



# The deepening of inequalities in Latin America during and after the pandemic

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Maria Gabriela Palacio Ludeña  
and  
Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón

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## About the Author(s)

Maria Gabriela Palacio Ludeña: Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University  
Fabio Andrés Díaz Pabón: African Centre of Excellence for Inequality Research (ACEIR),  
Southern African Labour Development Research Unit (SALDRU), University of Cape Town &  
Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University

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# The deepening of inequalities in Latin America during and after the pandemic

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## Abstract

Latin America continues in social, economic, and political turmoil in 2021. The vulnerabilities set by pre-existing conditions such as persistent inequality, high informality and exclusionary social protection systems have been exacerbated by recent health and humanitarian crises unprecedented experienced in the region's modern history. These crises have significantly impacted on socioeconomic indicators, as accounted in the increased levels of vulnerability and poverty next to stagnant economic growth. Public sector responses have been relevant but insufficient to cushion the effect of these multiple crises and, in many cases, unveiled the degree to which unrequested orthodoxy limited the role of the state in providing adequate support to its citizens. The chapter explores efforts to tackle the impacts of compounded deprivations of spatial segregation, pervasive informality, gendered and racialised vulnerabilities, and the education crisis, and explores the options governments face in terms of reversing the adverse effects of the pandemic while sustaining the economic rebound. In a context of polarised political participation, discontent will inevitably lead to contention and, in some cases, instability and violence, should the governments choose to be aloof about the need for a socially just recovery.

**Keywords:** Inequality, Latin America, Covid-19, Social Policy, poverty, social mobilisation

## 1. The widening of the great divide in Latin America

Before the pandemic, Latin America was grappling with multifaceted and co-constitutive inequalities. While most of these inequalities manifest in terms of income and wealth, the pandemic has highlighted the role of markers such as race, class, place of origin, age, and gender—among others, in conditioning the allocation of opportunities, outcomes, and rewards. These markers are embedded in institutions and societal structures across the region, evinced by the adversity and difficulties faced by historically underrepresented groups most vulnerable during the pandemic.

The protests that have taken place before and during the pandemic in different countries such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia revealed the discontent of citizens and expressed variegated grievances, ranging from precarity, segregation in the access to public goods and services, corruption, opposition to announced increases in national taxes, weak state responses to the pandemic, to the opposition to lockdown measures related to the pandemic. The discontent with several governments in the region is not new. It is the legacy of high levels of inequality, the weakening channels of representation, the atomisation of communities, labour unions and social movements in a context of commodification of public goods where taxation is rarely progressive and social provisions are limited (Mlanovic, 2019). Then, it is no surprise that the toll of the pandemic has affected disproportionately vulnerable Latin Americans: the region is, as of June 2021, home to seven of the ten countries with the highest average mortality rate in the world due to Covid-19 (The New York Times, 2021) and only one person in ten has been fully vaccinated (The New York Times, 2021). Furthermore, while Latin America accounts for 8.4% of the world population as of mid-2021, the region accounts for 32% of the deaths worldwide due to the pandemic, illustrating the impacts on households across the region (ECLAC, 2021).

Because of such inequities and the lack of truly inclusive social protection mechanisms, significant shares of the region's population were in a perilous position to face the pandemic. While a small elite can secure access to education and private healthcare – and in some cases headed to the US for Covid-19 vaccine shots; vulnerable groups did not have savings and lacked access to social services, which remained fragmented, limited, and insufficient. Poor and vulnerable populations continued, for the most part, gated away from state institutions that could either provide protection or give them a space to raise their voice within the political systems. The social costs of inequalities have been latent in previous decades, only partially contained by narrowly targeted policies offering residual support to the poor, as we explore in detail in section three.

Lockdowns have significantly impacted historically underrepresented groups: afro-descendent, indigenous, women, children, youth, and migrants. Segregation, informalisation and casualisation of employment, and fragmented public health systems have all been powerful amplifiers of inequalities in the region. While the region had witnessed an improvement in various developmental indicators, such as education, and the reduction in poverty in the region between 2002 to 2014 (according to data from Social Panorama ECLAC 2019), this was primarily due to the increased social expenditure financed by the commodity boom (driven mainly by minerals and hydrocarbons). During this period, the officially 'poor' (as measured by state institutions for the targeting of social policies) in the region could be seen as (social) citizens and claim their social rights, many for the first time. Such favourable conditions gave room to accumulate human capital and secure labour incomes, but with only limited social mobility.

