

2021 ISA Forum of Sociology Report by the ISA Vice-President of Research

Geoffrey Pleyers

Earlier versions of this report have been presented and discussed at the ISA Research Council meeting, RCC Meeting and Executive Committee meeting in March 2021.

I. General presentation

This fourth ISA Forum took place amid a global pandemic that has shaken our lives and our societies. It gave even more importance to the ISA primary mission: gathering social scientists from all over the world to share their research and analyses. Organizing a Forum during the pandemic and moving it online has been a challenge for our association. To make it happen has already been a success. To gather 3,516 participants in these circumstances and offer them insightful spaces to present and discuss their latest research is an achievement.

This Forum had to be organized three times: first for a regular on-site Forum in Porto Alegre scheduled in July 2020, then as an on-site forum in February 2021 and finally as a virtual event. It would not have been possible without the dedication and largely invisible work of the presidents and program coordinators of the 57 research committees, working groups and thematic groups that participate in this Forum and are the vibrant heart of our International Sociological Association. Organizing a Forum under such difficult circumstances required a considerable amount of work by hundreds of session organizers, our efficient ISA secretariat, our ISA president Sari Hanafi, the ISA Vice President for finance Sawako Shirahase, the members of its Executive Committee and the Porto Alegre Local Organizing Committee and its chair Hermilio Santos.

When assessing this Forum, we should bear in mind that it was the first virtual Forum organized by the ISA. It was a learning process for the ISA and each of its actors. Thus, it is important to assess it considering that future ISA events will entail a virtual dimension.

This document gathers elements to assessing the ISA Forum on three aspects: the Forum itself, its preparation process and its virtual dimension. It will be completed by the financial report prepared by ISA VP for finance, Sawako Shirahase.

Originally, ISA Forums were conceived as events run by and focused on the RC/WG/TG. At the 2018 research council meeting, RC/WG/TG delegates insisted on two priorities for the Forum (and other RC events). They remained at the core of my work to prepare this Forum:

1. A more accessible Forum was a priority for many RCs. (i.e. lower registration fees and costs for participants).
2. Ease and increase the participation of scholars from the Global South

II. Forum participants

Being able to set up a Forum during the pandemic and with high uncertainties has been a success. Almost all the RC/WG/TG have maintained their participation when the Forum despite the postponement to February 2021 and its move online.

Considering the circumstances, the Forum attracted a high number of participants: 3,525 participants from over 100 countries, 56% female, 25% students. 59% were from category A, 33% from category B, and 9% from category C countries. As expected, compared with the 2016 Forum in Vienna, there was a large increase in the number of participants from Latin America from 424 (2016) to 1,032 in 2021, almost 30%. Most RC/WG/TG underlined that the Forum virtual platform was efficient and very easy to use and that it has provided a good online experience.

Beyond the number of participants, the aim of an international Forum is to ensure speakers good conditions to present their research, a fair audience and a good quality of papers. Many speakers and RC/WG/TG program organizers expected the audience to be a bit larger. However, most panel gathered a sufficient audience to ensure good discussion of the papers. 15-20 people attended most RC/WG/TG sessions, a similar number to on-site panels in previous Forums for many RCs. Opening the access to these sessions beyond the registered participants by live-streaming them and diffusing the information in social media would have increased the audiences.

A virtual Forum was a new experience for many participants. Most had to combine the Forum with teaching, regular university commitments and family commitments. Several RCs asked for setting panels on Sunday, as no teaching and professional meetings are taking place on that day. The sessions on that day benefited from larger audiences (above 30 participants for most of them).

Strong participation by scholars of the Global South

Global South was well represented in the Forum main sessions and most RC/WG/TG. Most of the RC/WG/TG grants and all the solidarity fund were used to pay for the registration of colleagues from the Global South. Unfortunately, some RC/WG/TG failed to provide their list of colleagues entitled to registration grants. It would have allowed more colleagues to take part in the Forum.

