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LATAM REPORT

**(II) LATIN AMERICA
2020: A SOCIETY
BEING TESTED**

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THREE APPROACHES TO NAVIGATING THE PERFECT STORM

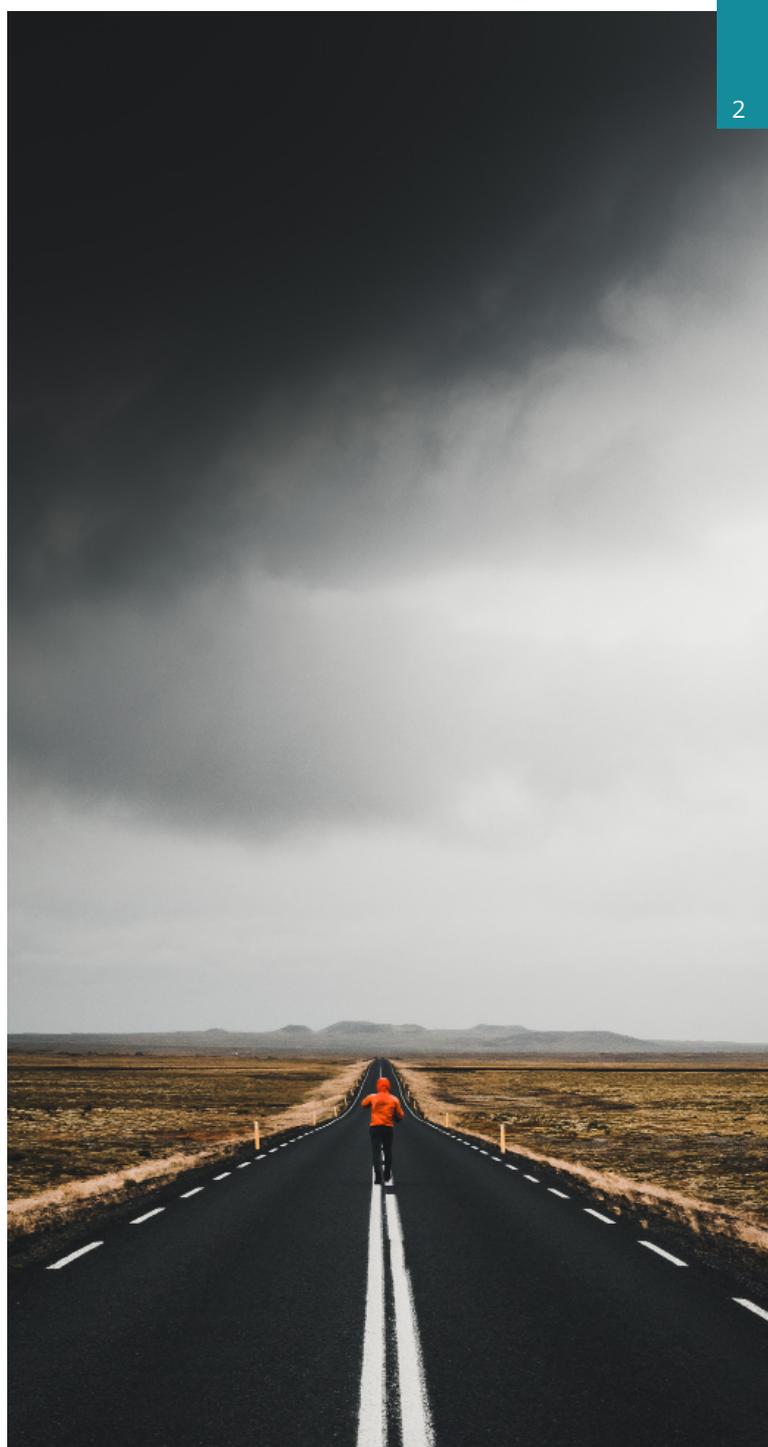
As we transitioned into 2020, most global experts and political scientists were raising concerns that suggested Latin America was facing one of its regular periods of difficulty. Numerous theories were floated about widespread conflict that would devastate the continent to a greater or lesser degree. The economic situation was slipping into paralysis amid a broader context of social insecurity and inequality, along with democratic and institutional disaffection. Countries were turning inward while talk of confrontation and populism was putting a strain on diplomatic relations, adding a local slant to some of the issues that come with the new political and social era of the new century.