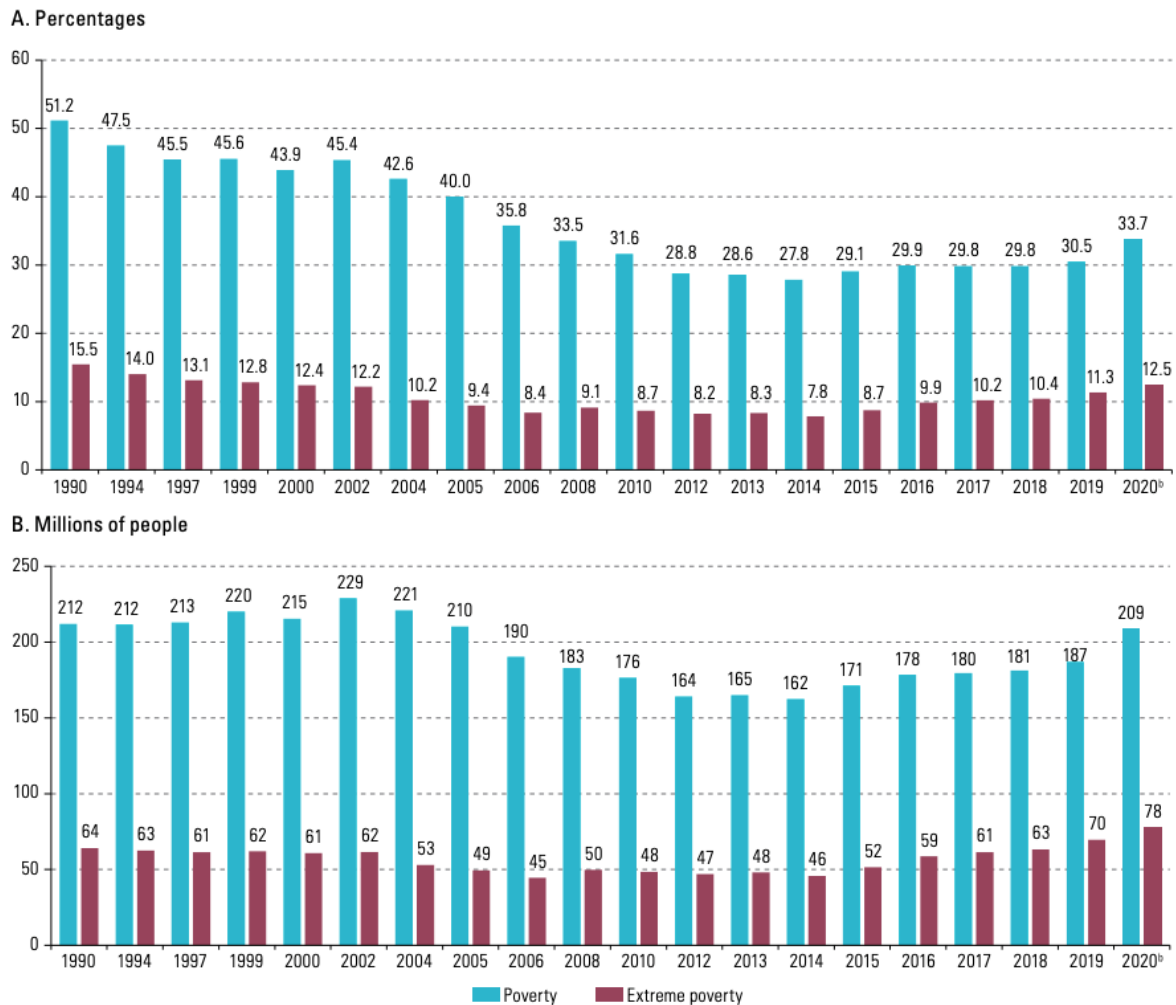
While these policies translated into a broader provision of education, health, and social protection (mostly cash transfers), they continued to operate within the structures that create and replicate inequalities and segregation in the region. Despite a stronger presence of the state during the first decades of the new millennia, many social protection policies and programmes fell under the category of residual or compensatory income support. This means that, despite reducing poverty and inequality, the preference for narrowly targeted interventions aimed at the extreme poor limited their transformative potential. Nevertheless, there were important exceptions in the region, such as the case of Brazil, which between 1999 and 2009 was able to lift many out of poverty thanks to an increase in their disposable income, due to the expansion of social assistance, such as Bolsa Familia (Sanchez-Ancochea 2020), and pro-poor growth, higher wages, and distributional improvements (Saad-Filho, 2015).

