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## COVID-19 and its effects in Latin America: social crisis, forced migration and hazy perspectives

*COVID-19 i jego skutki w Ameryce Łacińskiej: kryzys społeczny,  
wymuszona migracja i niejasne perspektywy*

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**Abstract:** Latin America became one of the epicentres of the pandemic due to the Sars-Cov-2 virus. One of the serious problems faced by Latin American populations is forced migration, which, like everything that concerns vulnerable populations, has increased in the pandemic. The cases of Central America and Mexico, a country considered one of the largest human corridors in the world, reached unthinkable levels of human rights violations, demonstrate this. This article addresses the political and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic resulting from the Sars-Cov-2 virus (COVID-19) in Latin America. Likewise, we will present, through the press and the reports of civil society organizations, how, in the middle of the pandemic, the criminalization and blaming of migrants in the speeches of the American government agencies was accentuated.

**Keywords:** Latin America, Covid-19, migrations.

**Streszczenie:** Ameryka Łacińska stała się jednym z epicentrow pandemii z powodu wirusa Sars-Cov-2. Jednym z poważnych problemów, z jakimi borykają się populacje Ameryki Łacińskiej, jest przymusowa migracja, która, podobnie jak wszystko, co dotyczy ludności wrażliwej, nasiliła się podczas pandemii. Świadczą o tym przypadki Ameryki Środkowej i Meksyku, kraju uważanego za jeden z największych korytarzy ludzkich na świecie, które osiągnęły niewyobrażalny poziom naruszeń praw człowieka. W tym artykule omówimy polityczne i społeczno-ekonomiczne skutki pandemii wywołanej wirusem Sars-Cov-2 (COVID-19) w Ameryce Łacińskiej. Podobnie przedstawimy, poprzez prasę i raporty organizacji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego,

kiego, jak w środku pandemii uwydatniono kryminalizację i obwinianie migrantów w przemówieniach amerykańskich agencji rządowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ameryka Łacińska, Covid-19, migracje.

## 1. Introduction

Between 2003 and 2013, Latin America was driven by the commodity export cycle that allowed the region to experience a decade of consistent economic growth, relative political stability and the development of public policies that contributed to the setback of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality<sup>1</sup>. One of the symbols of this phase was the cover of *The Economist*<sup>2</sup> magazine that under the title ‘Brazil takes off’ aroused upon the image of hope for a more egalitarian and politically stable future in Brazil and in the region. The magazine cover illustration was a montage with the statue “Christ the Redeemer” taking off like a rocket.

A feeling of optimism was disseminated regarding the overcoming of the historical ills such as poverty and recurring political crises in Latin America. This feeling of a promising and stable future could be observed in opinion polls realized by the Latinobarometer Corporation (*Informe Latino Barometro*, 2018: 35). Citizen satisfaction was reflected in their confidence in the present and in the future. In 2010, the highest level of support for democracies in the region was achieved. According to the historical series started by the entity, 52% of Latin Americans believed that democratic system was the best form of government for the region in 1995. This scenario of optimism began to recede in 2014. Between 2014 and 2019, the average economic growth in Latin America was 0,3%. The fragility of the expansion of the local economies contributed to the rise in unemployment, poverty, and the accentuation of the precariousness of the labour market. For example, about 54% of the Economically Active Population were informal in 2019. By 2014, this percentage was around 47%. In addition, around 27 million inhabitants (4% of our inhabitants) entered the situation of poverty between those years (ECLAC, 2020: 97).

The socioeconomic regression has submerged the confidence in the region's future in contrast to the diagnosis of the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Once again, we use as an example the information in the Latinobarometer

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<sup>1</sup> To know more about the commodity export cycle between 2003 and 2013 and its exhaustion see: Martins (2011) and Webber (2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Brazil takes off* is available at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2009/11/12/brazil-takes-off>

report. The report shows that, in 2013, the rejection of our democracies has reached 71% of dissatisfaction which is the highest level of the historical series.