Against that backdrop, the unexpected worldwide arrival of the coronavirus is stirring things up further, clouding all judgment and forms of analysis. An already strained political and social climate with flat economic indicators is now joined by the threats posed by a health risk with unforeseeable effects on the continent. No country anywhere in the world will emerge unscathed and the tough consequences of this pandemic will be felt strongest where structures lack the resilience required of a consolidated State and necessary for facing such a sudden, fast-spreading crisis with no immediate end in sight. Never has a maze been so complex and its exits so unclear.

In an attempt to draw you a map for this maze, three different authors with expertise on Latin America gathered from wide-ranging experiences and opinions offer three different approaches to navigating this perfect storm. Carlos Malamud, Eva Mateo and Ramón Casilda sketch out their broadest and most faithful outlines of the situation, and explore some of the possible opportunities that, according to classic proverbs, always emerge from a crisis.

In this second part of the report and from the international aid organization where she works, Eva Mateos presents the consequences that this pandemic will bring in terms of society and development, with a broader outlook on the phenomena and movements that exist in the region and their impact on the future of its societies.

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LATIN AMERICA 2020: A SOCIETY BEING TESTED

This article should have started with Venezuela and the serious humanitarian, political, economic, military and diplomatic emergency the country is currently going through. Or with the migrant crisis, drug trafficking and structural violence triangle in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Or the shouts of "Chile, wake up!" that still echo around the Plaza Italia in Santiago. Or any of the numerous other open wounds in Latin America at the start of 2020. This article should have begun with a chessboard and pieces set up like that. However, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the rules of the game.

As I write these lines, COVID-19 has already spread like a bad stain and reached every corner of the region. It could be said that Latin America and Africa - the regions to be hit last by the pandemic - have watched Europe, Asia and the United States from a distance for days and seen their own possible future: societies in lock-down, watching the climbing numbers of infected, dead and hospitalized, competing in the market for the same face masks and ventilators, with millions of jobs balancing on a knife edge. However, they have also witnessed incredible efforts from doctors, nurses, scientists, politicians and truck drivers giving everything they have to give on the front line of this emergency, anonymous heroes lending their homes to healthcare specialists arriving from other regions or going shopping for their elderly neighbors so the latter can avoid potential exposure to the virus unnecessarily, and the emotional rounds of applause from the balconies of half the world, every day at eight in the evening to blow wind into the sails of those looking after all of us.

When the coronavirus reached Latin America, the chessboard and pieces were already laid out. Preventive confinement has been the main barrier against the spread of this virus. With public health systems much less robust and per capita spending in the region three times lower than in the European Union, unequal access to healthcare is now the main bone of contention: universal health coverage in the region varies between relatively positive rates in countries such as Cuba, Uruguay and Brazil to others where health spending depends to a great extent on the

pockets of each individual, such as Guatemala and Haiti. If people do not visit healthcare centers to be diagnosed or treated even if they show symptoms of coronavirus because they lack the resources to pay for that service, infection in Latin America will spread like the plague. Furthermore, the shortage of hospital beds in intensive care units is a reality.

Nonetheless, some rays of hope shine through the clouds. Cuba has sent medical brigades to Italy and other Latin American countries to help combat the pandemic. The scientist from Panama, Ana Sánchez Urrutia, has been selected to sit on the World Health Organization Committee of Experts. The Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB) in Cuba and the Clinical-Molecular Biomedicine Technological Consortium of Chile are leading the region in its search for a vaccine against COVID-19. Scientists in Chile have created and released an antiviral face mask for 3D printing that is reusable, modular, washable and recyclable.

Paradoxically, Latin American universities are on the forefront of research against COVID-19 at a time when the Closed sign hangs on classroom doors. At the time of writing this article and according to UNESCO data, more than 122 million Ibero-American students have been affected by the suspension of classes due to the coronavirus. Higher education access exams will suffer considerable delays. Online education methods are the only alternative, but not all teachers and households are prepared for this kind of education. Experts are already making the calculations in economic terms: 88 days of no primary school for pupils in Argentina represents a 2.99% reduction in their salaries when they reach 30-40.