It is thus crucial to differentiate between residual income support, often following a more paternalistic workfare tradition, and more transformative social protection, as the latter can set in motion the changes to tackle structural poverty, expand citizenship and promote more equity. These are fundamentally different policy approaches and need to be distinguished ahead of the discussion of alternatives for ameliorating the impact of the pandemic, given the growing popularity of targeted income support.

By the end of 2021, the outlook is expected to worsen, as the figures of the millions of people entering poverty or extreme poverty in 2020 illustrate (See Figure 1). While poverty and inequality are some of the most accounted shocks of the pandemic, we also need to bear in mind the impact of the loss of lives (including household income earners) and their sustained impact on the livelihoods of dependent family members in the region. Such intra-household dynamics will have long-lasting effects but remain obscure due to the inability to survey populations amid the pandemic.

Figure 1. Poverty and extreme poverty in Latin America (1990-2020)

Latin America (18 countries)<sup>a</sup> poverty and extreme poverty, 1990–2020  
(Percentages and millions of people)



Source: (ECLAC, 2021)

It is also important to go beyond the existing indicators and supplement them with an account of the millions of people that have lost their housing and now inhabit informal settlements—facing the risk of violent eviction; and the millions of people (44 million people) that are now food insecure (Torero, 2021, cited on ECLAC, 2021, p.19). However, this dire panorama coexists with major disparities, as global wealth grew by 7,4% in the same period (ECLAC, 2021, p. 2), while the number of billionaires in Latin America increased by 31, and their wealth by 40 per cent (UNDP, 2021). Such dissonance is worrying not only because it tells of the high levels of wealth concentration in the region, but the consequences inequality has for the social compact, as rightly so, more people believe that their countries are ruled by the interests of elites and influential groups. Speaking of positive GDP growth in 2021, while the lives of millions worsen and hundreds of thousands die in the region, highlight the role of structural inequalities and the "scarce knowledge of the livelihood conditions of many", and the disregard for the lives lost due to inadequate responses (Alduenda Avila & Ramos Vilches, 2021, p. 5).

The protests taking place in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Mexico, Brazil or else, have taken the discontent onto the streets, with different triggers such as electoral processes or tax reforms and have signalled at the political processes and social structures that perpetuate vulnerability, denouncing these structural problems, vastly associated with the fragmented provision of public services in the region and painfully tangible in the alarming mortality levels of the pandemic in the region. As the pandemic does not seem to subside in the short term, governments in the region are tasked with designing interventions that can contain the virus (and its variants) while ameliorating the impacts of containment measures.

Containment and closure measures, e.g., school shutdowns, partial workplace closure (or telework), while necessary for containing the virus, also have consequences for people's livelihoods, particularly the most vulnerable, for they remain insufficiently supported by social policies and programmes that could cushion the socioeconomic effects, except for targeted forms of income support (i.e., social assistance). This is particularly evident in education: the region has experienced the most prolonged school shutdowns globally—up to 16 months in some countries. That is, about 100 million children in Latin America partake in distance learning, accentuating gender disparities (many girls abandoned their education and joined unpaid care work following traditional gender roles) and technological divides (many children are enrolled but struggle to access online platforms due to low connectivity) (The New York Times, 2021). This is a significant reversal: Latin America had accomplished the closing of education gaps for girls and different minorities during the last half-century. Furthermore, schools are essential for food security among the poor. Now, households in which people lost family members and/or their sources of income have seen an increase in malnutrition in the absence of school food programmes. The pandemic is likely to sharpen education inequalities and shape the future of younger generations for the decades to come.