The discomfort generated by difficulties in accessing the labour market, the decline in social indices, and the stagnation of economic expansion helped to erode local political systems and the neoliberal doctrine. These factors combined contributed to the waves of popular rebellions<sup>3</sup> that took place in the second half of 2019 in several countries like Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, and Chile<sup>4</sup>.

The lowest levels of confidence in democracies also enabled the emergence or the fortification of distinct groups of the regional right wing. As examples, we highlight the phenomenon of Bolsonarism in Brazil and small organizations of the extreme right such as the Bolivian Resistencia Juvenil Cochala (RJC) (Vassalo, 2020).

The effects of the pandemic caused by the Sars-Cov-2 virus could accentuate the nebulous scenario of strengthening the Latin American right wing making our political and socio-economic future unpredictable. With that undesirable remnant of our dictatorial past could reproduce themselves. The threats of a coup d'état carried out by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on September 7, 2021, symbolizes this.

Regarding the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 for Latin America, we used for the preparation of this article ECLAC studies elaborated in 2020. They diagnosed a retraction of 7.7% in regional GDP in 2020. With this, we consolidated a new lost decade, as the per capita income regressed to 2010 data (*Enfrentar los efectos cada vez...*, 2020: 15). Unemployment reached about 10.4% (*Balance Preliminar de las Economías...*, 2020: 11, 125) and poverty and extreme poverty increased, respectively, by around 7.1% and 4.5%, jumping from 30.2 to 37.3% and from 11% to 15.5%.

These circumstances convulsed even more the already unstable Latin American political framework. During 2020, a series of protests took place in countries in the region. Despite the social distance imposed by the pandemic several protests occurred in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Chile. These mobilizations called for public policies to mitigate the health and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic among other things<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Pasquino, popular rebellions or revolts are characterized by the absence of a proposal to subvert the constituted order and aim the immediate satisfaction of political and economic demands. For the purposes of this article, we have appropriated this definition. For more information see: Pasquino (1998: 1121).

<sup>4</sup> For more information of these rebellion look forward Fiori (2019) e Wasserman (2020).

<sup>5</sup> About these protests consult: Lacurcia (2020) and Colombo (2020).

The Brazilian case is like our neighbours, although we have more disturbing aspects due to some factors of our recent history. From 2011 to 2020, the country impoverished. In this new lost decade, our GDP grew by 2.2% on average while the global average was 30.5%. Not even in the 1980s, the “lost decade”, were the numbers so worrisome. At that time, we expanded our GDP by 16.9%, while the world reached 37.9%. In 2010, the country's per capita income, with restated amounts, was R\$ 36,245 (Patu, 2020: A17-18). At the end of 2020, it was around R\$ 34,101 (Patu, 2020: A17-18). The Brazilian economic weakness increased unemployment and misery that expanded the vulnerability of different social segments. Inevitably, the discomfort of parts of civil society expressed after the days of June 2013 and which was deepened with the “perfect storm”<sup>6</sup> that year can go deeper.

In the face of this disheartening situation, we believe in the necessity of reflections that contribute to the studies and debates of this unpredictable phase of recent Latin American history. The pandemic exposed the social consequences arising from the implementation of neoliberal political and economic practices which were consolidated in the region between the 1980s and 1990s. The dismal context in which we live exposed the groups most vulnerable to the psychological and socioeconomic effects of Covid-19. The transmission of the virus does not choose social class and is democratic, but its effects are not. As indicated by ECLAC studies, afro descendants, indigenous people, women, migrants, and young people from the Latin American peripheries are the most impacted by the pandemic.

Within the situation of vulnerability, there are those who are in transit, on movement, or on paths that suddenly are closed, unqualified, and obstructed due to the pandemic. What was already considered a crisis- the migratory one- with its massive and dramatic diasporas in the 21st century is now included within another one: the pandemic crisis. In the name of the sanitary emergency, borders are being closed and thousands of Latin Americans face walls or remain in a constant “state of transit” waiting for a solution from the receiving states about their destinations. The most extreme case is that of Central Americans in route to the United States. This is not a new fact, nor is migration, but the extreme degree of

