

# Responding to COVID-19 Challenges to Regional Coordination in Latin America

Salomé Garnier (Harvard)<sup>1</sup>

*OPALC Working Paper*  
July 2020

## 1. Introduction

Covid-19 has become the textbook case for public health specialists and international relations scholars around the world. The pandemic perfectly exemplifies the rising challenges of globalization, as it concerns a rapidly spreading virus that crosses international borders without discriminations between nations. As with any transnational challenge, dealing with the current pandemic requires a transnational response. Yet, international cooperation around the crisis has not risen to expectations, and existing institutions have often failed to provide adequate, coordinated responses to the virus.

In particular, the specificities of this crisis call for a localized response and reactivity at a regional scale. Different parts of the world were hit by the virus at different times, warranting distinct responses. Although the virus first developed in East Asia before spreading to Europe, the Americas have become the most strongly impacted region, as of August 2020. The United States and Brazil are hardest hit, with more than 3.3 and 1.8 million confirmed cases, respectively, but Mexico, Chile, and Peru are also facing major outbreaks (Table 1). Experts say that the peak of the crisis may be weeks away, and the continent has clearly become the epicenter of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the chronological characteristics of the pandemic, other factors make regional coordination essential in addressing the coronavirus crisis. First, countries that share a border are more susceptible to spreading the disease among each other, hence the necessity to coordinate border regulations (i.e. closures, testing at the border, etc). Second, neighboring

---

<sup>1</sup> Salomé Garnier is a junior Harvard college student, with a major in government and global health. She was research assistant at Sciences Po's Political Observatory for Latin American and the Caribbean (OPALC) during the months of June and July 2020 under the supervision of professor Dabène.

<sup>2</sup> Jake Horton, "Coronavirus: What are the numbers out of Latin America?" BBC News, 9 July 2020. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52711458>.

countries tend to rely strongly on each other for trade and economic stability, especially when regional integration is upheld by trade agreements.<sup>3</sup> Because of the economic damages that are inherently brought by a public health crisis such as this one, which required, in most cases, economic lock-downs and a stark reduction in economic activity, regional organizations have the responsibility to monitor and support regional economies, and potentially provide regional contingency plans for post-crisis recovery. Third, logistical issues caused by the pandemic often require consular coordination, for example for the repatriation of citizens and the management of migration flows. Finally, beyond these necessary roles, regional organizations can be the channel through which national governments work together to provide medical equipment, promote research for a vaccine, and publish accurate and relevant information to member states.

**Table 1: The Impact of Coronavirus in Latin America, as of August 2020**

Country	Number of cases	Mortality rate*	Population size	Cases per million people
Brazil	2,912,212	3.4%	209.5 million	13,700.70
Mexico	462,690	10.9%	126.2 million	3,588.61
Peru	455,409	4.5%	31.99 million	13,812.06
Chile	366,671	2.7%	18.73 million	19,181.16
Colombia	357,710	3.3%	49.65 million	7,030.06
Argentina	220,669	1.9%	44.49 million	4,882.51
Ecuador	90,537	6.5%	17.08 million	5,131.59
Bolivia	86,423	4%	11.35 million	7,403.65
Uruguay	1,318	2.8%	3.449 million	379.42
Belize	114	1.7%	383,071	286.70

**Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (August 7, 2020)**

Note: This table includes the eight most affected countries, as well as two relatively spared countries, Uruguay and Belize, for comparative purposes.

\* The mortality rate is the total number of deaths divided by the total number of cases.

Addressing all of these factors is the desired course of action for regional organizations. In Latin America, however, regional organizations have failed to coordinate a comprehensive response in such a manner. Some attempts at tackling the issue have been only partial and insufficient; while the pandemic is regularly mentioned in declarations and addresses, little concrete action has been taken. The weakness of Latin America's multilateral response is surprising, given the wide array of regional organizations that the region encompasses, and the similarity of the challenges faced by nation-states in reaction to the pandemic (high levels of inequality, weakness of national health systems, and high levels of comorbidities that make the population more vulnerable to coronavirus-related complications). The response of the Latin American region as

<sup>3</sup> Elias Sanidas, "World Trade: The Importance of Neighbors." (2018), International Journal of Economics & Management Sciences, 7: 492. Accessed at <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/world-trade-the-importance-of-neighbors-2162-6359-1000492.pdf>

a whole also stands in stark contrast with the rapid and comprehensive response of one of its subregions, Central America. The Central American Contingency Plan will be described subsequently in this paper.

This paper therefore seeks to explain the absence of a comprehensive multilateral response to Covid-19 from regional institutions in Latin America. Specifically, it will compare and contrast South America and Central America, to understand which factors have most prominently inhibited regional cooperation. To that end, I argue that underlying diplomatic tensions and a wide variation in responses to the crisis have weakened the region's ability to collaborate effectively. Furthermore, I also claim that the real determining factor is the distribution of power in the region. I will show that, in the current regional context, absent leadership and the diffusion of responsibility among institutions make effective coordination extremely improbable.

