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# OPINION: Why expanded energy access is key to an equitable COVID-19 recovery

by [Rajiv Shah](/profile/?id=003D000002Fv5VUIAZ) (/profile/?id=003D000002Fv5VUIAZ) | Rockefeller Foundation

Thursday, 24 September 2020 16:59 GMT



**\* Any views expressed in this opinion piece are those of the author and not of Thomson Reuters Foundation.**

The pandemic has driven interactions online - but not for those without electricity. Expanding access can change that

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*Rajiv Shah is president of The Rockefeller Foundation.*

For all the talk about the remarkable, virtual nature of this year's United Nations General Assembly week, videoconferencing is a routine way of life for its participants.

But that's not the case for too many people around the world whose lives depend on the decisions made at the UN this week: the 800 million people still living without electricity, and another 1.2 billion people whose electricity access is not reliable enough to even dial into Zoom.

While the pandemic accelerated digitization and economic interconnectedness, it has further isolated billions of people living without reliable electricity. This energy poverty makes it harder to fight Covid-19 and achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

As a result, it is increasingly clear that unless we make progress on SDG 7 – ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all – it will be difficult to achieve an equitable recovery from this crisis.

Before the pandemic halted travel, I visited a market in Derni, a remote village in the Indian state of Bihar. On a typical evening, the central power grid would cut electricity around dusk. Market stalls would shut. Families would burn coal to cook meals and light kerosene lamps to see, choking the air and emitting deadly black carbon.

The daily realities were punishing: dark streets were unsafe, children couldn't study after sunset and often were sickened by air pollution, which kills nearly 4 million people each year. Workers were limited to manual tools and daylight hours so no businesses could scale.

This pandemic has exposed and accelerated *many* inequities. Racial minorities and the impoverished are suffering the most, disproportionately losing lives and livelihoods.

While America's billionaires grew their combined wealth by nearly a trillion dollars this year, the UN estimates COVID-19 is pushing as many as 580 million people below an expanded global poverty line of \$5 a day.

Meanwhile women have lost jobs nearly twice as often as men, and every month of lockdown brings 5 million more acts of gender-based violence worldwide.

If we do nothing, decades of progress on these inequities and climate change will be erased. But if we make investments now to enable an equitable recovery, we can power a future brighter than we ever imagined – more sustainable, safer from pandemic threats, and better for world's poorest 2 billion, who can enter a growing and sustainable global economy.

An equitable recovery starts with ensuring all aspects of the health response – from testing and tracing, to the distribution of vaccines and support services – go first to the highest-risk communities.

An equitable recovery also includes access to power: only 28% of Africa's health centers have reliable electricity, while a staggering one-in-four have no electricity.

Accelerating progress requires power: namely electricity. Just as energy infrastructure investments powered economic recoveries after the Great Depression and Great Recession, today the world needs a massive, public-private investment in green infrastructure that unlocks inclusive growth for everyone, especially those left behind.

For industrial economies, that means high-speed broadband, smart logistics and seamless supply chains – and energy is foundational to all of that. Without electricity, you're powerless in today's global economy.

You might believe increasing electricity access and consumption must worsen the climate crisis. Five years ago, you'd have been right. But with new breakthroughs in distributed renewables, it's now possible to end energy poverty in 10 years without accelerating climate change.

At The Rockefeller Foundation, we believe solar-powered mini-grids are a key part of enabling a sustainable, equitable recovery.

Independent of costly and difficult to expand grid infrastructure, they use decentralized systems, advanced batteries, and cloud computing technologies to generate, store, and distribute electricity. As such, they can provide renewable, reliable power to people who never had it before.

For 2 billion people living with no or unreliable access to electricity, distributed renewables provide a pathway to economic inclusion and prosperity.

I saw this first hand in Bihar last November. Our Smart Power India affiliate had installed a mini-grid network across some of the country's poorest regions.

That night, when the sun set, the power stayed on. Shops stayed open, machines whirred, appliances hummed. It was both ordinary and extraordinary – a glimpse of a brighter future.

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# Brazil's public sector hit with lawsuits for COVID-19 labor abuses

by [Fabio Teixeira and Alfredo Mergulhao \(/profile/?id=003D000002WadXOIAZ\)](/profile/?id=003D000002WadXOIAZ) | [🐦@ffctt](https://twitter.com/ffctt)  
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Thursday, 1 October 2020 12:34 GMT



## Prosecutors have filed nearly 70 lawsuits against city governments and state-controlled firms for failing to protect workers from the coronavirus

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By Fabio Teixeira and Alfredo Mergulhao

RIO DE JANEIRO, Oct 1 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Dozens of local authorities and state-owned companies in Brazil are facing lawsuits accused of failing to protect workers including doctors and nurses from COVID-19, data obtained exclusively by the Thomson Reuters Foundation has revealed.

