

Fracking and glyphosate amid COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia

Fracking y glifosato en medio de la pandemia de COVID-19 en Colombia

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Dear editor,

Despite the congratulations that Colombia received from the Pan American Health Organization for its good management during the first months of pandemic (1), supposedly for using scientific evidence for decision-making, the start of the fracking pilots (unconventional hydraulic fracturing procedure) and return to use glyphosate against illicit crops leaves glimpse inconsistencies in decision-making in public health by the Colombian government. The pandemic taught that environmental protection is essential to avoid the emergence of future epidemics (2). However, it is precisely in the midst of the pandemic that the Colombian government makes decisions without listening to science, ignoring the precautionary principle even against the national constitution.

As of the end of March 2021, two unconventional reservoir fracking pilot projects had been approved for development without a rigorous assessment of the potentially associated adverse health effects (3). These will be carried out in the department of Santander, the most seismically active department in Colombia (4). On the other hand, the government is making the return of glyphosate a reality, as previously mentioned (5). The Decree 380 (April 12, 2021) regulates spraying with glyphosate, leaving only the National Narcotics Council to endorse the decision. This Decree was even signed by the current Minister of Health, Fernando Ruiz, who was Vice Minister of Health in 2015 and publicly endorsed then to ban the use of glyphosate because of its potential carcinogenic effects, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). This change in the government's decision is not explained on scientific grounds, as the evidence supporting the adverse effects of glyphosate on health remains even more conclusive now (6).

These two political decisions are added to others that aggravate the armed internal conflict in Colombia, precisely when next year there will be presidential elections. Anti-science in environmental health increases its power in Colombia, following the trend of Latin American countries with denialist governments such as Brazil. The territories and populations directly affected by these decisions are the most socioeconomically disadvantaged in the country. Perhaps for this reason it is not surprising that the Colombian scientific evidence shows that the policies implemented in the management of the pandemic have not succeeded in reducing social inequalities (7), but have probably widened them, and that public health surveillance has been limited, with achievements only in some regions (8) ♣

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