



Latin America and COVID-19

March 2020

Globalization has facilitated the spread of COVID-19 throughout the world. Internationally, leaders have been reacting in different ways. The general measures to stop the spread of the virus are clear: constant hand washing, social distancing, suspension of activities and restrictions on free movement. However, the measures to prevent and mitigate the social and economic impact of COVID-19 have not been clearly stated and these uncertainties are seriously affecting a very important part of the world population that lives in vulnerable conditions.

How is this multidimensional crisis being lived amongst the people of Latin America and the Caribbean?

There was an attempted escape at the La Modelo prison in **Bogotá**. Some media report that it was due to fear of the spread of the virus, given the conditions in which the inmates live. Several people died and there are serious injuries. Are they the first indirect victims of the pandemic?

In **Bolivia**, there have been hundreds of arrests of people who have not complied with the quarantine. **Panama** paralyzed its airport with the suspension of flight arrivals and departures as it is the country with the highest number of confirmed cases. Then, **Guatemala** announced a curfew, later reporting that the population “ignores” this measure given by the authorities. There are military checkpoints in **Peru**, and in **Brazil** the disease is already present in its 27 states while the president has suspended social isolation measures.

In **Ecuador**, mandatory isolation was implemented. However, a response strategy has not been seen to counter the precariousness of the health system due to the lack of budgetary allocation to protection systems, and the instability of the executive with the continuous changes of ministers, which has negatively impacted on health policies health, eradication of violence and care for priority groups.

In **Mexico**, people suffer from water scarcity to meet the most basic recommendations against the pandemic, as can be seen in the popular settlements in the Metropolitan Area of

the Valley of Mexico, with more than 20 million inhabitants, and in states such as Oaxaca, who have been demanding compliance with their right of access for years. Additionally, the urgency of effective protection for women increases in a country where 11 women are killed per day. Placing women in social isolation with their assailants increases the risk of fatality to levels higher than the virus could cause.

In **Paraguay**, a health emergency has also been decreed and free movement has been restricted throughout the day. This has generated a situation of anguish, anxiety and bewilderment for a large part of the population, mainly because protection measures are not being adopted for people who depend on their daily income. Several areas of the capital and the interior of the country are also registered with an intermittent drinking water service, which totally violates sanitary hygiene measures.

Colombia suffers from a similar situation. The El Faro community in Medellín, has demanded the fulfillment of the human right to sanitation to face the contingency, claiming for the precariousness with which the population has had to survive and emphasizing that despite the protocols that are required and that are necessary and understandable, they are impossible to fulfill without putting the lives of its inhabitants at risk. "People prefer to die from the virus than from hunger," they say in this community.

Feminist organizations in **Argentina** have emphasized that the health crisis is a care crisis. In the country, women spend approximately 6 hours in care work, and studies have revealed that irregularities in working hours due to isolation increase the unpaid workload of women.

The COVID-19 crisis has uncovered other crises that have been unfairly neglected for a long time, since Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) suffer from a problem that worsens the situation and the consequences of the virus: **being the region with the highest inequality index in the world.**

The new coronavirus arrived "late" in the region, compared to other geographical areas, so the highest points of contagion are expected to occur in the coming weeks. Experts have communicated their concerns regarding the capacity of the health and social protection systems that Latin American and Caribbean countries have, as well as the rapid spread of the virus in vulnerable populations.

These concerns are based on the fact that LAC dedicates less resources to public health than other regions: three times less on average than the European Union, and its public health systems have been eroding after decades of austerity dictated by international organizations.

Despite the fact that local and national governments have begun to implement some mitigation measures, there are serious and dangerous omissions. Those who live from informal work, have precarious jobs, lack adequate housing, suffer from domestic violence and are discriminated by gender, ethnic origin or race have not been duly considered in the support measures that the governments have dictated.

ECLAC reported last week that in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, **LAC is at risk of contracting GDP by -1.8% and increasing the unemployment rate by 10%, in addition to the fact that the number of people in poverty could rise from 185 to 220 million.** Additionally, we must bear in mind that 7 out of 10 people in poverty are women, so this situation will affect them more seriously. Alicia Barcena, executive secretary of this organization, emphasizes this:

"The more unequal a country is, the hardest it is for most vulnerable groups to bear the weight of the economic impact of the pandemic as they have fewer resources to combat this."

People who live in popular settlements, are very prone to **evictions by private individuals, forced to suspend the payment of credits and loans** due to their lack of income. Likewise, groups of people without homes or shelter will be more likely to be victims of the virus due to the lack of hygiene and sanitary services, as well as prisons with insufficient capacity to cope with the crisis.

For all the above, it is urgent for governments to take measures to:

- **Suspend the cuts in water and electricity services in homes to guarantee the measures hygiene.**
- **Ensure access to basic health services.**
- **Ensure shelter and adequate conditions in the home to communities in informal settlements, avoiding evictions due to non-payment.**
- **Guarantee effective protection mechanisms for women at risk of domestic violence.**
- **Guarantee a basic income that allows solving the most urgent needs of food, clothing and care for families in poverty conditions.**

It is time to call for solidarity from all social sectors and to assume the role that the state must have to guarantee Human Rights, particularly for the most vulnerable families and people. These rights are enforceable and that is what we demand, not only in the face of contingencies but in the face of a historical debt that today becomes evident and urgent to attend to.

*"The real disease is not the virus
but a system that has denied our basic rights."*

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