

# **An analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America through the perspective of ecological economics**

The American continents have become one of the epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistically, it is the world region which has been impacted the most by the pandemic. By August 3, 2021, over two million people have been confirmed to have died from COVID-19, which represents roughly half of the total number of confirmed global deaths from the disease (Statista, 2021). Moreover, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates that the economies of this region will contract by 5.3% in 2021, which will plunge almost 30 million inhabitants of this world region into poverty (ECLAC, 2021).

Of course, the impacts of COVID-19 are not just statistical. The pandemic has contributed to turmoil in different ways. The most prominent 2021 political revolts related to the pandemic occurred in Colombia where a new tax and health care reform proposed by the government of President Iván Duque Márquez set off almost two months of nationwide protests that united Colombians from different social and economic backgrounds in a movement against the government proposals and police brutality. Political turmoil related to problematic government responses to the pandemic also occurred in Brazil, where over five hundred thousand people have perished from COVID-19 as well as in Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru, among other countries (Parkin Daniels, 2021).

Many observers, such as Ernesto Vivares (2021) have noted that the impacts of COVID-19 on the region have resulted from pronounced existing inequalities. According to the United Nations (2019), Latin America has the highest regional Gini index of within-country inequality in the world at over 45.0. Qualitative research confirms these trends. Claudia Puerta-Silva et al. (2020) have documented how ethnic minorities, such as the Wayuu, an indigenous group inhabiting the Colombia-Venezuela borderlands have suffered deaths and health problems, food insecurity, water insecurity and increased poverty due to the absence of state protection. Sergio Moldes-Anaya et al. (2021) have analyzed COVID-19 responses in



countries from different world regions and demonstrated how Mexico's policies are most incoherent with addressing the vulnerabilities that have exacerbated inequalities in the country since the start of the pandemic.

For example, Mexico has signed more free trade agreements (13) than any other country. It is a member of the US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) Free Trade Agreement (formerly the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Pacific Alliance, and it has established free trade agreements with the European Union, Central American countries, and many South American states. Paradoxically, these agreements and associated trade practices have undermined environmental and social sustainability pursued through Mexico's international commitments to sustainable development. Mexico's gross domestic product has grown from USD 323 billion in 1992 when NAFTA was signed to USD 1.269 trillion in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). At the same time, poverty remains widespread as more than 42% of the population lives in poverty, representing more than 52 million people (Statista, 2021).

Specific groups, such as indigenous communities have been most affected by these increasing inequalities, and consequently, they have been the most vulnerable to COVID-19 impacts. For example, 9 out of 10 indigenous people in Mexico are affiliated with Seguro Popular (health insurance for the poor), 12.8% of the homes lack running water and 26.9% do not have sanitation services. As a result, 87.5% of Mexico's indigenous population lives in "a high degree of marginalization" (Alcalá Gómez, 2021).

This special issue, which results from *Regions & Cohesion's* collaboration with the Mesoamerican Society for Ecological Economics continues the journal's focus on the social construction of risk and vulnerability and its relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The field of ecological economics investigates the ecological footprint of human interactions that are dictated by market structures. While the principal focus of the field is environmental impacts, an important transversal theme is inequality which results from power dynamics established by market structures. The works presented in this special issue adopt the perspective of ecological economics in their analyses of human-environmental interactions. They examine the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 crisis through the lens of unsustainable economies in Latin America and the inequalities that they have produced. The editors thank the Mesoamerican Society for Ecological Economics for its support of this special issue and Dr. Aleida Azamar Alonso and Dr. Carmen Maganda, guest editors of the special issue, for the vision and development of this unique perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America. *Regions & Cohesion* is proud to publish this

special issue on “The 2020 paradox: A multi-system crisis in search of a comprehensive response.”

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