In terms of income support, several new programs were introduced during the pandemic, such as the Family Protection Grant (*Bono de Protección Familiar* or BPF) in Ecuador, or the Solidary income (*Ingreso Solidario*) in Colombia, among others in different countries, as discussed in section two. Still, these programs struggle to reach vulnerable populations, those above official poverty lines but however vulnerable to shocks, due to their invisibility in social registries (that oversample officially poor populations but might still miss hidden populations) or are not recorded in such registries due to their high mobility or condition of informality. As the provision of social assistance relies on accurate data on the target population, the incompleteness of registries on vulnerable informal workers speaks of the levels of marginalisation that those in a condition of vulnerability experience, as further discussed in section three. This has led to further exclusion of vulnerable informal populations of the policies and programmes that could curb the effect of the pandemic. Furthermore, public sector efforts are hindered by the spread of misinformation and disinformation levels. As the case of Ecuador illustrates, only 39% of the population reported knowing the reasons why quarantine measures were put in place in the country (Altmann, et al., 2020), increasing the levels of mistrust in the government. As the coercive role of the state in Latin America is pervasive, as illustrated by cases like Colombia, the brutal enforcement of provisions has added the loss of political freedoms to the imminent erosion of social and economic rights. These conditions frame the different responses undertaken by states in the region in the following years and set the path for recovery, stagnation, or more profound crises.

## 2. Band-aids for haemorrhages: state responses to the pandemic

The World Health Organisation announced that the Latin America region had become the pandemic's epicenter in May 2020 (Marquez, et al., 2020). When states responded with hard lockdowns, not surprisingly, those in precarious conditions were significantly affected by these measures. Most workers in Latin America lack economic security (Aguilera, 2020) and cannot take sick leave or cope with unexpected emergencies, including unemployment, sickness, or loss of income, let alone cope with a systemic and sustained shock such as a pandemic.

Latin American governments responses have been diverse, but most have followed the implementation of hard lockdowns in the first stages of the pandemic, reliance on existing social protection programmes, and the expansion and creation of new social assistance interventions. However, these measures operate in a context of precarity and growing individualism. This has weakened the support to broadening the base of social protection systems, as the role of welfare is perceived as an act of charity by many. This means that even with income support measures, citizens are assumed to be able to afford already privatised services and has forced to individuals to incur in debt to access higher quality health or education.

Bargain and Aminjonov (2021), estimate that in Latin America, poor people were less likely to comply with self-isolation requirements as they had scant savings, limited options to work remotely, thus having no choice than continue mobilising to work. They found that spatial mobility is higher in areas with higher poverty rates, with significant implications in the rate of Covid-19 infections: 'a 10% higher rate of regional poverty is associated with a 0.8% higher growth rates of Covid-19' (2021, p. 7). However, despite the latent health risk that vulnerable informal workers face during the pandemic, their mobility allowed the provision of goods and services in more impoverished communities and cities, as most of the low-wage workers were found working in essential services, e.g., grocery stores, delivery services and food distribution.

This illustrates a paradox. Even if lockdowns have been necessary to contain the virus, governments were 'ineffective in reducing [the collateral damages caused by the] economic, and human cost of the epidemic'. Furthermore, the consequences of hard lockdowns were filtered by layers of segregation and spatial inequality, compounded by the lack of timely information about the lived experiences of those in informal employment and out of reach of social protection networks (Dizioli & Pinheiro, 2020). This information gap not only took time to be acknowledged by policymakers, but it was not sufficiently accompanied by social protection programmes, even in the cases where this was accounted for. Because of this, as lockdowns continued, they were less likely to elicit compliance, particularly among poor households (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2021).

Cash transfers constituted a critical response to the impacts of the pandemic. While compared to other regions in the world, Latin America had a higher coverage of cash transfers (22% compared to 2% in Africa) (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2021). Cash transfers were central in decelerating the increase in poverty—estimates show that without income support, 'the poverty rate in 2020 would have increased by 6.7 percentage points' (ECLAC, 2021, p. 27). Emergency transfers benefited 326 million people representing 49,4% of the region's population (ECLAC, 2021, p. 23). Nevertheless, about 491 million



people in Latin America are now in the low and lower-middle-income brackets (up to three times the official poverty line) (ECLAC, 2021). This suggests that the social policy response was not sufficient to cushion against the humanitarian and socioeconomic crises ignited by the world pandemic.