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<sup>6</sup> Between 2013 and 2018, Brazil lived a period that combined political, economic, social, moral, and ethical crises. Therefore, we use the expression “perfect storm” to define it. Multiple factors contributed to this scenario, such as the corruption cases exposed by the politicized Operation *Lava-Jato*; the strong opposition of the national congress to Dilma Rousseff; the active mobilization of parts of civil society; and the economic-fiscal collapse that profoundly deteriorated the population's living conditions.

violence with which the anti-immigrant policies of the Donald Trump administration have treated this population especially during the year 2020. The pandemic arrival potentialized the human rights violations such as mass deportations, the blockade of entry into the country, the abandonment of migrants in conditions of extreme vulnerability in border cities and the concealment of children separated from their families. Atrocities that the world and the Western powers watched bestially, and silently because they are invisible lives; without destination; and stopped in the middle of the pandemic. For many people, they represent contaminated bodies that bother and obstruct the borders.

In this article, we will present the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic based on studies carried out throughout 2020 by ECLAC. Some of them were made in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, and Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). We will also assess forced migrations and migratory flows during this pandemic moment based on the press and reports from civil and governmental organizations. Thus, we hope to contribute to the reflections and debates that take place in Latin universities and civil societies on this very tragic and exceptional moment.

## 2. The Covid-19 and its social and economic effects

The year of 2020 had the biggest retraction in world GDP since 1946. Emerging and developed countries were affected by the generalized decline in economic activity due the pandemic. We ended this year with a contraction in international trade and a considerable reduction in economic activities in the service sectors. Although fiscal and monetary packages were around US\$ 20 billion<sup>7</sup> and were implemented on a global scale, they have not been sufficient to prevent the economic and social impacts of Sars-Cov-2 (*Balance Preliminar de las Economías...*, 2020: 12).

In June 2020, Latin America became one of the epicentres of the pandemic. Although we concentrate approximately 8% of the world population, we have around 20% of cases and 30% of deaths caused by COVID-19 (Dias. 2020: A 18). We are the most affected in the emerging world. Structural problems in our societies such as: economic vulnerability; historical income inequality; precarious housing infrastructure; ineffective public services for drinking water supply and sewage treatment; and scarce social protection mechanisms for the most

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<sup>7</sup> It's important to say that this amount represent values unprecedented in world history.

vulnerable groups help to understand why we are one of the global epicentres of the pandemic.

These elements reaffirm our belief that the spread and impacts of the virus are not democratic. There is no horizontality according to ECLAC reports used in this research. As the Commission shows the black and indigenous populations, women, and young people from the great peripheries are the most affected by the multiple effects caused by the pandemic.

Below we will present information obtained from reading the reports on the effects of COVID-19 released by ECLAC throughout 2020. We will demonstrate some data and evaluations to assist reflections on the impacts of the pandemic in this very turbulent cloud that we live in Latin America and the world. By cooperating with the dissemination of these investigations, we believe that we will assist public officials and segments of civil society that wish to object to the effects of COVID-19 in our region.

In studies published between April and December 2020<sup>8</sup>, ECLAC pointed out some perspectives on the multiple implications of the pandemic and the new time it will open in Latin America. We summarize some information below:

1. There was an increase in poverty and extreme poverty as can be seen in the graph below. Above the reason already exposed the reduction of financial remittances made by migrants residing in the United States and Europe largely contributed to this situation.
2. This crisis had significant consequences in the service sector unlike the previous ones. Tourism was the sector most affected on a global and local scale. Between January and August, there was a decrease of approximately 65% in the sector's activities. Its retraction largely impacted the Latin American economies due to the relevance of this activity.
3. The population strata living in conditions of economic insecurity were the most affected by the loss of income. In 2019, about 47% of our population, around 283 million people, were included in this group whose per capita income corresponded to up to three times that of the poverty line. This segment did not have financial reserves to face an unexpected economic

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<sup>8</sup> The eight items summarized in this part of the article were elaborated from the reading of the following reports: *El Desafío social en tiempos del COVID-19* (2020). Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), p. 3, 6 to 8; *Coyuntura Laboral en América Latina y el Caribe - El Trabajo en tiempos de pandemia: desafíos frente a la enfermedad por coronavirus (COVID-19)* (2020). CEPAL/OIT, May, p. 20, 27-28; *Universalizar el acceso a las tecnologías digitales para enfrentar los efectos del COVID-19* (2020). CEPAL, August, p. 2; and *Balance Preliminar de las Economías de América Latina y el Caribe* (2020). Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), p. 51.

paralysis. For this reason, this group was largely affected by the pandemic and was among the groups that demanded public policies either through direct income transfer or in helping small and medium-sized companies.