In short, this crisis has done nothing but create further imbalance in the already fragile social environment of one of the richest and most diverse but also most unequal regions of the world, where the richest have 70 times more than the poorest (in countries such as Guatemala).

According to the report entitled Social Panorama in Latin America 2019 by CEPAL, three out of ten Latin Americans are poor, a total of 191 million. Furthermore, Latin America has already recorded five consecutive annual rises in extreme poverty: 72 million people live on less than 1.90 \$US/day in the region. A red light has been lit in countries such as Brazil and Colombia, where the inequality gap stands above the regional average. This is also true for the most vulnerable: women, children and teenagers, the indigenous populations and those of African descent, the unemployed and those living in rural areas.

These figures threaten the commitment made by all to development. Whereas the world achieved the first Millennium Development Goal to halve the poverty rate recorded in 1990 five years ahead of schedule in 2010, global growth forecasts already suggest that we might not put an end to extreme poverty by 2030 in time. The Sustainable Development Agenda would therefore suffer its first setback.

With that in mind, it has become more urgent than ever for Latin America to make progress towards building Welfare States capable of guaranteeing equal access for its citizens to essential public resources, such as healthcare, housing, employment, transport and, of course, education.

Education is undoubtedly the biggest challenge for Latin America. This challenge can be split into three areas: improving education quality; promoting student mobility; and transforming economies that still depend on raw materials into knowledge economies capable of improving the incredibly low competitiveness in the region.

Invest more, but also invest better. This is the message launched by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) when highlighting that public investment in education in Latin America and the Caribbean has grown 20% faster than the OECD average. However, the other side of that coin shows that the budget allocated by Latin America per student remains much lower than that figure.

Nonetheless, the efforts made in recent decades have indeed produced results: practically all Latin American children attend primary school and almost eight out of ten attend secondary school. Something that still needs more work is the effort to reduce the number of students needing to repeat a year of schooling, which stands at an unsustainable 29%. Further concerns are reflected by recent PISA reports: Latin American students are incapable of solving real life problems. 80% fail in reading and mathematics.

The correlation between the results achieved in the classroom and the socio-economic status of the household in which the student lives is directly proportional: social exclusion springs from the same source and drags down on the future opportunities of these children. Pre-school education is therefore more necessary than ever to reduce inequality early and move towards fairer and more balanced societies.

Furthermore, efforts are still to be made in higher education: there are more than 30 million university students in the region today, many of whom are the first in their family to step into a university. All eyes - not only those of their families - are on them. However, the quality of the education they receive while studying their bachelor's and master's degrees is dubious. Rankings such as the latest by The Times reveal that, of the 1,400 best universities in the world, Latin America only has one among the top 400: the University of São Paulo.

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What are being called “garage universities” can be found everywhere throughout the region, which are set up with no form of quality control whatsoever. Countries such as Mexico have the incredible figure of up to 4,000 higher education institutions. At the other end of the scale, a mere 12% of university professors in Latin America hold a doctorate. Education urgently needs to be made into an attractive option for the best university graduates. Those who teach also need to have received training.

Obstacles to mobility also need to be overcome. At a time when Brexit is now a reality, we can say with all certainty that nothing has done more for European integration in half a century than the Erasmus academic exchange program. Over three decades, this program has enabled more than nine million students to improve their language levels, critical capacity, tolerance and understanding of other cultures, and employment opportunities. However, such a program is unthinkable as things stand today in Latin America, where the incompatibility between university systems, the lack of qualification recognition between countries and the lack of resources prevent students from moving beyond the borders of their home country.

This same shortage is suffered by science and R&D+i in Latin America, with merely 0.79% of regional investment. Universities also represent the cutting edge in this regard, as they account for the largest number of national researchers. I should stress male researchers, because the gender gap is more than obvious. However, this also represents a major opportunity: the encouragement of scientific careers among Latin American girls and young women is a growing priority for the education systems of many countries.