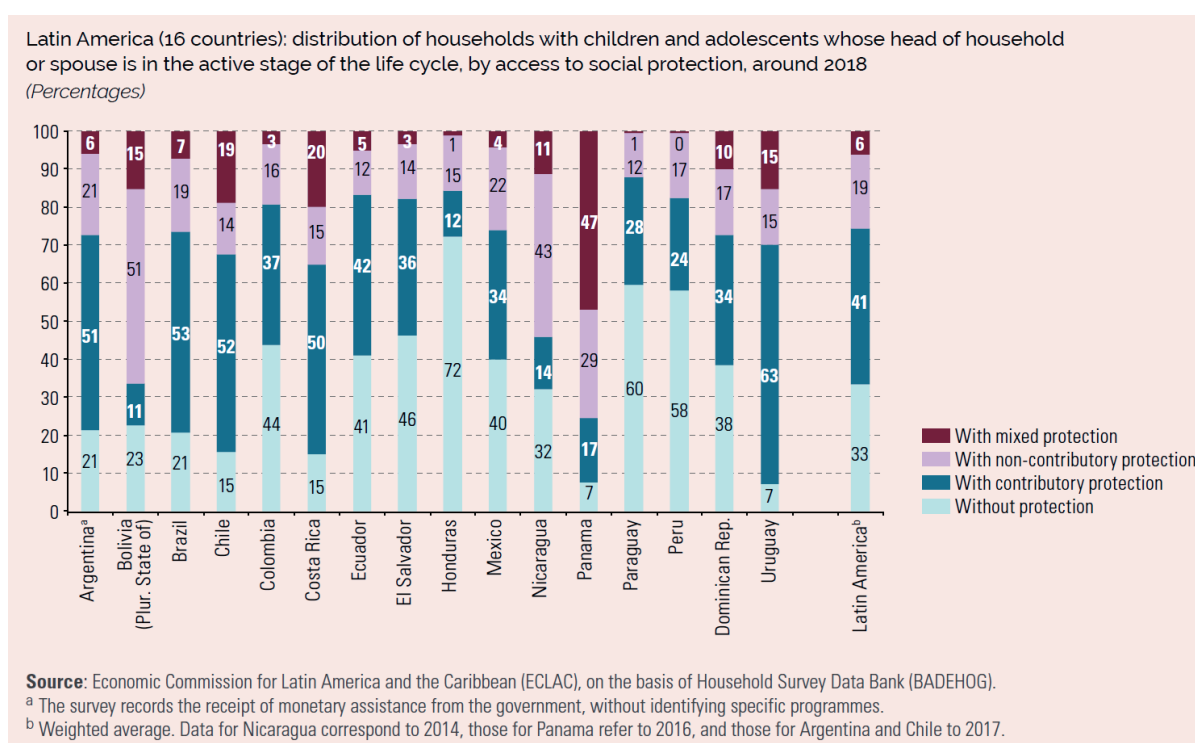
However, the increase in economic vulnerability has not only taken place among those close to the poverty line. Whereas in Latin America an important share of the population could be labelled as middle income, this segment was already vulnerable before the onset of the pandemic, with many sustaining their status through debt and unstable labour income. Even those that could accumulate assets and savings, thus excluded from targeted social protection programmes aimed at 'the poor', they still struggled to cope with the impact of unemployment, underemployment (many workers were operating below the desired number of hours to sustain their incomes) and increased debt in the absence of government support. In the middle of deferred responses, political fragmentation, fiscal constraints, and growing polarisation, different Latin American countries have taken centre stage in the pandemic's timeline due to the high rates of mortality and contagion.

Whereas it is disingenuous to think that any country could be prepared a priori to face a shock of this magnitude, the fact that people are mobilising and taking the streets in the middle of a pandemic illustrates that compensatory and residual state policies are no longer sufficient to maintain social compacts. The so-called "social explosion", with which popular opinion has referred to the increase in protests and strikes in the region, is an expected response to the increased precariousness and the failure of governments to grapple with the actual impact of the pandemic.

As mentioned above, efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic were curbed by pre-existing inequities, fragmented social protection, underfunded health systems, and informalised employment. These conditions constitute a challenge to the implementation of recovery policies, as extending existing social assistance programmes, expanding the amounts disbursed with grants, or the creation of new programmes all require granular information on the poor and vulnerable.

