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FEATURED Q&A

Where Are Latin Americans Most at Risk of Starvation?



The Covid-19 pandemic may push millions of people into hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the United Nations World Food Program. A Salvadoran family that participates in a World Food Program initiative is pictured above. // File Photo: WFP.

Q The coronavirus pandemic could push more than 14 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean into hunger, the U.N. World Food Program warned last month. That's nearly four times the number of people who experienced severe food insecurity in 2019. The estimates don't include Venezuela, where one in every three people faced hunger last year. Which countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are most at risk of facing a hunger crisis this year? What can governments in the region do to make sure their citizens are fed, and what should the role of multilateral organizations and the private sector be in such a task? What are some potential unintended consequences of aid, especially for small businesses that are already facing a dire economic situation, and how can they be taken into account when developing a strategy for food distribution?

A Devry Boughner Vorwerk, member of the Advisor board and CEO of DevryBV Sustainable Strategies: "The World Food Program reported that the food situation is acute in Haiti; among migrant populations from Venezuela that are in neighboring Colombia, Ecuador and Peru; and along the 'Dry Corridor' of Central America. Also, Cuba faces the double burden of Covid-19 and the long-standing U.S. embargo, and the political situation in Venezuela is exacerbating hunger and starvation. Governments in the region should: 1.) take a women-centric approach and ensure voucher and nutritional assistance programs are readily available and flexible to meet family needs; 2.) develop local and regional task forces comprised of community leaders, business and farm groups; and 3.) run a parallel approach of directing

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TODAY'S NEWS

ECONOMIC

Puerto Rico Governor to Lift Restrictions

Puerto Rico Governor Wanda Vázquez said she will lift nearly all of the restrictions that were imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19. The reopening would begin June 16, she said.

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BUSINESS

Health Must Come Before Output: Chile Miners' Unions

Chilean miners' unions said workers' health must be prioritized over production.

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POLITICAL

Leading Candidate in Dominican Republic Positive for Covid-19

Presidential candidate Luis Abinader of the opposition Modern Revolutionary Party said he and his wife have tested positive for Covid-19. The election is scheduled for July 5.

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Abinader // File Photo: Abinader Campaign.

POLITICAL NEWS

Leading Candidate in Dominican Republic Has Covid-19

Luis Abinader, who is leading the polls ahead of the Dominican Republic's July 5 presidential election, has been diagnosed with Covid-19, Reuters reported Thursday. Abinader said his wife has also tested positive. "Be tranquil because with God's grace, we will recover quickly," Abinader, 52, said late Wednesday on social media. The presidential candidate added that his doctors expect a full recovery because he is not a high-risk patient. Abinader, of the social democratic Modern Revolutionary Party, said he and his wife are self-isolating at their home. Abinader's political opponents were among those wishing him a speedy recovery. "We ask God for his quick recovery and good health," President Danilo Medina said in a posting on Twitter. Medina, of the Dominican Liberation Party, has served two consecutive terms and is ineligible for re-election. Gonzalo Castillo, the candidate of Medina's party, trailed Abinader by two percentage points in a recent poll by Mark Penn/Stagwell. In the poll, Abinader led with 39 percent. The Dominican Republic's presidential and legislative elections next month were postponed from May because of the coronavirus pandemic. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes on July 5, a runoff would be scheduled for July 26. Some 7.5 million voters are expected to cast ballots in the Caribbean nation and abroad, Reuters reported. The Dominican Republic is among the Caribbean countries worst hit by the virus, and it remains in a state of emergency. The country has more than 21,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 561 reported deaths from it. The Dominican Republic's status as a magnet for tourists is seen as having contributed to the country's high number of cases, Reuters reported. However, the pandemic has largely shut down tourism in the country. Last month, Abinader told reporters that among his main goals would be the "rapid restoration of the national tourism industry," Dominican Today reported. "I know

first-hand the contributions that tourism makes to employment, to the generation of foreign exchange, to the agricultural sector, and to the development of the country in all aspects, and I know that without the slightest delay we have to start this engine of the economy and of the general well-being that is tourism," he said.