Labor prosecutors filed 69 lawsuits against city governments and state-controlled firms such as Banco do Brasil SA in the first half of the year for reported coronavirus labor abuses such as not providing workers with protective equipment.

Local governments and other public sector bodies were the target of 30% of the 230 labor lawsuits related to the pandemic - more than any private sector industry except transport - according to data obtained via the Access of Information law.

The data has raised concerns about a lack of oversight by several major Brazilian companies as well as local authorities that are mostly responsible for running the public health system in a nation with the world's second highest COVID-19 death toll.

Brazil has registered more than 4.7 million cases since the pandemic began, with at least **143,000 deaths** (<https://news.trust.org/item/20200930210710-z53rf/>).

"(Government) action is not just chaotic, it's catastrophic. And they must be made responsible for this," said Joao Domingos, head of the Confederation of Public Servants of Brazil (CSPB).

"(City governments) lack sensitivity to such a degree that we need to take them to court for a basic thing like caring for their employees' health," added Domingos, whose organization represents more than 1,000 public worker labor unions.

Brazil's labor secretariat - which sits in the economy ministry - said it was not responsible for the public sector and referred questions to the management and personnel performance secretariat. The division did not reply to request for comment.

About 7,500 complaints about **workplace abuses** (<https://news.trust.org/item/20200629205715-hu79d/>) were made against public bodies in the first eight months of the year - up from

7,200 for the whole of 2019 - labor prosecutor data shows. It is unknown how many complaints were related to the pandemic.

"The large number of lawsuits stems precisely from the fact that state entities consistently fail (to protect workers)", said Ileana Neiva, head of Conap, the prosecutors' division responsible for addressing labor abuses in the public sector.

Labor prosecutors tend to strike deals and agree not to take further action if employers address the issues raised, but if a case reaches court, judges may sentence and fine an employer.

Beyond that, a labor judge can refer the case to regular prosecutors who may then start a criminal investigation.

A total of 1,652 lawsuits were filed by labor prosecutors in the first half of 2020, so about 14% were related to COVID-19.

## HONING IN ON HEALTH WORKERS

About 30 city governments have been sued, most accused of failing to provide health workers with adequate protective equipment after COVID-19 struck Brazil in March, the data found.

In some cases, public hospitals rationed equipment among staff, while in other situations, sub-standard face masks were provided, according to Neiva of Conap.

An anesthesiologist in Belem - the capital of northern Para state and one of the governments facing a lawsuit - said he had to buy his own face masks and ultimately fell ill with COVID-19.

"I paid a steep price, but I survived," said 65-year-old Wilson Machado. He worked at the Mario Pinotti hospital where staff protested in April about the lack of protective gear.

At least 59 health workers in Belem have died of COVID-19 to date, according to local government data.

The lawsuit against Belem was filed on April 16 and the next day a judge issued an injunction ordering the city to supply medical staff with equipment until a final ruling was reached.

In July, Belem's administration supplied documents to the court to show it was complying with the order, but prosecutors said the submission in fact proved shortages were still ongoing.

"It is a demonstration of how the ... state behaves in regards to healthcare," said prosecutor Rejane Alves, referring not just to Para but local government responses across Brazil.

Public hospitals were already understaffed and underfunded due to years of economic hardship, several prosecutors said.

"The issues pre-date the pandemic, (which has) only made clear the real scenario, both for the population and for health professionals," said Alves, who is handling the ongoing lawsuit.

Responding to questions from the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Belem's administration denied failing to provide equipment, and said it had proved that it supplies medical facilities weekly.

## FROM BANKS TO RAILWAYS

At least eight state-owned companies have also been sued - from Banco do Brasil to Sao Paulo-based railway company CPTM.

Banco do Brasil was hit by a lawsuit in May and accused of not giving face masks to security guards in Rio de Janeiro.

The bank denied the claim, and said it was appealing an injunction ordering it to provide the masks.

CPTM was sued by prosecutors in April on the grounds that it had not provided protective gear and required staff who said they felt ill to present a doctor's note if they missed work.

"We were made to work because we are essential workers," said Eluiz Alves, the president of a union for railway employees in Sao Paulo.

The union said at least four CPTM employees have died of COVID-19 to date.

Earlier this month, CPTM was ordered by a judge to allow its staff to miss work if ill without a doctor's note but was cleared of failing to provide protective gear. The company said it would appeal the court ruling regarding the doctor's note.

Prosecutor Marcelo Freire said he considered the lawsuit a success as working conditions had since improved at the company. He is now focusing on several other cases related to the pandemic, some involving public bodies and state-owned firms.

"I have a lot of coronavirus on my docket. A lot."

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(Reporting by Fabio Teixeira @ffctt; Editing by Kieran Guilbert and Belinda Goldsmith. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)

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