It is also important to distinguish between the extension of social security benefits (that provide coverage to contributing formal workers) versus social assistance (that provides temporary support to those living in poverty). In Latin America as of 2018, one-third of the region's population did not have access to social protection networks, and only one-quarter of the region's population was covered by non-contributory or mixed protection (with private contributions and state contribution) mechanisms (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of households with access to social protection in Latin America in 2018



Source: (ECLAC, 2021)

The breaches between these social protection regimes have important implications for the region as they speak of different normative views in terms of visibility of vulnerable populations, social justice values and perspectives on citizenship. Social provisioning has been increasingly commodified in the last decades, with health coverage increasingly channelled via the private sector. As the privatisation model aims to favour a cost-benefit logic over issues of universalism and rights, it is prone to exclude populations that would be deemed as unprofitable (like the poor), and as a result, the region had insufficient health coverage and brittle provision networks. Such built-in vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by the pressures of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, which continued its call for fiscal adjustment<sup>1</sup> amid the pandemic. Whereas concerns about the affordability of social policies and programmes over time is justified, policymakers seem to dismiss the social costs of austerity too quickly. The preoccupation with ensuring sound fiscal accounts often confuses ends and means and ignores that social compacts are eroded under tight financial conditions.

The tensions exacerbated by the pandemic and expressed in mobilisations are just a preamble of the political crises to come. This critical juncture can lead to a radicalisation of the elites for the defence of their interests and the entrenchment of economic models that claim to be insulated from politics and advanced through technocratic policies. Yet, it also has the possibility of channelling the warnings voiced in protests and mobilisations, which are pointing at necessary corrections to public policies. Whether governments can engage with these voices and diverse sectors and collectives would

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the Ecuadorian case, the IMF demanded fiscal adjustment equal to 5.5% of the gross domestic product (Progressive International, 2020).

determine the road to tackle the economic consequences of the pandemic, including the likely reversal of industrialisation in the region.

We might observe two possible recovery paths in the region in the face of social discontent. First, a group of countries in which the entrenchment of obscurantist ideas that have permeated some elites in Latin America in the middle of discontent and massive mobilisations and which are weaponised by radicals and authoritarian governments. In the face of the hollowing of the rights of citizens in some states that claim to be democratic, sheer repression and force will emerge more crudely as the disciplining force. Then, a second group of countries where conflict can lead to a calibration of policies able to include diverse voices and provide social support in a way that re-legitimises the state and its role and moves toward more socially just outcomes.

### **3. Inclusive recovery: how to locate 'the poor'?**

Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, data gathering has been at the centre of the social policy response to reach previously excluded populations, e.g., informal workers. However, evident challenges remain in providing social assistance in contexts marked by deep-rooted socioeconomic inequities, poor data infrastructures, incomplete administrative records, prominent levels of informality, and institutional weakness that make marginalised populations less visible to the state apparatus.

Most of the social assistance programmes existing in Latin America have been channeled through cash transfers. This modality is often regarded as a 'radical' new idea conceived in the South (Hanlon, et al., 2010). Conditional cash transfers, widely used even before the pandemic, are primarily based on a Latin American model first tested in Chile in 1982 (Lavin, 2014) and pioneered in Mexico and Brazil in the early 1990s (Cecchini & Madariaga, 2011). In the face of the shockwaves of the pandemic, cash transfers have been reengineered and crafted to better respond to the pandemic.

Like the existing anti-poverty schemes popular in the region, most cash transfers provided during the pandemic have focused on 'the poor'. Yet, given the necessity to reach (newly) vulnerable populations, efforts placed even more emphasis on data infrastructures. Social registries are the most common data infrastructure used in social assistance provisioning, specifically designed to fill the gap in information about the poor, particularly in highly informal settings where vulnerable informal populations are missing from administrative records. To collect specific data on less visible populations, registries relied on national household surveys to estimate poverty and map it onto census data, thus assigning a poverty profile to specific areas surveyed and include these in registries. However, such geographically based enumeration tools remain imperfect.

Sampling and mathematical modelling used to allocate cash transfers in the region cannot fully compensate the incompleteness of social registries, which fail to capture the highly mobile nature of informal work and the complexity of care networks that go beyond the nuclear household. Social registries are sparsely fielded, and cannot adapt to the fluidity of social life, including livelihoods strategies or demographic changes within households. For example, since datasets usually focus on the residence and in households as the unit of analysis, they are likely to miss atypical households, displaced or homeless populations, migrants, newborns, or highly mobile informal workers. A higher frequency

sampling is thus necessary for trying to understand the impact of the pandemic on unseen, miscounted and unaccounted populations.

In addition, data collection needs to be framed under a rights-based approach to effectively respond to the pandemic. As these approaches are concerned with 'universality, equality and non-discrimination, participation, access to information and accountability' (Sepúlveda Carmona, 2014, p. 8), they can better inform interventions and support the enactment of rights of vulnerable populations. There is also growing support for universal social protection programs, including universal basic income, for this can better respond to the different manifestations of precariousness and the variegated lived experiences of vulnerability in Latin America.

