



TRAINING REFLECTION
November-December 2022

The Post Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis

Pope Francis recently spoke about the heavy toll the Covid-19 pandemic has taken on the world. As this is one of the themes of our next International Assembly, we would like to share with you some of the Pope's thoughts, as well as a brief analysis of the impact Covid-19 has had on different sections of society.

Lastly, we will share several actions set up by AIC groups to meet some of the needs that have arisen during this terrible crisis in the lives of our brothers and sisters living in poverty.

Pope Francis speaks to us

“[During the pandemic] All of us felt vulnerable, all of us in need of help, none of us completely independent, none completely self-sufficient. Presently however, we are challenged not to squander the powerful sense of solidarity that we experienced by pressing on as if nothing happened [...]

In addition to reminding us of our vulnerability and our responsibility, believers in a post-pandemic world are called to *care*: to care for humanity in all its aspects [...]

How do we embark upon so demanding a mission? Where do we begin? We begin by listening to the poor, by giving a voice to the voiceless, by bearing witness to a global solidarity concerned above all for them, the poor and the needy, who suffered most from the pandemic, which so forcefully brought out the injustice of global inequalities and imbalances. [...]

Let us show ourselves neighbours to all, but especially to those most neglected in our time: the disinherited, the poor and the helpless [...]

What I propose is not only a path to greater attentiveness and solidarity, but also a path to healing for our societies. For poverty is precisely what enables the spread of epidemics and other great evils [...] *Poverty* continues to be the major factor of risk in our day. [...] As long as inequality and injustice continue to proliferate, there will be no end to viruses even worse than Covid: the viruses of hatred, violence and terrorism.”

– Extracts from the Address of his Holiness during the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, Kazakhstan, 14/09/2022



Overlapping crises

The pandemic and education

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted education in more than 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students. The educational response during the first phase of the pandemic focused on implementing remote learning methods as an emergency response. The aim was that all students could benefit from such methods, but this was not always the case.

Unfortunately, access to digital infrastructure and connectivity remains extremely limited in the world's poorest countries. And while the pandemic highlights the need to increase connectivity, it could also widen the digital divide, as private investment is limited and public funding is diverted to address urgent policy priorities such as health and social protection.

The short- and long-term impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis on children's education will be profound. The pandemic and school closures not only jeopardized children's health and safety with increased domestic violence and child labor, but also substantially affected student learning. One report indicates that, in low- and middle-income countries, the proportion of children living in learning poverty, which already exceeded 50% before the pandemic, could reach 70%, largely as a result of long school closures and the relative ineffectiveness of distance learning. Children in countries such as Brazil, rural Pakistan, rural India, South Africa and Mexico, among others, show substantial losses in math and reading.

The effects of Covid-19 on education could last for decades, and not only cause short-term learning loss, but also reduce long-term economic opportunities for this generation of students.

With economic conditions forcing families to make difficult spending decisions, concerns about dropout rates have increased.

Food crisis

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2020 the total number of people suffering from malnutrition may have increased by 83 to 132 million due to the pandemic.

Moreover, children – boys and girls – are also vulnerable to the global increase in food insecurity affecting people in both rural and urban settings. Even before the beginning of the pandemic, the number of people suffering from malnutrition was on the rise.

Conflicts and violence

In many places, food insecurity and the pandemic have exacerbated the impact of vulnerability, conflict and violence, potentially reversing development gains. In 2000, 1 in 5 of the world's extremely poor people lived in countries experiencing vulnerability and conflict. Since then, the number of poor people living in such environments has continued to rise.



Today, about half of the world's poor are affected by situations of vulnerability and conflict. Indeed, poverty is becoming concentrated in vulnerable and conflict-ridden places. It is predicted that up to two-thirds of the world's extremely poor will be living in such places by 2030. Covid-19 is likely to further accentuate this trend.

Accelerated deterioration of the economy

The restrictions put in place to control the spread of the virus have had a huge impact on economic growth. Covid-19 has unleashed an unprecedented global crisis, a global health crisis which, in addition to having an immense human cost, is leading to the biggest global recession since World War II. This coming year 2023, the global economy and per capita incomes are expected to slump, pushing millions of people into extreme poverty.

The impact of the pandemic on different sections of society

The new poor

Over the past 12 months, the pandemic has hit the poor and vulnerable the hardest, and could push millions more people into poverty. This year, after decades of steady progress in reducing the number of people living on less than \$1.90 a day, Covid-19 will mark the first setback in the fight against extreme poverty in a generation.

The most recent analyses warn that Covid-19 has pushed 88 million more people into extreme poverty this year, and that this figure is just a starting point. In a worst-case scenario, the number of people living in extreme poverty could reach 115 million.

The effects on women

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, which has contributed to increasing gender inequality in health and threatens women's development and well-being.

During periods of lockdown, imposed in order to slow down the spread of the virus, women spent more time at home, a place that was unsafe for many. During these periods, calls to domestic violence hotlines increased by up to 40% in some countries.

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on women's health. While it is known that women are slightly less likely to develop severe disease from Covid-19 than men, it is also known that in marginalized areas women were likely to be diagnosed later than men. And even once they were diagnosed, they tended to die earlier, suggesting that more women did not receive adequate care in time.