Colombia Accuses Captured Venezuelan Soldier of Spying

Authorities in Colombia on Thursday said they had captured a Venezuelan soldier who was claiming to be seeking refuge but was actually still working for Venezuela and was spying on Colombia's military, the Associated Press reported. Gerardo Rojas was captured in north-eastern Colombia at a roadside checkpoint and was carrying documents identifying him as an active Venezuelan military sergeant. Venezuelan officials did not immediately comment.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Puerto Rico Governor to Lift Lockdown Restrictions June 16

Puerto Rico Governor Wanda Vázquez announced Thursday that she will lift nearly all restrictions imposed in a bid to curb the spread of coronavirus on the island, which means beaches, churches and businesses including movie theaters and gyms will reopen after nearly three months of lockdowns, the Associated Press reported. Vázquez said the reopening would begin on June 16, which is also when businesses will be allowed to operate seven days a week, as well as restaurants at 50 percent capacity. A curfew will be maintained for two more weeks, she said, though it will now be from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., instead of 7 p.m., the Voice of America reported. Additionally, wearing masks will be mandatory in public and inside businesses, and social distancing is still

NEWS BRIEFS

Shoppers Line Up for Hours as Malls Reopen in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro

Shoppers lined up for hours in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro as malls reopened after being closed for 83 days due to the coronavirus pandemic, Reuters reported. Most shoppers wore masks and followed social-distancing rules. The lockdowns have cost more than \$5 billion in lost business, said industry group Abrasce.

Costa Rica Imposes Rules for Food Companies as Covid Cases Increase

Costa Rican officials on Wednesday announced a "health intervention" in agricultural companies and food packers in a bid to control a spike in cases in the northern area of the country, near the Nicaraguan border, The Tico Times reported. Health Minister Daniel Salas, alongside Agriculture Minister Renato Alvarado, said the government would place rigorous sanitary standards for such companies, and those that do not comply will be shuttered. Many plantations and packers of products including pineapples operate near the northern border and commonly employ undocumented migrants from Nicaragua.

Operations at Ecuador's OCP Pipeline Halted Over Environmental Concerns

Ecuador's privately run heavy crude pipeline, OCP, has halted operations for four days as a preventative measure against possible environmental damage due to soil erosion in the Amazon region, operator OCP Ecuador said on Thursday, Reuters reported. The company said the suspension would not affect exports, adding that crude transport would restart once the company had drained the pipeline and connected it to a new bypass. The OCP pipeline currently transports about 180,000 barrels of crude per day.

required. The governor also said that Puerto Rico will be ready to welcome tourists starting July 15, the AP reported. However, Vázquez warned that the restrictions would return if an increase in Covid-19 cases, related deaths or the number of people hospitalized follows the reopening. "These have been hard decisions," she said. "Now it's up to each one of us ... to decide where to go and how to go about it." Puerto Rico has confirmed more than 1,400 coronavirus cases and at least 144 deaths.

BUSINESS NEWS

Health Must Come Before Output: Chile Miners' Unions

Miners' unions in Chile, the world's top copper producer, said Thursday that workers' health comes before output and should be a top priority, a statement that came one day after state-run Codelco's unions threatened a walkout at some of its operations, Reuters reported. Members of the Federation of Copper Workers said that there had been an "alarming" increase in coronavirus cases at some mines a week after an employee at the company's massive Chuquicamata mine died from the disease. "This is a general warning, in case the administration does not take the measures," Liliana Ugarte, the head of the Chuquicamata 2 union, told the wire service on Thursday. "The lives of our people are more important than any production targets," she added. Codelco declined Reuters' request to comment. The regional government has said the Chuquicamata mine is complying with the required health protocols. The concern came as cases in Chile climb past 154,000 in 100 days since the first case was confirmed in the Andean nation, Reuters reported. There have been more than 2,600 deaths related to Covid-19. "It has been a very hard 100 days," Health Minister Jaime Mañalich told reporters in Santiago on Thursday. He added, "June is going to be the toughest month in the fight against the disease."

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multilateral aid to the country and into local distribution networks. There can be unintended consequences of food aid, but the WFP is quite astute in this regard. The key is that aid is not 'dumped' in the market, displacing local farmers' ability to meet local demand. Nonprofit groups are coordinating and mobilizing. They include World Central Kitchen, Gastromotiva in Brazil and social gastronomy hubs in countries across the region. These groups are operating at the very local levels and targeting the most vulnerable communities for action. They should receive funding from governments and the private sector to do their work. Small businesses and local food retailers are part of the solution and are critical actors in the distribution network. One thing governments can do is infuse capital into these local businesses, not just food aid, but 'capital aid' to keep these local businesses relevant and afloat. Finally, we have resources from the technology side to identify where there is a mismatch in the marketplace. Tech solutions need to be brought to the table quickly, where local community leaders can alert the market to the excess demand situation and suppliers can say, 'we got it!' The pandemic forces necessary disruption in the traditional supply chains. We have no time to waste. Lives will be lost today from starvation."