Over its 70 years of working for, in and from the region (an unprecedented example of South-South multilateral cooperation), the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) has: helped to teach 2.3 million young people and adults to read and write; improved education infrastructures through projects such as Lights to Learn, which brought electricity and connectivity to remote schools in 13 countries; tackled the challenge of faculty

quality by training over 100,000 Ibero-American teachers; supported over 1,800 university teachers and researchers throughout the region; enabled more than 500 students to study at universities in another country; and, in recent days, made dozens of free-to-access education resources available to teachers, students and parents free of charge so that the suspension of classes due to the coronavirus leaves nobody behind.

In these uncertain times, the “social elevator” theory (improving education = improving opportunities) has stopped working: education is no longer the guarantee of a better life. Whereas the pay difference between Latin Americans who finished primary education and those who completed a course of university study varied between 95 and 115% seven decades ago, that difference has been reduced to 70% today. The expectations of the increasingly more educated middle classes, with legitimately more aspirational dreams, will therefore need to be managed.

The migration phenomenon is another of the problems that has continued to trouble Latin American societies. The United Nations raised the alarm this year with record figures for displaced and refugee populations. Someone is forced to flee their home somewhere in the world every two seconds, up to 70.8 million people. Colombia is the second country, after Syria, with the highest number of forcibly displaced citizens: eight million people have been forced to abandon their homes. More than four million Venezuelans have also left their old lives behind due to hyperinflation, food shortages, political instability and violence.

However, extreme climate - not violence - is the main reason for internal displacement at present. Latin America is one of the regions in the world with the greatest exposure to climate change. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), prolonged periods of drought, frequent flooding and hurricanes in the region displaced 4.5 million Latin Americans in 2017.



Environmental policies to combat climate change, such as those in Uruguay, already consider the relocation of vulnerable communities living in areas of greatest risk. Civil society is also mobilizing. Before Greta Thunberg, Latin America always had indigenous communities reporting that their lands were being plundered for farming or mining operations. However, the price of defending the planet in Latin America is the highest in the world: 1,500 environmental activists have lost their lives since 2012 (Report entitled *Enemies of the State?* - NGO Global Witness, 2019). One of the most recent (in January), Homero Gómez González, was a Mexican agricultural engineer who set up a shelter in Michoacán to protect the Monarch butterfly. His family reported the harassment

they were being subjected to by companies engaged in tree felling.

Feminism has also left its mark in the last year. In the deadliest region of the world to be born as a woman, the “Un violador en tu camino” anthem has spread from Argentina to Mexico, ensuring that protests against sexual violence and aggression go viral, holding up a mirror to male chauvinist societies in which people are stepping up to say enough is enough. Social media have provided a channel for all these activist movements, not surprisingly given that Latin America is the part of the world where people spend the most time online.

Communication has always played a key role, and not just for the digital revolution or the fake news menace. It is only fair to underline the fact that, in a world where 40% of the population does not receive an education in their mother tongue and a language disappears every two weeks, Ibero-America is the region of the world where 800 million people communicate, live and dream in Portuguese and Spanish, as well as hundreds of indigenous languages. Spanish is the second-most spoken mother tongue in the world, and Portuguese is the second mother tongue present on the most continents. If the forecasts are correct, one billion people will speak these two languages by the end of the 21st century, being among the fastest growing at the moment.