- *Five speakers from the Global South among eight speakers in the opening and closing plenaries*
- *Five semi-plenaries (out of 8) were organized by professional associations from Latin America*
- *Five common sessions out of 11 focused on the Global South. At least half of the speakers from most of the other common sessions were based in the Global South*
- *The plenary panel that gathered the president of professional organizations focused on strengthening the contribution from the global South: CODESRIA, CLACSO, ALAS!*

Highest participation of host country scholars in plenary sessions

In spite of the Forum moving virtual, it was essential to us to consider this Forum as a space of dialogue with Brazilian sociologists. The participation of Brazilian sociologists exceeded the participation of any host country in previous ISA Forums and recent Congresses. The talk by Rita Segato (University of Brasilia) talk in the opening plenary was a major contribution to this Forum. The opening session also entailed an intervention by the president of the Brazilian Sociological Society and a moving tribute to a Brazilian sociologist, Marielle Franco.

The LOC and the Brazilian Sociological Society (SBS) have organized three of our eight semi-plenary sessions where Brazilian sociology could represent itself directly. Six Brazilian scholars were involved in the five other semi-plenary sessions (four as panellists, two as chair/organizers). In addition, a common session (i.e. semi-plenary) co-organized by 9 RCs was dedicated to Marielle Franco. Dozens of other Brazilian colleagues organized panels and joint sessions in our RC/WG/TG. At least a dozen Brazilian colleagues acted as program coordinators for their research committee. We have all learned so much from our Brazilian colleagues during this Forum and are very grateful for that.

As the Forum moved virtual, the LOC proposed to produce a series of sociological movies to share some challenges faced by Brazil and by Porto Alegre inhabitants. This series was realized by Hermilio Santos, with funding initially destined for the ISA Forum. In spite of receiving these short movies less than 48 hours before the start of the Forum, the ISA secretariat was able to make them available online during the Forum.

As it happened in some previous ISA Forums or Congresses, some misunderstandings and tensions occurred with the chair of the LOC. The move to a virtual Forum was a new situation that transformed the relationship with the LOC. We should have better managed the invitation to the presidents of the SBS and to the chair of the LOC to our plenary sessions. However, it should not overshadow the fact that we also received various messages by members of the Local Organizing Committee and of the Brazilian sociological society to congratulate the ISA on this successful Forum. Here is one of them: *"Although the circumstances are very different from what we have initially imagined for this Forum, it's inspiring to see it happen with such quality. Even more, to see this Forum as an outstanding moment to endorse the sociology we believe in. Congratulations!"*

Collaboration with regional organizations

This Forum was going to take place in Porto Alegre, Brazil. It was the opportunity to strengthening the global dialogue with our Latin American colleagues, whose theoretical, epistemological and analytical contributions help us to understand the global challenges of our times. The virtual Forum was an opportunity to strengthening our partnership with the Brazilian Sociological Society (SBS), the Latin American Sociological Association (ALAS) and the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO). They organized semi-plenary sessions at this Forum. We have extended this partnership to other regional associations. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the vice-president of the International Science Council joined the presidents of CLACSO, ALAS and ISA in the semi-plenary panel dedicated to the roles of international organizations. The president of the Arab Council for Social Sciences joined us in the Forum closing session.

Our Latin American partners, CLACSO, ALAS and the SBS played an essential role in diffusing the calls for papers and the information about the Forum during the whole preparation process.

III. Panels

The ISA Forum is mainly a conference run by RC/WG/TG. They organized over 800 panels. Their program organizers and session organizers should be credited for most of the success of this Forum. Here is a short balance of the limited number of plenary or semi-plenary sessions.

Opening and closing plenaries

The opening and closing plenaries focused on the Forum theme and on sociology in the pandemic. It gathered leading scholars from Brazil, India, Portugal, France, the United States and Lebanon. Two women from Argentina and Mozambique withdrew at the last moment for personal and health reasons.

As the Forum became virtual, the opening ceremony lost some of its meaning and was merged with opening plenary. In this panel, the ISA president and the Forum president presented the Forum theme, welcomed the president of the Brazilian Sociological Society and paid tribute to a Brazilian sociologist murdered in 2018. The head of the LOC was invited to the closing plenary.

