emissions that weapons production and military movements release into the atmosphere, even in times of peace.<sup>3</sup> We began to understand also that this impressive carbon footprint multiplies astronomically when there are wars; which not only pollute, but produce vast sacrifice zones and serious harm at the planetary level.<sup>4</sup>

Military spending not only has consequences on the availability of resources for health, as described by Barry and Levy. There are several other important consequences, including pollution, and the destruction of housing, crops and other productive infrastructure, causing, in short, the destruction of entire ecosystems. This extensive harm deepens inequalities, generates poverty, causes the forced displacement of millions of people and, as a consequence, produces more disease and death.

As if this were not enough, all of this occurs in the midst of a serious climate crisis which, despite the denialist positions taken by several governments, is manifesting itself with increasing intensity, multiplying disaster situations. Numerous scientific evidences sustain that the planet's climate crisis has passed a point of no return.

In 2019, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in many different parts of the planet took to the streets to demand governments and international organizations adopt urgent measures to face the environmental crisis, which became more evident when simultaneously gigantic fires ravaged vast areas of the Amazon, Australia and California. This made the urgency of taking immediate action



even more apparent. However, in 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic disarticulated the demonstrations and pressure in favor of the environment, forcing everyone to stay at home, completely diverting the focus of world attention.

In mid-2020, in the midst of the pandemic, a WHO/UNICEF/Lancet commission report on the health and wellbeing of the world's children for the coming decades<sup>5</sup> was presented and disseminated. This report, the product of extensive effort on the development of indicators and which required several years of work in 180 countries, concluded that climate change, pollution and commercial pressures that promote unhealthy lifestyles will prevent the next generations from accessing health and wellbeing conditions, even in those countries that currently have the best indicators. This report should have helped focus international attention on climate change and pollution; however, it was largely overshadowed by the pandemic. Although the discussion of this document was not as abundant as expected, several voices agreed that war and violence were two additional threats that made the projection of conditions for the world's children even more daunting.

The pandemic postponed indefinitely many of the actions that had been identified as urgent to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis. The postponement of these measures will have, in the medium and long term, a high cost in lives, illnesses and suffering, in addition to requiring the allocation of large economic resources to deal with disaster situations, diverting attention from other enormous and dire needs within the population.

However, the pandemic also brought lessons; such as the “painful pedagogy of the virus,” referred to by Boaventura de Sousa.<sup>6</sup> One of the most surprising and hopeful lessons, is that the weeks of increased confinement, during which mobility and consumption were reduced, had as an unexpected response: clear skies, less noise, less smog and a significant reduction in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Many wild animals reappeared in their former habitats, momentarily recovering their spaces. This phenomenon was clear evidence of the resilience

of ecosystems and of the positive impact of the reduction of several human activities.

The mosaic of vaccines that was developed and applied without much scientific rigor worldwide to deal with SARS-CoV-2 was certainly an important factor in limiting the pandemic. However, it is difficult to elucidate whether the major motivation for the development and application of vaccines was to save lives and reduce human suffering, or whether the development of vaccines was driven primarily by economic interests pressing for a return to normal production and consumption. What is clear is that the emphasis on vaccination over other measures to control the pandemic, and to prevent future pandemics, had a collateral effect, causing a profound amnesia:<sup>7</sup> the cruel pedagogy of the virus was forgotten, as were the important clues for how to address the climate crisis, which were given by many ecosystems demonstrating their potential for regeneration and resilience when mobilization, production and consumption declined.

Before the opportunity arose for global attention to turn back to addressing the climate crisis once the pandemic had passed, three new wars, in Ukraine, Sudan, and the genocide in Gaza, were added to the armed conflict in the Congo, active since 2008.

In May 2023, the WHO declared the end of the pandemic, a year and a half after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and shortly after the start of the war in Sudan and the Hamas attack that triggered Israel's military actions, which turned into the war of extermination it is currently waging against the Palestinians.

The post-pandemic period is characterized by an uncontrollable spiral of militarism, political tensions, wars, weakening of democracies and the international human rights system, as well as increasing repression of freedom of speech and press.

If we agree that health conditions are largely a result of the ability of populations to exercise their economic, social and cultural rights, we see clearly how the outlook for the coming years presents gigantic challenges. There is no greater obstacle to

the realization of the right to life, health, food, housing, education and other economic, social and cultural rights, than wars. These are also the forces that most violently accelerate the climate crisis.

The deliberate use of hunger and disease as a form of collective punishment, the mass murder of children, sexual violence as a weapon of war, the bombing of hospitals and ambulances, the assassination, arbitrary detention and torture of medical personnel and many other atrocities are committed in these conflicts with increasing force and frequency, encouraged by impunity. International humanitarian law, the product of a great effort over many years to minimize atrocities against humanity, has been seriously eroded by the impunity enjoyed by governments and militaries during the current conflicts.

In the face of this disorienting and challenging panorama, social medicine, resulting from social and humanitarian practice, with solid ethical and theoretical foundations, constitutes a compass to avoid going astray, and to meet with fellow human beings. The light to walk in these dark moments comes largely from knowing that the struggle to improve health is inseparable from the defense of human rights and from the struggle to preserve the planet.

## References

1. Sidel W, Victor y Levy S Barry, (editorial) The Health Consequences of the Diversion of Resources to War and War Preparedness, *Medicina Social*, 4:3 Septiembre de 2009 pp 151-157.
2. Gore, Al, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Rodale, N. York, 2006
3. Murtaza Hussain, War on the World, Industrialized Militaries are a Bigger Part of the Climate Emergency than you know, *The Intercept*, September 15, 2019. Available in: <https://theintercept.com/2019/09/15/climate-change-us-military-war/>
4. MacNeill, J R y Unger R, Corinna (eds) *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, German Historical Institute, Cambridge University Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-52176244-1
5. Helen Clark, Awa Marie Coll-Seck, Anshu Banerjee, Stefan Peterson, Sarah L Dalglish, Shanthi Ameratunga et al. A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-The Lancet, *The Lancet* Vol. 395 No. 10224 P605-658. Available in: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32540-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32540-1/fulltext)
6. Dos Santos, Boaventura. *La Cruel Pedagogía del Virus (The cruel pedagogy of the virus)*, AKAL, Mexico. Available in: [https://www.akal.com/media/imagenes/Cruel\\_pedagogia\\_virus.pdf](https://www.akal.com/media/imagenes/Cruel_pedagogia_virus.pdf)
7. Arana, Marcos, Fighting COVID-19 Pandemic: Linear Responses for a Complex Problem, GIFA, Ginebra, noviembre 3, 2021. Available in: <https://www.gifa.org/en/fighting-covid-19-pandemic-linear-responses-for-a-complex-problem-2/>



# Social Medicine

Health For All

ISSN: 1557-7112