A **Martín Piñeiro, director of the Agricultural Affairs Committee at the Argentine Council of International Relations:** "The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on food production and distribution in Latin America. However, this impact has been concentrated mainly on fresh food sectors that depend on migrant labor or are very sensitive to disruptions in distribution logistics. Figures show that production of basic staples, including meat and dairy products, have not been greatly affected. So, it is possible to conclude that supply disruption is not the main reason for the deterioration of food security in Latin America, including

the 14 million people who will be pushed into hunger, according to the WFP. Hunger is mainly the consequence of the deterioration of buying capacity of poor urban populations, which results from the forced quarantine that all governments have implemented, with varying degrees of enforcement. Quarantines inevitably result in diminished economic activity and employment, especially in sectors such as tourism, personal services, restaurants and others that have been targeted in the restrictions. Most governments have implemented substantial support programs with direct handouts to unemployed people and provided subsidized credit and other support measures to firms that have been forced to reduce their activities. Well-designed and implemented policies of this type are the most useful and necessary government interventions. International organizations can play a role in evaluating best practices and helping in the exchange of ideas and experiences between countries. The impact of these measures on fiscal stability, especially in poorer countries, is significant. International finance institutions should design special programs to support countries in need."

A **Diana Chavez, executive director of the Private Sector Regional Centre for the Support of U.N. Sustainable Development**

Goals: "The word 'hunger' evokes strong reactions. A few weeks ago in Chile, an electronic projection of this word on the wall of a corporate building in downtown Santiago caused political and social turmoil. This emphasized the opportunity that the coronavirus pandemic provides to take a step back and reimagine traditional primary sectors, such as agriculture and food production. The agriculture sector in Latin America represents close to 5 percent of the GDP and 14 percent of the labor force. Despite the importance of the sector, competitiveness, infrastructure and innovation in social policies to tackle urban-rural disparity are nec-

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essary to position the food and agriculture sector as strategic from a dual perspective: first, as a large employer that contributes to economic and social development; and second, as a key actor that contributes to food security. Policymakers must address the historical neglect of rural areas through an updated approach that guarantees food access to the most vulnerable populations and facilitates the continued operation of the industry and local markets where small producers operate. The private sector has a pivotal role in creating formal employment to counterbalance informality in the sector. Investing in innovation and development for the economic empowerment of local communities is critical. Multilateral organizations must understand the reality of the region and provide a platform to benchmark practices and build local capacities through cooperation. Covid-19 has shown that food security goes beyond Sustainable Development Goal 2, and it is critical to include small producers for more resilient global supply chains and prevent hunger as a threat to political and social stability. Employment and food access are stabilizing factors that prevent civil unrest.”

A Lidia Fromm Cea, executive director of the Mesoamerica Project for Integration and Development: “The worst-case scenario looms ahead of us: an expanding pandemic that could easily spiral into a global food security crisis. The economic shutdowns have put the food system—production, supply, processing, marketing and services, including street food vendors and restaurants—at risk. Losses of jobs and incomes have caused financial hardships for families, thus reducing the demand for agro-products and affecting formal, informal, small and medium-scale businesses. The contraction of food-purchasing power is affecting the type, quantity and quality of food consumers demand. The poorest—especially those with little or no access to social

protection programs—are the hardest-hit. Governments should support policies to stimulate private sector and SME-led agricultural initiatives, create social safety nets or strengthen existing ones with efficient food programs and monitor the delivery of emergency assistance. Physical-distancing requirements bring a unique opportunity to broaden access to digital information tools and services that can assist production tasks as well as health and social service ones. Agriculture ministries should consider that timeliness of land preparation and planting is a major concern for rainfed crops, and that the adoption of digital technology for agricultural information and marketing could greatly help sort problems. Private sectors and governments should work together in response teams to collect data and perform analysis to identify crop and livestock system needs. All development actors—including academia, civil society and farmer organizations—should recognize this time as an opportunity to transform the food system so it is more climate-resilient, healthier and digitally intelligent: install irrigation systems and terracing programs, ensure reforestation and restoration of depleted lands, create incentives to stimulate production, marketing and consumption of nutritious foods and also use information technologies to track supply constraints, climate conditions, hunger hot spots and market prices. Regional platforms should bring together technical, political and economic leaders to support joint actions: 1.) remove existing or threatened export restrictions to allow the free movement of agricultural commodities; 2.) compile countries’ data and facilitate joint analysis in order to establish priorities that may mitigate food insecurity and facilitate dialogue to help countries plan for the upcoming production season.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue, Copyright © 2020

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Latin America Advisor is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005

www.thedialogue.org

ISSN 2163-7962

Subscription inquiries are welcomed at ebrand@thedialogue.org

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