Both plenaries were well attended and livestreamed. Over 500 viewers joined the opening plenaries. Its video on Facebook reached 6500 views in a couple of days. This session contributed to shedding light on the Forum on social media.

Semi-plenaries and common sessions

Three semi-plenary sessions were organized by the LOC and the Brazilian Sociological Society. Originally, these sessions aimed at shedding light on contributions by Brazilian sociologists. The LOC and the BSS decided to combine talks by Brazilian and international scholars. All the feedback indicate these sessions were particularly insightful. The audience was low, as they were little advertised by their organizers.

The Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO) and Association of Sociology (ALAS) organized two other semi-plenaries. Both took place in Spanish and gathered a good audience around contributions on the Forum themes seen from Latin American perspectives.

The RCC organized a semi-plenary on the theme of the Forum, with speakers from the Philippines, Ecuador and the USA. Two other semi-plenary sessions were dedicated to the ISA tribute to its former president Immanuel Wallerstein and an encounter among presidents of international social sciences associations.

Common sessions

11 common sessions were selected among the proposals received from RC/TG/WG. Each proposal had to be supported by at least 3 RC/WG/TG or RCs and committees from the SBS, ALAS or CLACSO.

Some common sessions gathered a wide audience. Some 80 participants joined the tribute to Erik Olin Wright, over 200 the tribute to Marielle Franco. Other common sessions did not succeed in diffusing their sessions and maintaining a working dynamic among the RCs over a very long process. (The deadline to receive the common sessions proposals was fixed on March 15th 2019, almost two years before these sessions happened.)

Tributes

This IV ISA Forum was an opportunity for our community to pay tribute to three of our most distinguished colleagues in three special panels. *Immanuel Wallerstein* was not only a major global social scientist and a global citizen committed to social justice. He presided over the ISA between 1992

and 1996, leaving a considerable legacy. **Erik Olin Wright** will notably be remembered for shedding light on “real utopias” that embody the hope of fairer and more human times. **Marielle Franco**, a Brazilian sociologist who was murdered on March 14th 2018, has become a global symbol of a struggle against racist, colonial, hetero-patriarchal domination and police violence and for social justice, human rights and democracy. Her life as a black woman from the favelas shows that intersectionality is not only a theoretical concept.

These sessions were significant for ISA as a community, very insightful in terms of content and successful in gathering a good audience, both on the Zoom platform and in the Facebook livestream. I hope that the ISA will open spaces for similar sessions in future events.

Professional development sessions and “Senior sociologists addressing Junior sociologists”

The Forum will also be the opportunity to attend “professional development sessions” and learn how to write journal articles and meet editorial standards with our Vice-President for Publication Eloisa Martin and the editors of the ISA journals in sessions that will be available on Zoom and livestreamed on the ISA Facebook page.

ISA Vice-President Filomin Gutierrez, with Elina Oinas, Chih-Jou Jay Chen (ISA-EC team dedicated to promoting early career sociologists) have prepared videos of inspiring senior scholars in a dialogue with young researchers and Hermilio Santos and the Porto Alegre Local Organizing Committee a series of videos on the Challenges of Brazil. All these videos are available on the ISA Forum website.

RC/WG/TG initiatives

Other successful proposals were implemented by the RCs

- *Some RCs conducted an online pre-conference*, notably a very dense one by WG08 (Sociology of emotions).
- Training sessions were organized by some RCs, including an insightful panel on “Managing Everyday Life as a Research-Focused Academic” (RC11) and some workshop to publish in international journals in their field (RC11 & RC05).
- Even online, the social dimension of a Forum remained essential to many RCs, and particularly to RC34 (Youth) that held a daily virtual pub at the end of each day.

The preparation process of this Forum was complex. It was not easy to set it up for the RC/WG/TG program coordinators who did a fantastic work. It should however be mentioned that in some RC/WG/TG, there was a lack of diversity and insufficient turnover among the discussants, chairs and program coordinators and that Program Coordinators organised and chaired more sessions than usually.

