



# IDeIAS

*Informação sobre Desenvolvimento, Instituições e Análise Social*

## COVID-19 AND THE “RISK SOCIETY”: A REFLECTION BASED ON THE MOZAMBICAN CONTEXT

“The biggest danger, therefore, is not the risk, but the perception of risk” (Beck, 2002: 4)

Lúcio Posse

### Introduction

With the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have observed that different actors, such as, ordinary citizens, experts, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, the press, different elites, have given discourses and have made decisions in an attempt to understand how to fight the corona virus. These acts make it clear that we are facing a reaction that reflects the production of “risk”<sup>1</sup>.

The “risk” in the present reflection must be understood from the perspective of the “risk society”. A “risk society” is a society that emerges from the transformations brought about by the industrial revolution and globalization (Ulrich Beck, 2011). While the industrial revolution brought to the modern society, risks resulting from the production of wealth, such as, pandemics, environmental, nuclear, genetic, terrorism, among others, globalization, massified these risks by breaking social and geographic boundaries, that is, the risks affect indiscriminately all social groups and are no longer circumscribed to specific regions. In addition, risks could also be seen as democratic, since these affect nations and social classes without respecting borders of any kind (Guivant, 2001: 96), driving or forcing individuals and/or groups to put aside their differences and to unite themselves to respond to the risks that have become “democratic”.

However, this response is the result of the production of “objective” and “subjective” risk, by society itself. Objective risk is the product of scientific elaboration – the “scientific rationality” of risk (Beck, 2011), being health risks an example (Luiz & Cohn, 2006). Subjective risk is a product of the perception of risk i.e. the “social rationality” of risk (Beck, 2011) which can be interpreted as a result of the experiences, cultures, values, emotions, interests and others of society. Although “objective risk” is the product of scientific elaboration, it is important to put it into perspective because it is defined by actors who are under the influence of other variables, such as, religious, cultural, political and/or economic. This

fact makes the objective and subjective risk production processes intrinsic in themselves, and, the absence of the social dimension in the production of the objective risk makes it empty, and the absence of the objective risk in the production of the subjective risk makes it blind (Beck, 2011).

The present reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic is based on the case of Mozambique, through the perspective of the “risk society” theory. I also used my experience resulting from the dialogue with family members, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers about the corona virus. With the last two groups, the interaction occurred spontaneously in different contexts where our personal and/or professional interests met. In addition, I took into account the information conveyed in the press, which is made up of central players in the dissemination of senses and meanings of risk, the President’s speeches and the Presidential Decree No 11/2020, of March 31, which declared the State of Emergency, as part of efforts to combat COVID-19.

### COVID-19 and the “Risk Society”: Trying to Say Something

COVID-19 is a pandemic, which, according to the “risk society” theory, is part of the new type of risk that modern societies are subject to, and the fighting actions by society are a reflection of the production of both, objective and subjective risk. Apart from the production of these risks, this pandemic is democratic as it is forcing groups to put aside – at least temporarily – their conflicts and/or differences in order to unite their actions to fight the corona virus because it represents a global threat, as can be seen by the support between States in the fight against it, in the form of equipment, specialists, and in the search for medicines and/or vaccine, as well as solidarity actions coordinated by almost everyone in support of the most vulnerable groups (Notícias, 2020).

COVID-19 also has the social construction of the “other”, while sick, as opposed to “us”, while healthy. The perception of risk has been central to the cons-

truction of stereotypes that end up excluding or rejecting people or groups because they are considered responsible for something bad in society (Sacramento & Machado, 2015). For example, the “Chinese” not only from the affected region, but all (even other people in Asia with similar features to that of the Chinese) were the subject of these stereotypes because COVID-19 was first diagnosed in China, specifically in Wuhan city. However, it should be noted that the “Chinese”, “they”, the “healthy ones” also developed stereotypes of the disease in their association with the “Africans”. This time, the “Africans”, the “others”, that is, “the sick”, were considered, by the Chinese, to be responsible for the transmission of the virus – most likely because of cases of the disease already registered in the African continent. These stereotypes embodied the acts of violence against the “Africans” who resided in certain parts of China (Lusa, 2020; Teixeira, 2020). These identity stereotypes, “we”, the healthy, and “others” the sick, around COVID-19, caused deaths in some contexts, as was the sad episode that happened in Malawi, where two Mozambicans were murdered on charges of taking the virus to the Malawian society (Rádio Moçambique, 2020).

### COVID-19 and the “Risk Society” in Mozambique

Mozambique has its social, economic, technological, political and other dynamics influenced by the industrial revolution as well as by globalization, a condition that makes the Mozambican society a “risk society” and/or part of the “global risk society” according to the “risk society” theory developed by Ulrich Beck. However, it is necessary to recognize that portraying the Mozambican society as a risk society based on the “risk society” theory could be a simplistic assumption, if we take into account Guivant’s (2001 & 2016) criticism to this theory that, it tends to look at the world as if it were a homogeneous society, ignoring, therefore, the specificities of each context. Nevertheless, this theory is still valuable in explaining why Mozambique fits the concept of “risk society”, as I will discuss below.

<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the COVID-19 virus has already infected more than ten million people, killed more than five hundred thousand in more than two hundred countries, territories and areas and the trend is growing.