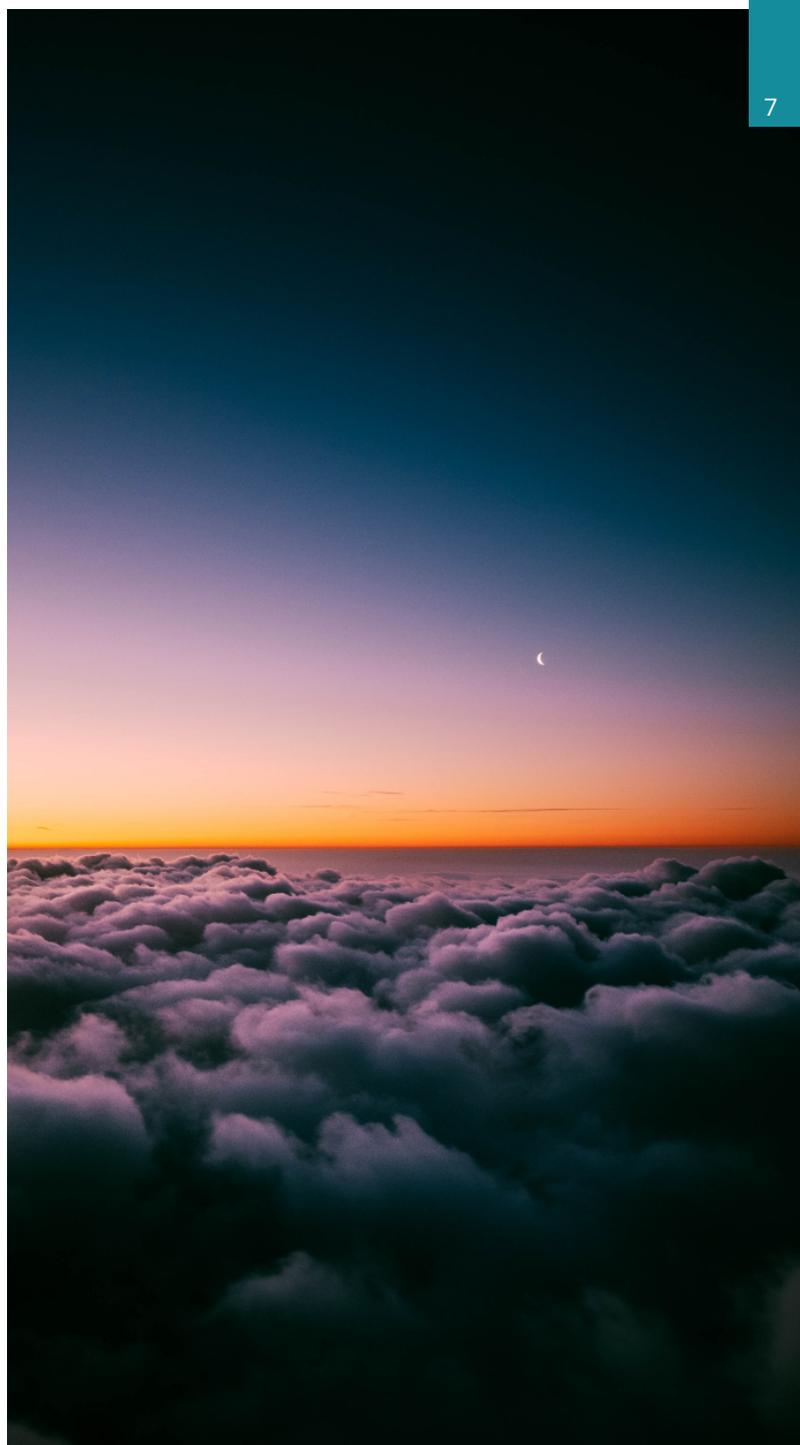
Reading Plan of Ecuador that has made books available for free download; through virtual tours of certain exhibitions in Mexico organized by its Secretariat for Culture.

The Spanish language contributes more than tourism to Spanish GDP, and it has been shown that it quadruples trade exchanges in those countries where it is spoken. Cultural industries tied to these two lingua francas account for 3% of the economies in Ibero-America, create jobs and attract tourism. That is not all: all these figures aside, they also promote cultural diversity and human development. Culture in Ibero-America is a more vibrant industry than ever, it represents heritage of exceptional value and contributes to a culture of cohesion, dialogue, knowledge production and overcoming poverty. In these coronavirus times, culture has become more necessary than ever before: from virtual platforms such as Retina latina in Colombia and the Costa Rican Centre for Cinematographic Production, which have recently been sharing the best of their Spanish-language film content for cinema enthusiasts; to the National Book and Reading Plan of Ecuador that has made books available for free download; through virtual tours of certain exhibitions in Mexico organized by its Secretariat for Culture.

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In conclusion, Latin America is facing its uncertain future like the utopian horizon discovered by Eduardo Galeano: the closer we get, the further away it moves. At this juncture, with the new challenge left to us by the COVID-19 pandemic, the portrait of this region could well be very different in terms of equality and social

interaction. And better in terms of knowledge generation and opportunities. And education, science and culture, the path. So, from an optimistic standpoint, we could take 2020 as a bonus track; another chance to get better grades from the exam of this decade.



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