

According to recent projections by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the economic contraction across the region due to COVID-19 has been dramatic. The number of people living in poverty rose by 22 million to 209 million, or one third of the population, by the end of 2020. More than 26 million people have lost their jobs, with women, informal sector workers, and migrants particularly affected. Food insecurity has increased most drastically in this region, affecting 41 percent of the population (compared to 32 percent in 2019).

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have been at the epicenter of the pandemic, with countries such as **Brazil** topping the list of cases and deaths. At the time of writing, according to official figures, Brazil accounted for 16.9 million infected people and over 472,000 deaths. There are probably many more people who have not been counted because they do not have access to health services, or simply remain undocumented. Food and nutrition insecurity has been on the rise in recent years as a result of authoritarian decisions by the Bolsonaro regime, including the dismantling of the country's renowned National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONSEA). This situation has been compounded by mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, pushing over half of the population into a situation of food insecurity.

In the context of this crisis, the situation faced by Indigenous Peoples – which constitute nearly one quarter of the continent's rural population – needs underlining. Many Indigenous Peoples live in forest areas and have historically seen their political, economic, social and cultural rights undermined, placing them among the most impoverished segments of the population. These long-standing and systemic barriers inhibit their access to resources and to decent enough living conditions to be able to protect themselves from the pandemic. Access to adequate food and nutrition is of vital importance in this context, as different forms of malnutrition, as well as the chronic diseases caused by malnutrition, affect the body's ability to respond to infections such as COVID-19. Furthermore, extractive companies subject Indigenous Peoples to internal colonization, thereby limiting their agency to establish their own measures, and exposing them to high risks of infection.

It is estimated that over 80% of Indigenous workers are employed in the informal sector, which is known to have been particularly hit by restrictive measures imposed by governments. Some measures banned peasant and Indigenous food producers and fisherwomen/men from accessing markets, which, coupled with overall instability, fomented price speculation. For example, among other countries experiencing similar situations during the pandemic, in **Ecuador** the price of some basic products rose fivefold, making it very difficult for the wider population to access food.

The pandemic has allowed governments in the region to provide themselves with a legal framework to further restrict movement, legalize the loss of labor rights,

privatize public resources and common goods, introduce tax exemptions, and digitalize lives. While informal markets and farmers' markets were closed down, large food corporations were able to remain open, and commodity exports were supported and classified as 'essential'.

In **Honduras**, measures to contain the pandemic have negatively impacted the realization of the RtFN, especially of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk, women and informal laborers. Restrictions on mobility and commercial activities imposed by government decrees have had disastrous consequences on the right to food of urban populations, especially women, who represent the majority of the workforce in the informal sector. The closure of food markets particularly affected these sections of the population, as they depend on these markets to access food at a lower price. In line with the current trend, peasant and small-scale fisher families were also severely affected.

All the while government measures significantly constrained people's access to healthy agricultural produce and fish from local markets, they cleared the path for imports, and in some instances even relaxed phytosanitary and food safety requirements. Moreover, in several countries, such as **Chile, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador** and **Peru**, the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) received renewed attention. Although already an issue of debate beforehand, the pandemic gave rise to arguments backing the introduction of GMOs as a solution for local production in times of crisis. Based on the negative experience of peasant and indigenous populations and on the impacts on biodiversity in GMO producer countries, it is common knowledge that they provide a 'false solution'.



Between March 2020 and May 2021, the **Brazilian** government extended tax exemptions on the commercialization of pesticides and **approved 613 new pesticides**.

A **recent study** by FIAN International sections and groups in LAC shows that agrochemicals have devastating impacts across food systems, and particularly on the RtFN of people in the region.

In **Ecuador**, the health and economic crises provided the perfect setting in which to **implement economic and labor policies** that had been proposed in 2019 but then taken back amid widespread protests. The policies prioritize the economic growth of corporations over food sovereignty, the right to food, and gender equality.

In **Honduras**, the **Program to Support the Food Producing Sector and Agroindustry to guarantee food security and food sovereignty** is another example of government policies that favor national and

transnational agribusiness. The program provides incentives to investors to create agro-industrial parks, yet, although it includes the term “food sovereignty” in its title, it will actually not support the food sovereignty of the people of Honduras. Quite the contrary, given that article 4 of the decree, which stipulates that ‘unused’ public lands can be earmarked for this program, could potentially legitimize the grabbing of peasants’ lands. The definition of ‘unused’ is not clarified, nor are the procedures for the expropriation and concession of state lands. Hence a likely outcome could be the dispossession of peasants of their lands, thus laying the basis for the expansion of the agricultural frontier, and the destruction of protected areas as well as areas designated for the purpose of accessing water.