Furthermore, the accounting for the living conditions of marginalised populations should be a departure point to acknowledge and understand the political economy of visibility: who is seen by the state and why? By positioning universality and participation as central principles to engage with societal problems, it is possible to make use of both the statistical tools and political dialogue a way to account for the different dimensions on livelihoods that are currently missing in data infrastructures. This would be a way of recovering the role of political participation as a tool for change (ECLAC, 2021, p. 39).

Cash transfers directed to provide income support can only be transformative if part of a holistic approach to tackle the sources of vulnerability, i.e., access to formal and secure employment, affordable and high-quality public services and goods, and interventions that recognise and enhance care networks that support and affirm life. In the design of policies for the recovery, governments should engage in genuine processes of participation of those living in vulnerable conditions, as a way of sealing new social covenants in the region (ECLAC, 2021, p. 71) and moving towards a path of equitable growth.

#### **4. The risks of not acting decisively**

Public debates about potential paths to recovery have been framed around desired visions of the state's role in the economy and its accountability when balancing forces between different interest groups. There is a growing tendency to try to insulate public policy responses from politics, which risks shifting the debate away from power differentials. In addition, financial stability and the maintenance of foreign investors' confidence has also taken a central role in the debates.

In this context, Latin America waits for a progressive shift as the roll out of Covid -19 vaccines takes place. The pandemic has deepened existing fissures in the social contracts of different countries. While discontent was expected to increase in the years prior to the pandemic, the stakes in the years ahead are even greater. States are risking the loss of their legitimacy, and democratic social compacts cannot be held together only by flawed ideologies or conspiracy theories, purposive disregard, or techno-fixes for poverty.

The actions of governments will matter beyond the forthcoming electoral processes in the next years. As the election of Castillo in Peru illustrates (Alvarez Chavez & Díaz Pabón, 2021), citizens can make use of democratic channels to denounce and voice their grievances to aim to correct the path chosen by

their governments. Where democracy is frail or at risk, in countries like Colombia, Venezuela, Salvador or Nicaragua, there is the risk that electoral processes will be tainted by corruption and the effective co-optation of police and security forces by authoritarian regimes.

In the absence of full control of armed forces and institutions, ideology and the effective use of misinformation and fake news, governments will not be able to hold in power those elected via such tactics. A possibility remains that authoritarian politicians will pragmatically operationalise ideas such as universal basic income, other things unchanged. In such cases we are likely to observe a democratic regression next to an expansion of welfarism. If social protection is taken more seriously, that is, extending the provision capacity of health systems and education systems and including those populations that were "invisible" to the state, governments can both stimulate the economy and consolidate the networks for ever-increasing shocks that we are likely to observe due to climate breakdown.

While social mobilisations are usually seen with some degree of distrust by governments with authoritarian tendencies, they constitute an intermediate way of involving, reaching out and understanding the needs of important segments of the population. While governments aim to strengthen provision networks, protests can help leveraging state interventions with communities, neighbourhoods, and points of resistance to calibrate and device public interventions. Harnessing the vibrancy and the demand of democratic participation of protestors, civil society and grassroot organisations can help to re-legitimise the state.

Not doing so will lead to an entrenching of existing inequalities. Progressive taxation of corporations and individuals that have blossomed in the middle of a pandemic leading to an increase of exports of 22% (ECLAC, 2021, p. 10) should not be seen as a punishment to innovation, but as a way of redistributing the gains and ensuring future investments. As more than half of the youth of the region lives in poverty, governments, and businesses should understand that inaction in the face of growing inequality can lead to the expansion of illegal groups that can take advantage of the precarious situation of younger populations to recruit members in gangs, as already taking place in El Salvador, Venezuela, Honduras, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.

While the Covid-19 outbreak is a crisis full of unknowns, it demands massive and decisive efforts to ramp up the social protection networks in the region. As the pandemic has exposed the more profound weaknesses of economic models that fail to understand the role of politics, the emergence of turmoil and discontent across different countries in the region is a sobering call to engage with the social compact and take full responsibility in leading the recovery.

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Level 3, School of Economics Building,  
Middle Campus, University of Cape Town  
Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701,  
Cape Town, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0)21 650 5696  
Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5797  
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