4. Parts of society most affected by COVID-19 were as follows: women, young and old people; informal workers, maids, rural population, indigenous peoples, people of African descent, migrants, homeless people, and individuals with specific needs.
5. Female participation in the labour market is concentrated in the service sector, especially in domestic jobs. This activity was among the most affected throughout 2020 due to social distance. 51.3% of women in the labour market are in the informal sector. As ECLAC points out, public policies should address the gender dimension. However, this occurred superficially, as in the Brazilian case, in which single mothers or female heads of households received twice the amount of emergency aid which started to be paid by the federal government in April 2020.
6. Interregional displacements may increase. In addition, the migrants are among the groups most exposed to the effects of COVID-19. The closing of national borders, the dependence of the informal sector on the labour market, the restricted access to health and social protection systems, and racial discrimination, racism and xenophobia represents its main weaknesses in this group.

One aspect to be highlighted in the various of these reports refers to the proposal for the adoption of a universal basic income in the region. The entity has been continuously recommending the viability of this social policy, because if adopted it would have a double consequence: it would contribute to economic activity and would mitigate the vulnerability of different social segments even those who are not in a situation of poverty and extreme poverty. This assessment can be seen below:

In a long-term perspective, ECLAC reiterates that the scope of these transfers must be permanent and include people not in poverty, such as groups that receive low and medium-low wages but are not poor. This would make it possible to move towards a universal basic entry that should be implemented gradually over a period to be defined based on the situation in each country. This consideration is important, as overcoming the pandemic will take time and societies will have to live with the coronavirus, something that will hinder the economic and productive reactivation (Our translation) (*El desafío social en tiempos del COVID-19*, 2020)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> In original language: “Desde una perspectiva de largo plazo, la CEPAL reitera que el alcance de esas transferencias debe ser permanente, ir más allá de las personas en situación de pobreza

TABLE I. LATIN AMERICA (17 COUNTRIES): PROJECTION OF THE POPULATION IN POVERTY AND EXTREME POVERTY, 2020 (II PERCENTAGES AND PERCENTAGE POINTS)

Country	Extreme Poverty 2019	Extreme Poverty 2020	Variation between 2019 and 2020	Poverty 2019	Poverty 2020	Variation between 2019 and 2020
Argentina	3,8	6,9	3,1	26,7	37,5	10,8
Bolivia	14,3	16,8	2,5	32,3	36,1	3,8
Brazil	5,5	9,8	4,3	19,2	26,9	7,7
Chile	1,4	3,4	2	9,8	15,5	5,7
Colombia	10,3	14,3	4	29	34,1	5,1
Costa Rica	3,4	5,1	1,7	16,5	20,5	4
Ecuador	7,6	12,7	5,1	25,7	32,7	7,0
El Salvador	7,4	11,9	4,5	33,7	40,2	6,5
Guatemala	19,8	22,7	2,9	48,6	51,6	3
Honduras	18,7	22,2	3,5	54,8	59	4,2
Mexico	11,1	17,4	6,3	41,9	49,5	7,6
Nicaragua	18	22,8	4,8	47,1	52,7	5,6
Panama	6,5	8,5	2	14,6	17,5	3,1
Paraguay	6,2	6,6	0,4	19,4	20,9	1,5
Peru	3,7	7,6	3,9	16,5	25,8	9,3
Dominican Republic	4,5	6,7	2,2	20,3	24,7	4,4
Uruguay	4,5	6,7	2,2	20,3	24,7	4,4
Latin America	11	15,5	4,5	30,2	37,3	7,1

Source: Elaborated by the authors on the basis of *Enfrentar los efectos...*, 2020: 11.