The reaction of the Mozambican society to COVID-19, as a result of the experiences of other contexts, was and still is characterized by the adoption of preventive measures, such as social distance, washing hands with soap and/or disinfecting them with alcohol<sup>2</sup> and use of masks. In addition, the State intervened in the fight against COVID-19, by strengthening awareness-raising actions for the adoption and enforcement of preventive measures that were already being implemented by Mozambicans. It should be noted that this position by the State resulted from pressure from different groups in society, for fear of the corona virus as reported by the President of the Republic, Filipe Nyusi, in his report, on April 29, 2020. The position to enforce preventive measures evolved from a simple monitoring process to the enactment of the State of Emergency on March 30, for thirty days (01 to 30 April, which was later extended for another thirty days, 01 to 30 May).

This set of measures reflect, to a certain extent, the production of risk as a social rationality, insofar as it manifests the "release [among Mozambicans] of fantasies of danger and antidotes, thus robbing the modern [Mozambican] society of their freedom of action" (Beck, 2002: 4). In other words, the feeling of panic that installed itself among Mozambicans – as a result of information conveyed by the press about COVID-19 and the perceived inability of the government of Mozambique to fight the disease – made it possible, on the one hand, for the government to adopt measures as if the virus were already in Mozambique, and, on the other hand, showed that Mozambicans were predisposed to abdicate their freedoms, as was observed with the decree of the State of Emergency<sup>3</sup>.

The decree of the State of Emergency, was the first way in which the subjective dimension of risk in the actions of Mozambicans was made visible since it exposed the unpreparedness – of the different State institutions – to implement the decree, as, for example, the restrictions on public transport and the movement of people. Regarding the issue of transport, the decree limited the number of passengers to 1 to 3 as a way of avoiding crowds, but it did not increase the means of transport, thereby, not being effective as expected. Passengers continued to be transported in overcrowded buses, a situation that caused the government to back down on the measure and introduce the mandatory use of masks for passengers. This mandatory use of masks has extended to locations with population agglomerations but it also faced difficulties in being adopted by Mozambicans.

Second, the restriction of the movement of people has left a large part of Mozambicans in a situation of

greater vulnerability, since the majority are informal workers, who depend on "informal work" or "daily work" to survive, which implies leaving home. This aspect also helps to illustrate that poverty has been central to the subjective production of risk among poor Mozambicans. That is, even in the face of mandatory campaigns and measures to combat COVID-19, this group of Mozambicans continued to take to the streets as usual. This stance is largely due to a matter of choice, as suggested by Albuquerque Navarro & Oliveira Cardoso (2005: 68), that "individuals tend to build a self-image and consolidate what they think is a specific human potential, based on this feeling to promote self-assessments to expose themselves or not to risks". In other words, this means that poor Mozambicans have chosen to continue looking for their survival because hunger is a greater and more present risk when compared to COVID-19, which still seems distant. Or as Beck (2011) suggests in the analogy to environmental problems, hunger is a visible risk while COVID-19, although real, is an invisible risk because it seems distant.

Another aspect that could help illustrate that actions to combat COVID-19 in Mozambican society are the product of subjective risk is the social construction of identities. It was possible to observe that the discourses around the corona virus were shaped by stereotypes in the dichotomous logic "others" and "us". The "others", the "Chinese" being the "sick" and who were spreading the virus throughout the world, including in Mozambique – since there is a large presence of them in the country – and "us", the "Mozambicans", "were the healthy". It was based on this stereotype that I observed the emergence of discourses that argued that the State should prohibit the entry of Chinese – including individuals from other regions with cases of COVID-19 – into the country as a way to avoid contagion among Mozambicans. The discrimination against the "Chinese" was also observed through the fear of sharing the same spaces at the risk of contracting the virus, including the way they were addressed to "hey, coronavirus" when calling or indicating them<sup>4</sup>.

### Final considerations

Mozambicans as well as citizens from other contexts in the world are in a fight against COVID-19, and this made me question the factors that shape their actions. In an attempt to understand, it was possible to identify at least two factors, the scientific ignorance (it is a new virus) and the type of catastrophic information that the press transmits about COVID-19, driving people to despair, with feelings and thoughts that the world is facing a catastrophe that will culminate in its end – end of the world. It was through the combination of these two aspects that I could see

that people's actions reflect risk in its subjective dimension. A similar attitude was observed from the government of Mozambique regarding the fight against the corona virus, specifically the panic it showed due to its level of unpreparedness illustrated by its measures for public transportation and the confinement of people at their homes. It is important to monitor the phenomena in order to be aware of the risks, but it is even more important to control the production of risk, in order to avoid catastrophes that would result from the production of the subjective risk and not the supposed "real" risk in society.

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<sup>2</sup> Demand for disinfectant alcohol and masks soared to the point of becoming scarce in the market, leading to speculation.

<sup>3</sup> One of the characteristics of the "risk society" is the acceptance that citizens show in authorizing the State to withdraw some liberties in situations of imminent risk (Beck, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Debates about the origin of COVID-19 have raised the hypothesis that the virus was spread through the consumption of contaminated wildlife meat that was marketed in a market in the city of Wuhan, China.