To be improved

- There was confusion between the opening session and the first plenary – these should be clearly separated in the next virtual meeting.
- The relation with the LOC should be clarified for future virtual Forums.
- Every RC/WG/TG should make sure it sends its list of colleagues entitled to a Forum registration grant, notably to ease the access to ISA events to colleagues from the Global South or colleagues with less resources.

IV. Forum Preparation process

This ISA Forum had to be organized three times. We had to set up three calendars to submit and select abstract proposals. It represented considerable work for the ISA secretariat and for the RC program coordinators and session organizers.

1. A fairer allocation of panels for large and more active RC/WG/TG

Measures were implemented at different stages of the preparation process to achieve a **more equitable distribution of panels for larger and more active RC/WG/TG**. The first step was to allocate additional sessions to the larger Research Committee before the calls for abstracts were published. The second one to add two sessions to the RC/WG/TG that had received the highest number of abstracts. The aim is to reduce the difference in the rate of sessions per member and per received abstracts. However, this rate remains unfavourable to the largest and most active RC/WG/TG. (i.e. smaller RCs receive proportionally more sessions per members than large RCs). It should act as an incentive to increase the existing RC/WG/TG rather than multiplying the number of small RCs.

2. RC informal consultations and proposals for a virtual Forum

Consultations with RC leaders took place at different stages of the Forum preparation process. These consultations of RC leaders and of the RCC members resulted in many innovative proposals that were gathered in a 19-page report presented by the VP Research “Proposals for the first ISA online Forum” (diffused on 15 September 2020).

Some of these proposals had a clear impact on the Forum setting, showing that involving RC leaders allows improving ISA projects and is particularly efficient. Other proposals were presented to the ISA Executive Committee but not implemented in this Forum. Many of these proposals would deserve to be reconsidered for future ISA forums and congresses. Among these proposals were the suggestions to allow the lower the Forum registration fees and will enable the payment of ISA membership for two years instead of four years. RCs also asked for more flexibility to schedule RC/WG/TG sessions according to different time zones.

3. Preparing the first virtual Forum

- Re-opening the calls for abstracts in fall 2020 requested additional work by the RC/WG/TG program coordinators and by the ISA secretariat. It revealed crucial to ensure a good number of participants in all participating RC/WG/TG.
- A considerable amount of last-minutes issues appeared in the last couple of weeks. We managed to solve most of them, primarily thanks to efficient work by the ISA secretariat.

4. Lower registration fees

- The main complaint expressed by RC/WG/TG leaders was that the fees were far too high for an online Forum.
- The ISA accepted lower the registration fees by 50%. Besides, early registration fees applied until December 15th (Two months before the Forums).
- A solidarity fund resulted in free registration for scholars from the global South. Each RC/WG/TG was able to select one or two recipients.
- The ISA should consider lowering the fees for future events.

5. Innovative projects for an on-site Forum

During the Forum preparation process, time and energy have also been dedicated to innovative projects that were carefully organized but could not be implemented in a virtual Forum.

- Over 20 RCs prepared a pre-conference before the Forum, many of them with local researchers and actors and/or with spaces open for PhD students.
- The LOC provided was able to provide free rooms for each of these pre-conferences in the other two local “partner university”: the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and the UNISINO.
- The LOC set up a platform for solidarity housing: local researchers and students were invited to host an international participant.

To be improved:

- A more accessible Forum was a priority for many RCs. RC/WG/TG have complained repeatedly about the high registration fees
- Most of the suggestions and proposals that emerged from the consultation of RC presidents were not considered or implemented. All the participating RC/WG/TG should have been consulted about the postponement and the virtual Forum. However, most had a very positive evaluation of the Forum at the end.
- Various RCs asked for more autonomy in organizing their online sessions, notably to adapt to different time zones or to extend the length of specific sessions.

V. A virtual Forum

This Forum was the first virtual conference organized by the ISA. It should thus be assessed with comprehension, considering it as a learning process. We should also bear in mind that this Forum was organized and planned as an “on-site Forum” that was then translated online. As such, it was different from an event that would have been planned as a virtual event from an early stage.

