

An open letter to the global AIDS community

Why I have decided to leave the Brazilian Ministry of Health following three years as head of the Department of STIs, AIDS and Viral Hepatitis

I am writing this letter so as to draw international attention to the fact that Brazil's current [and provisional] government now poses a serious threat to the country's long sought after Unified Health System [or *Sistema Único de Saúde/SUS*, in Portuguese] – not to mention to Brazilian democracy itself.

My work at the Brazilian Ministry of Health's Department of STIs, AIDS and Viral Hepatitis (DDAHV) began in July 2013, when then Health minister Alexandre Padilha invited me to head Brazil's successful public policies in this field. At that time, I had been working abroad for eight years, six of which for the World Health Organization.

Now, three years later – under Brazil's new and provisional government – I faced a big dilemma: to resist in order to protect SUS against the increasing threats it had begun to suffer, or to simply put an end to a bold and successful management cycle at the head of the DDAHV. Unfortunately, I was obliged to come to an abrupt conclusion only 13 days after president Michel Temer took office: although the problems that affect Brazil's public health policies did not begin during this provisional government, they have been alarmingly intensified over the first few days of Temer's term.

Allow me to briefly explain.

Within the Ministry of Health, we were already being obliged, for some time, to harbor various political nominations. For example: under the then Health minister Arthur Chioro, political nominee Antonio Nardi took office as the Ministry of Health's secretary of Surveillance. This nomination went against the entire history of the Surveillance Secretariat – which from its foundation has always been run by highly qualified public health professionals.

Also, although Health budget cuts had already been imposed on us during president Dilma Rousseff's government, they did not threaten Brazilian constitutional principles as they do now, under the new provisional government. The provisional government has also announced significant cuts to Brazil's Health and Education budgets, and to show disregard for Brazil's official national budget.

Moreover – after years of fighting discrimination in all its forms – we are now facing a government which does not in the least represent Brazil's rich diversity: Temer's ministers are all male, white and heterosexual; several of them are fundamentalist religious leaders who push forth their ideas in a country that is supposedly secular.

As for human rights, the provisional government has downsized Brazil's Ministry of Human Rights to secretariat status – and submitting it to the Ministry of Justice, which is now under the command of former São Paulo Public Security secretary Alexandre Moraes, who is notorious for violently repressing social activism and violating human rights.

These are but a few signs of what is yet to come.

Following a political negotiation, the provisional president invited engineer and politician Ricardo Barros to head Brazil's Ministry of Health. He soon announced his intention to

downsize SUS and encourage private health plans. Recently, on his first international mission to the World Health Assembly in Switzerland, he left behind the board of the DDAHV – despite the fact that the WHA was going to discuss important five-year STIs, AIDS and viral hepatitis strategies. To justify this decision, his aides argued that the delegation had to be smaller; nonetheless, the minister's wife was inexplicably part of the delegation.

Furthermore, to date, the minister of Health has not yet appointed a secretary of Health Surveillance, despite current zika, dengue, H1N1, chikungunha epidemics. So far, he has only promoted former secretary of Health Surveillance Antonio Nardi to the position of deputy minister. Nardi – despite his lack of technical expertise – is now responsible for managing the largest share of the Ministry of Health's budget.

Antonio Nardi has made several mistakes. Recently, he dispatched a document forbidding any DDAHV employees or consultants – including myself – from participating in a UN high-level meeting on HIV/AIDS (HLM) that will be held from 8-10 June 2016, in New York. This is a crucial AIDS meeting, dealing with AIDS epidemic control by 2030, a Sustainable Development Goal which Brazil is a signatory of.

This is no small matter: during the 31 years of Brazil's response to AIDS, this is the first time it will be absent in such an important event.

Nardi's attacks on Brazilian STI, AIDS and viral hepatitis policies have been constant over the last year. Up to now, they had been overturned by the Ministry of Health's Executive Secretariat or by the former minister himself; they were imperceptible to anyone who does not work at the DDAHV, but created a great deal of stress to its team.

Therefore, as a result of this conservative provisional government's actions, I now realize that I cannot continue working at the DDAHV.

I will, however, continue to defend the SUS that I helped to establish in the 1980s – and will evidently never cease to combat sexually transmitted infections, AIDS and viral hepatitis, or to fight for the lives of people who depend on the public policies that deal with them.

As long as I live, I will devote my life to promoting the human rights of all people – women; trans or bisexual people; gays or lesbians; people who use drugs; negro or indigenous people; people living with HIV or who carry viral hepatitis and STIs; and sex workers –, as I have always done. These are my friends and companions I am proud to have made along my long journey – and they are the most eloquent expression of the reasons that have led me to dedicate my personal and professional life to this cause. I will go on fighting, but from a different address – and my struggle for SUS will continue wherever I am.

I will leave the Department today, May 27, 2016, hoping that the Brazilian AIDS state policy is preserved by whoever takes office, and for the duration of this provisional government. Following the Department until the publication of my dismissal in the Official Gazette, and follow the SUS the fight of which we dream, wherever I am.

Attached please find the report of my term at the head of the Department, with all technical indicators of progress and public savings.

I would like to thank all my employees, colleagues and partners in Brazil and abroad.

In the words of Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, "I am sorry I have not been successful in all my endeavors, but my failures are my victories – and I would hate to be in the position of those who have defeated me."