The ECLAC's proposal of financial transfers to vulnerable groups while there is pending mass vaccination and the elimination of the pandemic times is in line with the recommendations made by international organizations. Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has historically adopted positions contrary to the extent of Latin American public spending, defends these measures. In an interview for *Folha de São Paulo* its managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, stated:

What we know from experience is that a pandemic leads to more inequality. There is a very pressing need to address the question of who is most severely impacted by the pandemic and what policy options exist to prevent inequality from deepening. Low-

y llegar a amplios estratos de la población muy vulnerables a caer en ella, como los estratos de ingresos bajos no pobres y los medios bajos. Esto permitiría avanzar hacia un ingreso básico universal que se debe implementar gradualmente en un período definido de acuerdo con la situación de cada país (véase el recuadro 2). Esta consideración es importante pues la superación de la pandemia tomará su tiempo y las sociedades deberán coexistir con el coronavirus, lo que dificultará la reactivación económica y productiva” (*El desafío social en tiempos del COVID-19*, 2020: 15).



skilled workers, women, and young people are the most affected and we know that in all three categories there were problems even before the pandemic. And now these problems are amplified. So, what should be done? First, public support which is now provided on a very significant scale, 8% of GDP in fiscal measures in Latin America, needs to gradually be better targeted at parts of the economy and workers and unemployed people who are in this category most severely affected (...) Is very important for countries to continue to support companies and people until there is a lasting exit from the health crisis (...) do not remove the support if you have the capacity, do not remove the support until you are on the other side of the health crisis (...) Withdrawing support could mean an obstacle to recovery [...] Cutting that lifeline prematurely is a danger to poverty and inequality and also to success in faster recovery and robust (...) the authorities must protect the poor and avoid a sharp increase in income inequality and poverty (Dias, 2020).

The proposal to implement state actions that protect the most affected by the pandemic stems from the alarming data obtained by ECLAC in the course of 2020. According to its estimates, eight out of ten inhabitants of the region (approximately 491 million people) (*El desafío social en tiempos del COVID-19*, 2020: 20) demand public policies due to their condition of vulnerability to the socioeconomic and psychological effects of COVID-19.

In this part of the article, we used a set of data and analyses that aimed to support our assessments of this dark, hazy, and unpredictable moment. Judging by the events of our recent history, among which we highlight the discredit in relation to democratic-representative systems, the strengthening of extreme right wings and the popular rebellions of 2019; the period ahead is likely to be marked by the intensification of social struggle and political instability in Latin America.

At a time when we are witnessing the recurrence of coups d'état, as in Bolivia in 2019<sup>10</sup>, and the strengthening of social organizations, parties, and leaders identified with authoritarian practices that marked the melancholic pages of our history in the 20th century. We hope that with the information here presented to collaborate with the understanding and reflections of a frightening and dismal gift due to our pandemic situation.

In the third part of this article, we will focus on migrants' situations, a group strongly affected by COVID-19, and the phenomenon of forced migration. Especially, the case of displacements from Central America to the United States passing through Mexico, considered one of the most important human corridors in the world. In this transit of lives, we will meet with thousands of human beings facing the adversities and violence that exile imposes on them. The virus becomes another difficult frontier in the lives of migrants making it more difficult and vulnerable to their journeys in search of a better future.

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<sup>10</sup> About the coup d'état that took place in Bolivia in 2019: Stefanoni (2019) and Moldiz (2020).

### **3. The pandemic and the immigrants: Crossing to Mexico in the way to American border in times of Covid-19**

The imposed necessity of closure of borders and social confinement increased the precarious and vulnerable conditions experienced by many migrants. These facts hurt the human rights of millions of individuals that are trying to survive the epidemiological war. The context of the pandemic has caused thousands of displaced people to seek clandestine routes and find themselves lacking the protection, health and safety measures provided by the States, actions from which they were excluded due to their status as undocumented. In this way, migration and the pandemic present themselves as one crisis within another.