The disaster caused by hurricanes ETA and IOTA in Central America in November 2020 led to the displacement of many people, and seriously aggravated an already extremely difficult situation. The hurricanes caused around 63,000 victims in **Nicaragua** and 28 deaths, including 4 children. In the Caribbean and Pacific region of Nicaragua, villages were flooded, houses destroyed, and road infrastructure damaged. Thousands of rural families were cut off from communication, while in the fields, 70% of the harvest – mainly of basic grains – was lost. Due to the subsequent shortage of seeds, sowing in the spring of 2021 was disrupted. As is often the case given the discriminatory unequal sexual division of labor, women are the most affected because they are responsible for feeding their families and for subsistence agriculture. In addition to being victims themselves, they live with the distress of not being able to respond to emergencies in their homes. In **Honduras**, the combined effects of the hurricanes and COVID-related measures have pushed one third of the population into an **emergency situation of acute food insecurity**.



Some governments have responded to the food crisis by distributing ‘food aid’ to the most vulnerable sectors. It has been reported that in countries, **such as Honduras**, most of the food in the ‘solidarity bags’ are actually ultra-processed food products from large corporations, which means that the nutritional value of the food aid is limited, while the investment made by governments does not favor local small-scale food producers. This goes against Decree 025-2020, according to which the government formally commits to source food aid locally. Additionally, the quantity of the products was said to be insufficient. Lastly, irregularities in the distribution have been denounced, as government agents privileged supporters of the ruling party. In **Guatemala**, which is also prone to clientelism, patterns of discrimination against the most marginalized people in the distribution of food aid have been reported.

Photo | CLOC-LVC Nicaragua

Restrictions on mobility have gone hand in hand with strong militarization in some countries. In **Paraguay**, for example, cases of abusive use of force, fiscal arbitrariness and extortive behavior have been denounced. In **Honduras**, armed forces violently repressed protests by rural peasant and fishing communities to draw attention to their precarious situation following the closure of local markets, as described above. Similarly, the government took advantage of the declared state of emergency and of restrictions on freedom of association and peaceful assembly to **push through large-scale ‘development’ projects**, violently targeting communities that oppose such projects on their territories.

In spite of this overall dim outlook, there were some positive developments worth sharing. For example, in **Mexico**, in August 2020 the Congress of Oaxaca approved a **law that prohibits the distribution and sale of sugared drinks and junk food to children and adolescents**. In **Paraguay**, a **new law** was adopted to support the ‘ollas populares’ (community kitchens) that have been organized throughout Paraguay since the beginning of the pandemic. Based on the demands and drafted with contributions of community-based organizations (CBOs), the bill includes important provisions on, for example, nutritional value of food.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Faced with the hunger and food insecurity unleashed by government measures to contain the pandemic, peasant organisations in **Brazil** and **Ecuador** organised diverse solidarity actions to give food to those in need, including unemployed, evicted, and homeless people.¹

In Brazil, between August and October 2020, more than 300 initiatives, including donations of farm produce, food banks, and community kitchens, led by social movements, popular organisations and collectives, sprouted across the country. The concern for healthy food, which received a strong boost during the crisis, became a strategic angle for constructing new relations between rural and urban populations. These place the appreciation of peasant agroecological production and exchange of knowledge (e.g. on the creation of agroecological community gardens) at their centre. Many of the initiatives are documented in databases, such as this one: <https://agroecologiaemrede.org.br>.

In Ecuador, amid the closure of popular markets and fairs, various peasant, indigenous, and fishing organisations – in collaboration with women’s and other social organisations – revived the ancestral practice of “trueques alimentarios” (food bartering) to confront the crisis.

¹ Macías et al. (forthcoming, October 2021). An Imperceptible Growth: Healthy Food and Transformative Solidarity. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch Issue 2021*.

Across the country food was donated, exchanged, and shared between communities, both locally and across regions, showing the immense solidarity and resilience of communities in times of crises. The logistics of collecting and distributing the food were led by youth who collectively mobilized and engaged with local administrations. In addition to the exchange of food, knowledge on culturally adequate recipes were shared, including on medicinal plants that strengthen the immune system, and which rural and indigenous women preserve in their territories. In Guayaquil, peasant pharmacies were set up to provide the population with medicinal plants at a time when access to health centres was severely limited.

In **Oaxaca, Mexico**, local fishers have been providing 50–60 tons of free seafood to their communities per week. Meanwhile in **Colombia**, youth groups are recovering peasants' knowledge, and learning to value their work in communities.

→ Watch video by youth of Gamero and Evitar (Colombia)

