

COVID-19 voices from Latin America and the Caribbean

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By August 2020, Latin America and the Caribbean has become the epicentre of the pandemic with more than 5.4 million COVID-19 cases confirmed and 210,000 fatalities. Coronavirus cases keep rising sharply, especially in Brazil, with more than 3 million confirmed cases, followed by Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Peru. As under testing seems to be the norm across the region, many feel in the dark regarding the severity of the virus and the effectiveness of national health strategies. Others insist on the futility of testing a population where tracing and surveillance are unfeasible due to rates of poverty and unemployment and where health systems, with a few exceptions, have been denigrated for decades. Recent estimates suggest that, as a result of the pandemic, the number of people living in extreme poverty across Latin America and the Caribbean could reach 83.4 million by the end of the year.¹ COVID-19 has severely impacted the region's food system, and farmers' organizations have already warned of an unprecedented social crisis due to lack of social protection and sanitation for workers. The continent is on the edge of a food crisis as millions are unable to afford basic needs such as food and shelter due to unemployment and declining income. Under these and other pre-existing conditions, navigating through the virus has proved to be a path full of tension and contradictions. Stay at home campaigns become an irony when there is no home to go to or, in the case of millions of Latin American women, when home becomes the greatest threat due to domestic violence.

The potential contribution of medical anthropology to the field of bioethics lies in the cultural embeddedness of moral systems and the situatedness of bioethical problems (Muller, 1994). The field of bioethics has been historically dominated by Western philosophical thought and for some, by the normativity of whiteness (Marshall, 1992; Myser, 2003) COVID-19 has undoubtedly remind us of the need to account for culturally pluralistic responses to issues of life and death and the bioethical problems that go along with them. The plethora of social and cultural concerns that have emerged from the pandemic are drastically varied across countries and regions and such differences demand us to question if the epistemological tools at hand are useful to our own situated experience or not. The aim of this series of texts is to provide a glimpse into the pandemic from Latin America. The texts reflect on the way our own national contexts shape experiences, perceptions and expectations among countries in the region. The texts aim to cover how colonial histories of poverty, dispossession, violence and economic sanctions are deeply entangled with various forms of vulnerability under COVID-19. The texts also provide us with success stories of solidarity and care, such as the case of Cuba, and emphasize the importance to rethink bioethics in the region, not only as Latin Americans but also as humans engaged in processes of radical imagination for a more caring and sustainable life. The coronavirus is a powerful reminder of our global interconnectedness, but also of how our differences (i.e. economic, social, and discursive) condition the strategies at hand and the challenges ahead. The series of texts hereby presented, offer situated concerns and experiences from Latin America and the Caribbean from the voice of academics writing under one of the most complex social and health conditions that many of us have ever experienced. We hope these texts are read not as a mere scholarly endeavour, but as testimonies of one of the most painful human experience of our times.

¹See: <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/45726-preventing-covid-19-crisis-becoming-food-crisis-urgent-measures-against-hunger>

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