The militarization of borders and state security is something that already exists in the policies of nation-states and were enhanced by the health emergency. Securitization is the process by which an actor with a certain power and influence builds a phenomenon perceived as an existential threat. That means that a certain phenomenon to be considered a threat depends on the perception and interests that the actors of the international system pursue. As such, the threat may fall into subjective considerations. This is not a situation unrelated to immigration as a social phenomenon if we think that States, individuals, and institutions can consider a migratory phenomenon something positive or negative based on their perceptions and identities. For example, it is the cases of massive migratory flows that represent a challenge for the states (Buzan & Hansen, 2012).

It is the power of the state when it acts outside its territorial domain and its sovereignty and thus materializes the sovereignty of the empire. We are talking about the externalization of borders, hyper nationalism, and militarization. For example, in the 2016 election campaign, Trump repeated several times without saving words: "I want to build the wall, we have to build the wall ... Mexico will pay for the wall, even if they don't know it yet". The construction of the promised "big and sumptuous" wall, which should have 3,142 kilometres of border, never came to fruition. The constructions were limited to 507 kilometres of barrier mostly formed by existing obstacles. It can be said that the real wall of Trump was another. It was one much less noticeable, but with a direct impact on millions of people. Most of them Central Americans, as was the agreement with Mexico in 2019 to prevent the entry of immigrants into the United States (Sánchez, 2020). The words directed at Mexican migrants, by Trump, labelling them as a criminal population echoed in many parts of the world. Thus, the leader of the United States, criminalized

migratory flows and allowed to advance a policy of globalized migratory governance that articulates the right to movement as a fundamental key to the production of inequalities in the contemporary capitalist order.

Donald Trump's anti-immigrant policy is the ultimate example of militarization, hyper nationalization, and externalization of the frontier enhanced by the emergence of the pandemic. The US representative in agreement with Mexican President André Manuel López Obrador, from the year of 2019 forward, transformed Mexico into the wall of the United States extending its borders to Guatemala. This was made to prevent people from entering American soil. Especially those individuals that Trump considers criminals, that is those below the Rio Bravo such as Latinos, Mexicans, the people of the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), the blacks of Haiti, etc.

The so-called *Quédate en México* (Stay in Mexico) program started operating after January 2019 once Trump threatened to impose duties on Mexican exports. Since then, his government has sent the National Guard to the southern and northern borders allowing the United States to redirect more than 70,000 people<sup>11</sup> to Mexican territory<sup>12</sup>. The suspension, due to the pandemic, of hearings before the American immigration courts has extended the multiplicity of risk situations experienced by immigrants for an indefinite period. The humans' rights organizations have frequently denounced that both the United States and Mexico have been lax in treating migrants, as they have not created minimum measures to prevent or mitigate the social and contagious effects of COVID-19. As a result, the integrity, health, and other human rights of migrants and asylum seekers were put at risk<sup>13</sup>.

The pandemic has not stopped the flow of migrants to the United States and consequently their deportations. South-north migration has grown continuously since April 2020 which marked the peak period of COVID-19 in that country when 17,106 thousand arrests occurred. The number of migrants, as well as the death from the pandemic, has only increased: 23,237 in May, 33,000 in June, and 40,000 in July; in August there were 50 thousand; and in September 57 thousand. The United States Department of Customs and

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<sup>11</sup> OMS data.

<sup>12</sup> Arroyo. Lorena. Biden y López Obrador acercan posiciones sobre inmigración. *El País*, December 21, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Information given by the investigation "En la boca del Lobo". *Contexto de riesgo y violaciones a los derechos humanos de personas sujetas ao programa Quédate em México*. By: Alicia Moncada, *Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho* (FJEDD).

Border Protection (CBP) reported that between October and November, 9,128 children were traveling alone and 116,935 adults. According to Eunice Rendón, director of Agenda Migrante, people did not stop migrating despite the pandemic. On the contrary, throughout 2020, the migratory flow increased and will certainly grow in the year 2021 (Butron, 2020) according to the director's evaluation.

In August 2020, the CBP defended the so-called “express deportations” and blamed immigrants for the advancement of coronavirus in the United States. The head of the Customs and Border Control Office, Mark Morgan, advocated these measures and took advantage of the presentation of monthly data, to call out irresponsible migrants who try to enter the country without authorization during the pandemic.