Covid-19 also worsened maternal mortality. In poor countries, expectant mothers had to balance the fear of being infected with the uncertainty of not knowing whether they could deliver safely in a health facility, and too many did not receive the care they needed in time.



Governments must address these deep inequalities to tackle the current health crisis and build a better future for women and girls living in the poorest regions of the world.

The effects on the elderly

The Covid-19 crisis has shaken the world and especially the elderly, whom we tried to protect by isolating them. The consequences that followed for many highlighted the vital needs of the elderly, inviting us to adapt our AIC actions to respond in the best possible way. Civil society and the Vatican also reacted, each in its own way, so that the elderly would be treated with respect and surrounded by affection until the end of their lives.

Many AIC groups responded to a survey launched by the Crescendo Network¹ in October 2020 to mark the International Day of Older Persons. Crescendo's Newsletter No. 18 lists these responses:

- The period of lockdown, and therefore of confinement, was experienced as frightening and lonely. Unable to go out or move around, many elderly people lost much of their memory and mobility.
- The situation in nursing homes was terrible: all visits were cancelled and despite the dedication of many, there were not enough doctors and staff to care for residents.
- In some cases, hospital admission was denied because there were no ventilators for the elderly. Many elderly people died without their families being able to say goodbye, be by their side in their last moments or be present at their funeral.

This dramatic situation provoked a reaction: civil society mobilized, AIC groups joined other groups and many young people responded to the call with renewed interest and affection for elderly people.

The vital needs of the elderly came into view: a need for friendship and family relationships, a need for spiritual exchange, as well as basic needs (food, shelter, care).

- **Human contact**

Contact with others allows elderly people to enjoy interactions, encounters and communication. It is important to take the time to help them refresh their memory, often scattered, by adopting active listening, not deciding for them, respecting all that is expressed, and valuing their desire to be useful, to be of service, and to transmit.

- **Spiritual guidance**

Such support was essential during lockdown: How could we help elderly people reflect on questions about the meaning of life, death, life after death...? We can watch or follow on the radio with them programs that offer times of prayer and meditation, especially during important liturgical times. Where possible we can have discussions in small

¹ Worldwide network for a human and Christian ageing, of which AIC has been a member since its foundation. For more information: www.reseaucrecendo.org



groups, sharing from the Word of God, praying the rosary, and leading intergenerational prayer times.

Pope Francis has stressed that grandparents and the elderly are a value and a gift both for society and for ecclesial communities.

The Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life has stated that *“the life experience and faith of the elderly can help to build societies aware of their roots and capable of dreaming of a more caring world.”*

- **Attention to basic needs** (food, housing, health care)

We do this mostly through direct support, but we should not forget that, as AIC members, it is also our role to draw the attention of civil society to situations of poverty experienced at the local level.

At the international level, AIC is closely following the approach of the Human Rights Council (HRC), a UN agency in Geneva, which has been working for several years on establishing a convention on the rights of older persons. The first resolution marks an important step forward in promoting the rights of older persons and combating age discrimination worldwide.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the previous analysis, the global situation is complex and **we must redouble our efforts to support people living in poverty**. As St. Vincent de Paul taught us, *“we must run to the poor as if we were going to put out a fire”*.

Questions to continue preparing for our International Assembly 2023:

Pope Francis asks of us: “May we be profoundly shaken by what is happening all around us” (Homily, Second Sunday of Easter, 19 April 2020). This call is still valid today as we prepare for the International Assembly, a moment of **Listening** to **See** the reality. In this context, we invite you to reflect on the following questions:

1. Which of the **effects** of the pandemic on children, youth, women and elderly people are the most urgent for AIC? (maximum four)
2. What **actions** does the pandemic call us to take in order to foster a fairer and more environmentally friendly society? (maximum three)
3. During the pandemic, what have been the main **achievements** and the main **difficulties** in our service to people living in poverty? (maximum four)
4. What are the **signs of the present times** that demand of us a greater personal, community, pastoral, structural, missionary and synodal **conversion**? (maximum six)



Some AIC actions to address needs that arose from the pandemic

The network of AIC volunteers around the world has responded to many needs that have arisen during and after the pandemic. You will find below a series of concrete examples.

Many volunteers came together to **feed** the countless people who had lost their jobs and found themselves living in extreme poverty.

In some cases, as in Ecuador, volunteers promoted the creation of urban gardens and prepared food from their harvest, which they distributed to people in need.

In several countries, young people helped volunteers with food distributions.





Other groups were committed to **supporting children** who, without a computer, could not continue their studies at home. Volunteers organized campaigns and provided many children with the means to continue their education during lockdown.

They also supported children by offering them tutoring when they noticed certain things were lacking, as well as psychological support and spiritual guidance.



In other countries, volunteers taught women how to **make soap, disinfectants and to sew masks or face coverings.**

In some cases, the women used these products to maintain hygiene in their own homes and prevent contamination. In others, the workshops were a way to give the women tools to market the products they made and thus earn an income for their families.

Many groups also organized **workshops to raise awareness of and prevent Covid-19.**



In several countries, volunteers **supported elderly people** by bringing food to their homes and alleviating their loneliness.

During lockdown, several AIC groups began calling each other much more often, in order to hear from each other and thus reduce isolation. In some cases, the use of digital tools made it possible to organize virtual meetings with families. All these tools are still useful for maintaining contact with families who are often far away.