While we could not seize all the potential of a virtual event, the virtual Forum allowed maintaining the dynamic of the ISA and of participating RC/WG/TG, and listening to insightful research outcomes.

Feedbacks and evaluations have stressed the following points:

Virtual platform and technical difficulties

- They were very few *technical problems and the online platform was very easy to use. This success has to be credited to the ISA secretariat and Confex company efficient work.*
- A significant amount of last minutes requests and technical questions were raised by Forum participants and organizers in the last few days before the Forum. We are very thankful to Izabela, Juan and Lola (*the ISA secretariat*) for their work behind the scene and their flexibility to solve many issues in the last days and during the Forum.

Livestream and open access to the panel videos

- *All the panel videos are available online, on the ISA Forum website*
- *Seven panels and the editor sessions were livestreamed.*

The decision to livestream them was finalized too late for advertising these sessions online. However, some of these sessions reached out to broad audiences (Over 5000 views in 24 hours for the opening plenary!). I hope this success will pave the way for opening all the panels to a broader audience in a future virtual or hybrid event.

(The Research Council suggests that all the panels should be livestreamed but that we may be more cautious concerning the Q&A sessions.)

Visibility and projection of the Forum

As a virtual event, the Forum could have had much stronger visibility in social media. Livestreaming the panels was an excellent way to reaching out beyond the registered participants. The fact that it was planned as an on-site Forum limited its projection and diffusion to registered participants. For future virtual events, we should consider diffusing information on the Forum and the possibility of attending some of its sessions on social media in the months before the Forum. It will bring more visibility to the Forum, the ISA and sociology.

VI. Appendices and additional reports

1. Forum theme
2. Proposal for a virtual Forum in 2024

1. ISA Forum Theme

Challenges of the 21st Century: Democracy, Environment, Inequalities, Intersectionality

Twenty years after the start of our century, the optimism of the Millennium has faded and the challenges we face for living together on a limited planet are even more urgent.

While the expansion and the deepening of democratization was taken for granted at the turn of the Millennium, *democracy* has been at stake in an increasing number of countries, while its key component such as diversity and equal respect for all citizens are threatened. The hope for a global democracy able to tackle global issues such as climate change, migrations and rising inequalities have faded. It has now become clear that to face global challenges, democracy needs to be re-invented within and beyond the representative system.

The environmental crisis and climate change are now a worrying reality. How can we live together on a limited planet? Land and food have become again major objects of struggles. Environmental and socio-territorial conflicts have multiplied against extractivist industries. Who are the actors who bring innovative solutions to keep our societies thriving within the planetary boundaries? How does the global environmental crisis lead us to re-think our world and our discipline?

Inequalities have considerably increased since the turn of the Millennium. We can now count twenty-six persons who own more wealth than the poorest half of humanity. This level of inequality is a major threat to democracy and to ecology. Inequalities particularly affect marginalized populations and women in their professional, public and private lives.

Intersectionality has become major theme in the ISA conferences and in our discipline over the last 20 years. Overcoming the lasting and interconnected economic, racial, colonial and gender discriminations and the violence that maintain them is another major challenge of our time. The rising consciousness of intersectionality is both a result and a trigger of the rise of subaltern actors and movements since 1992. Indigenous communities, minorities, feminists and small farmers have resisted injustice by combining practices, social struggles and alternative worldviews.

The 2021 ISA Forum will provide sociological analyses of these four global challenges paying particular attention to their interconnections and to possible solutions. We will discuss how both progressive and conservative actors and movements tackle these challenges and their conflictive perspectives. We will use this Forum to ask how our discipline has been meeting these four global challenges and it has been transformed by them. What are the contributions of the actors and epistemologies of the South? What are the new trends in global sociology that allow innovative analyses of these challenges? What are the main obstacles we face to tackle these problems? How can innovative sociological analyses contribute to grasp and to face our common problems in the Global Age?