According to Morgan, illegal immigration<sup>14</sup> continues and puts the lives of Americans at risk despite the danger posed by COVID-19. Migrants continue to ignore their countries' orders to stay home and the guidance of medical experts from around the world (CBP defiende “deportaciones exprés”..., 2020). Based on the words used by the head of the CBP, we immediately find a speech that criminalizes and blames migrants. First, when he considers immigration to be an “illegal” act, as if every individual who was not legalized or documented under state law was a criminal. No human being is illegal, they are in some cases undocumented persons. Second, he says that migrants “ignore their countries' orders to stay at home”, as if migration were an adventure or an option, and the factors driving them out of the states of origin of migratory flows did not compel people to leave their homes in despair or even amid a sanitary emergency. Finally, he accuses migrants of being carriers of the disease when in fact they are as victims as anyone because they are in conditions of extreme vulnerability- without due reception.

The immigrants are exposed to all types of violence, many of them without hygiene conditions in the middle of a pandemic and without access to lawyers who defend them while they are waiting at the borders for asylum that never arrives. In these south-north migrations, 256 children were counted who were victims of kidnapping and attempted kidnapping<sup>15</sup>. These human beings

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<sup>14</sup> We totally disagree about the term used by Mark Morgan, because any immigrant live is illegal.

<sup>15</sup> Available in Syracuse University TRAC Immigration Data Tools (Last actualization was on November 4, 2020); and Human Rights First (Last actualization was on May 4, 2020).

live in limbo, in an eternal transit, obstructed in their crossing and facing another enemy: the pandemic.

These migratory flows originate from the structural conditions of each country. In the case of Central Americans, they are deprived of the possibility to remain in their countries. The population that lives in conditions of poverty and marginalization, in addition to lacking economic goods to survive, are deprived of socio-cultural goods, and are experiencing great political deprivation. In real conditions, they lack the right to citizenship and identification mechanisms with their governments, institutions, and the rest of the population. The situation of delinquency and social violence occurs mainly through armed urban groups that dominate entire neighbourhoods due to the absence of government and private institutions that positively integrate citizens, mainly children and youth. Despite formally living under democratic governments, the structures of public administrations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras lack budgets, and educational and social integration projects (Manaut 2015).

Thus, the option of violent organization in armed gangs is the only link of identity that many of the young people born in these countries have. These are countries with a minimal state, with a neo-extractive economy, with a depredating use of natural resources, with the use of state force and violence to contain social mobilizations, and even to contain migrants, as is the case of the southern borders of Mexico with Guatemala. It is a death policy that excludes citizens from being able to subsist and live without violence within their own state. Individuals cannot return because of threats from armed groups, and the states do not want to take charge of those lives. Then, they are discarded, and migration is the symbol of this eviction.

In the context of the pandemic, the vulnerability of this migrant population has increased considerably. The factors that previously put these people's lives at risk were enhanced by the lack of opportunities and the reduction of support networks. For example, many migrants are forced to spend their nights in unhealthy spaces due to the lack of sufficient resources to rent a room and the increased demand for available space in the hostels that host them on the roads. As a result, this and other situations end up considerably reducing the options for following emergency health measures.

Another serious problem involving the condition of migrants in times of a pandemic is confinement in detention centres and mental disorders caused

by this situation. Living in unsanitary environments the risk of contracting COVID-19 increases. In some cases, migrants complained about the excessive use of force, sexual assault, and solitary confinement both used as forms of punishment. The prolonged permanence in detention centres causes great trauma, physical, psychological distress, and mental disorder in migrant people (Aguilar-Gaxiola, et al., s.a).

Migration detentions entail deprivation of liberty under the euphemism of “accommodation” and represent interests of the United States government in border control. The Mexican Migration Law establishes that, as from the Migration Control, it is inspected if the people who enter the country have the necessary documentation to make a long stay in the country and determines that the immigration detention must not exceed 36 hours. Deportation processes must take place within 15 days of the migrant's presentation. In this act, the person is informed of the reason why he was deprived of liberty and his rights are read and the migrant is taken to an accommodation or detention centre. However, this is not what is happening. Immigrants have been living in adverse conditions in detention centres and are experiencing different types of violence (Centros migratorios en México, 2020).

