

## How COVID-19 Could Send Latin America Back in Time

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Emerging countries desperately need money, equipment, and professional assistance to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, save thousands of lives, and prevent large portions of their populations from falling into catastrophic poverty. This aid can only come from wealthy countries already struggling to cope with the novel respiratory infectious disease. In Latin America, internal political turmoil, severe governance problems, and ambiguous foreign policy will hamper this indispensable aid and international collaboration.

The [strategic culture of Argentina](#) has been characterized by a “recurring pattern of making foreign policy decisions to shore up” domestic political support without accepting the consequences of its international actions. The same could be said for many (if not all) Latin American nations. These problematic dynamics have affected International Monetary Fund policies in local economies, commercial relationships with the European Union, and other multilateral collaborations with the West and Asia. If Latin American countries are to successfully respond to the COVID-19 crisis, these dynamics, especially procrastination on domestic political conflicts, will need to be replaced by a renewed commitment to international cooperation.

### *THE RICH SHOULD NOT FORGET THE POOR*

First detected in Wuhan, the capital of central China’s Hubei province, COVID-19 then spread to the rest of Asia, Europe, Africa, and the United States. Until now, global focus on its effects has concentrated on the most powerful economies in the world. It remains to be seen what will happen when the full effects reach less-prosperous shores. History shows us how widely regional effects can diverge: during the [1918 flu pandemic](#), the [death rate](#) was thirty-one times higher in the central provinces of India than in the U.S. state of Wisconsin. Nearly 50 percent of that variance can be independently explained by per capita income. Studies further showed that a 10 percent increase in per capita income was associated with a 10 percent decrease in mortality. This should raise the alarm about the potential consequences of COVID-19 in Latin America, Africa, and India, and points to wealth disparities as a central problem behind globalization, and for any possible global health governance response.

In Latin America, COVID-19 was initially a high-income disease linked to international travel, but has now [spread aggressively to the low-income population](#). Its harms will be amplified by the high numbers of elderly people living in poverty, the more than 15 percent of the general population living in shantytowns, and the extremely fragile health-care systems throughout Latin America. Govern-

ments, in most cases already facing chronic fiscal deficits and uncertain economic growth, have mobilized their scarce resources to abate an unendurable recession fueled by adverse international conditions and the local consequences of mandatory social distancing. Latin American governments, however, will not be able to domestically solve a problem that is global in nature. This is a test for global governance, and, if the international system fails, the world will certainly be confronted with another round of intense and long-lasting impoverishment among Latin American nations.

### *FIGHT GLOBAL, NOT LOCAL*

Emerging countries are fighting this pandemic alone, and their efforts will be hampered by inadequate economic means and health-care capacity. Richer nations are focused on containing their local outbreaks, but this is a global crisis. Using the 1918 flu pandemic model, if the same outbreak were to occur today, emerging countries would bear 92 percent of the world's deaths. The next few months will determine whether COVID-19 fulfills that prophecy, but by then it may be too late for the world to change course. Unusually busy gravediggers in Villa Formosa in Sao Paulo, Brazil; retirees crowded at the doors of banks to get their meager pensions in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and corpses in the streets of poor neighborhoods in Guayaquil, Ecuador, suggest that this gloomy outcome is well on its way.

The COVID-19 pandemic will [forever change the world order](#). Even the most powerful nations will be unable to meet the unprecedented health and social challenges alone. This universal interdependence further suggests the need and responsibility to collaborate. Effective globalization depends on continuous progress toward democratization and development, and the failure of one will cause the other to collapse as well.

Countries in Latin America should restructure existing domestic and regional health governance institutions. Regional governments should prioritize and build up outbreak tracing and disease modeling on a national, regional, and global level to promote early warning and collaboration across borders. Additionally, development plans will need to be designed with an eye toward regional health-care goals. International organizations can play a role in these reforms by creating appropriate incentives. For example, many countries struggle to be admitted into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Tying membership accession to the [OECD's guiding principles](#) and promotion of social welfare, scientific research, innovation empowerment, and cross-country health and science collaboration could create more incentives for establishing regional and global collaboration. The role of institutions such as the Pan-American Health Organization should also be reinforced by close collaboration with international science institutions based in North America, Asia, and Europe.

Additionally, although border restrictions have been widely implemented to restrict the spread of COVID-19, the longer they remain in place, the more they will undermine years of regional integration. Further, the need for crossing borders does not stop at individuals. Global programs are needed to fuel the transfer of health-care technology as well. Broadly speaking, this epidemic is fought mostly with primitive weapons (quarantine and cordon sanitaire); a modern approach based on information technology and artificial intelligence will be necessary to facilitate the required collective behaviors. If these behaviors are not implemented soon, much of the progress in many republics will be reversed.

Such efforts need the leadership of rich nations together with a spirit of collaboration with emerging countries.

### *THE WORLD NEEDS A LEADER*

The world is in disarray and requires a clear global vision of what needs to be done. In his dialogue “[The Statesman](#),” Plato develops the idea that God from time to time lets humans alone govern the world, to the point where catastrophe follows excessively indulgent human behaviors. But “beholding it in its troubles, and anxious for it lest it sinks racked by storms and confusion . . . he takes control of the helm once more.” COVID-19 has exposed the well-recognized and deep disorders of this world, disorders that need to be repaired. Nothing will prove more effective than values-based leadership, science, and collaboration.

It is time to consider what COVID-19 “[reveals about the political systems](#) that respond to it,” at both the national and the global level. If it is true that “the need to control plagues helped create the modern state,” then a failure to command the current crisis globally would seriously harm the world order. This outcome could vary greatly in its effects, leaving some regions in better shape than others. In the end, though, the great dream of a globalization that promotes a common human destiny would remain unfulfilled. For Latin America, it would certainly mean falling back to a more primitive age.