Human rights defenders and civil society have been advocating for the benefit of migrants and are demanding solutions for the definition of those who are in a condition of refuge and for the elimination of the *Quédate en México* program. The *Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho* report, published in December 2020, warns of the human rights obligations of the United States and Mexico:

The Mexican State and the United States have obligations in terms of human rights with the migrant population and the subject of the *Quédate en México* Program, especially in terms of health, personal liberty, personal integrity, right to seek and receive asylum. In this sense - and my programs persist - it is imperative that States adopt measures aimed at respecting the rights of persons subject to the *Quédate en México* Program, attending to the exhortations of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration and the World Health Organization (Informe de investigación “En la boca del Lobo”..., 2020: 9.).

For the *Quédate en México* Program to be eliminated in a coherent way the government of President-elect Joe Biden needs to carry out this action not only in coordination with the Mexican government, but also with civil society organizations, hostels for migrant people and other actors and these ensures that the best conditions exist on both sides of the border. Negotiations on migration between

the new leader of the American executive and the Mexican executive have already begun. And the hope is that previous policies will be dismantled and that the degraded *Quédate en México* program will end. It is a topic of maximum relevance that cannot wait. Joe Biden made it clear that his government has as a priority the migratory issue as it could not be otherwise. People will continue to move, because migration is a human right even though many do not know or hesitate to not want to know. Therefore, once again, the focus is on turning to the expelling countries from where thousands of people leave, to help develop economies, reduce violence, and improve the lives of their populations (Arroyo, 2020: 3; Jiménez, Biden, 2020).

However, we have evidenced that the anti-immigration policies of the Donald Trump administration, in partnership with the Mexican government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, will be marked in history as a terrible succession of violation of the human rights of migrant people neither relieved nor even in a pandemic season.

It is expected to write a new history of migration with the next American government, and the Latin American communities that supported it will remain vigilant, so that the traumas and atrocities committed will not be repeated in the coming years. Something of hope springs up, as the seeds always remain.

### **Final Considerations**

The Sars-Cov-2 pandemic situation exposed the social and economic effects of the four decades of application of neoliberal doctrine. The vulnerability of various social segments was exposed throughout 2020 and, consequently, many of the apologists for neoliberalism began to defend social policies that would alleviate the condition of misery of most of the world population.

As we have examined throughout this article, the effects of COVID-19 are not democratic. The virus hit the most vulnerable social groups most vehemently either due to the conditions of their insertion in the labour market or their precarious living conditions. As we have examined, the Latin American case is emblematic, due to the characteristics of its economic formation and historical social ills.

Among the groups most exposed to the effects of the virus, there is the migrant population of Latin America. They are victims of violence, climatic disasters, poor economic conditions in their countries and the lack of opportunities,

and expectations for the future that their states' policies do not offer. Migration is not a new factor, but the pandemic has brought yet another wall to fight for these individuals in transit: the epidemiological. The health crisis served as an additional instrument for nation states to safeguard their borders and increase the militarization of their territories, even knowing the rights of asylum seekers, aware that health is the benefit of all and not the privilege of some nationalities. As we demonstrated throughout the article, the pandemic held migrants responsible for their condition, condemned them to limbo, to permanent traffic, to the never arrived. On the other hand, migrant resistance has also shown the world of the pandemic how much they are needed, risking their lives for essential services, sending remittances to distant families in dramatic situations and vital needs. Many of our countries have relied on financial contributions, throughout the pandemic, sent by migrants, such as Mexico.

In this way, in addition to the perpetuation of the migration phenomenon, we believe in the tendency for the Latin American socioeconomic crisis to accentuate over the next few years and, consequently, for social discontent in the region. In this context, the disbelief with our democracies and political instability may intensify, leading to new waves of popular rebellions, such as those that occurred in 2019 and 2020. So, we believe more than ever that political unpredictability borders on the future of the region.

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