*Background Information: Regional Integration in Latin America and the Caribbean*

To understand the current regional context in Latin America, it is important to take a look at the institutional landscape throughout the region. Regionalism in the Americas takes a myriad of different forms. Each geographic area constitutes its own trade bloc and community, from the Central American System of Integration (SICA) to the Andean Community of Nations (CAN). The two largest trade blocs, in terms of both population and GDP, are NAFTA and MERCOSUR. These concern North America (Canada, USA, Mexico) and the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay), respectively. Beyond trade-centered institutions, other organizations focused on integration and development have recently emerged, such as the Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (PROSUR), which seeks to promote coordinated public policies, while defending democracy, sovereignty, and the market economy. PROSUR was created in 2019 as a right-wing replacement for the allegedly left-wing Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which largely declined over the past few years.

Then, there are organs of broader international organizations that focus specifically on Latin America. The Organization of American States (OAS) is one of the world's largest and oldest regional organizations, encompassing all 35 independent states of the Americas towards socioeconomic development and peaceful cooperation. The Community of Latin America and Caribbean States, or CELAC, was similarly created to promote cooperation and peace in the region but differs from the OAS by its composition: its members include Cuba but exclude the United States and Canada. Within the UN, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) is a regional body that aspires to contribute to economic development and integration. Finally, there are regional organs of specialized UN agencies, such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which is a regional branch of the World Health Organization (WHO). The PAHO works with its member-states to improve and protect people's health across the region.

Lastly, a number of interregional forums were created to support specific ideologies, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) which is a socialist alternative to the

Free Trade Area of the Americas, proposed by the United States. Such forums bring together ideologically similar political leaders from many Latin American countries, and, although their weight is relatively lighter than that of the aforementioned institutions, they contribute to a broader discussion of ideals and policies in the transnational arena. All of the aforementioned organizations could be relevant to the management of a global crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, which impacts nations on a sanitary, political, economic, and social level.

### Multilateral Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: What Has Been Done

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the area that has prompted the most regional reactivity is obviously the health sector. MERCOSUR produced more than 50 thousand PCR kits and 400 thousand detection tests with the financial support of its Structural Convergence Fund.<sup>4</sup> The PAHO supplied Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) to 26 countries, deployed technical experts to underprepared clinics, and delivered virtual trainings to more than 1,000 health professionals across the Americas. Broadly, it is also working towards strengthening national health systems, expanding health care capacities, and disseminating guidelines and information to their member-states to better respond to the crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the health-sector response, however, little coordination has taken place for economic, social, and humanitarian considerations. The CEPAL has set up the Observatorio COVID-19, in which resources, reports, and useful references are published about the situation in Latin America, to make information easily accessible.<sup>6</sup> The MERCOSUR, PROSUR, and CEPAL have held meetings, published declarations, sent out recommendations concerning economic recovery, but with no concrete multilateral action.<sup>7</sup> At such an advanced and critical stage of the pandemic, these actions are largely insufficient.

On a smaller scale, however, the only organization that has enacted a concrete and comprehensive response to the crisis is the Central American System of Integration (SICA).<sup>8</sup> Its Regional Contingency Plan came out as soon as March 26<sup>th</sup>, only 20 days after the first case was

---

<sup>4</sup> Mercosur, “Mercosur financia 50.000 kits PCR de diagnóstico de COVID-19 y 400.000 de serodiagnóstico”, 28 May 2020. Accessed at <https://www.mercosur.int/mercursosur-financia-50-000-kits-pcr-de-diagnostico-de-covid-19-y-400-000-de-serodiagnostico/>

<sup>5</sup> Pan American Health Organization. *PAHO/WHO Response* (Report No. 17), 6 July 2020. Washington DC. Accessed at <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/covid-19-pahowho-response-report-15-6-july-2020>

<sup>6</sup> CEPAL. *Observatorio COVID-19 en América Latina y el Caribe*. Accessed at [www.cepal.org/es/temas/covid-19](http://www.cepal.org/es/temas/covid-19)

<sup>7</sup> PROSUR, “Segunda Declaración Presidencial de PROSUR sobre Acciones Conjuntas para Enfrentar la Pandemia del Coronavirus”, 26 May 2020. Accessed at <https://foroportun.org/segunda-declaracion-presidencial-de-prosur-sobre-acciones-conjuntas-para-enfrentar-la-pandemia-del-coronavirus/> ; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Brasil, “Comunicado Conjunto de los Presidentes de los Estados Partes del MERCOSUR”, 2 July 2020, Asunción. Accessed at <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/es/notas-a-la-prensa/21597-comunicado-conjunto-dos-presidentes-dos-estados-partes-do-mercossul-assuncao-2-de-julho-de-2021>

<sup>8</sup> Member-states of the SICA are Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize and the Dominican Republic.

reported in Costa Rica.<sup>9</sup> The plan comprises of a US\$8 million Emergency Plan Fund from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE), divided into USD\$1 million per member-state. Economic assistance is supplemented with health-related support: the SICA engaged in joint negotiations for the purchase of medications and medical resources and bought more than 180 thousand test kits for its member-states. It set up a Central American Humanitarian Corridor and Regional Humanitarian Assistance Mechanism, to address humanitarian and migration issues. The organization is constantly monitoring the economic impacts of the pandemic, and members are coordinating economic aid amongst each other. It even created an instantaneous messaging system with WhatsApp, in order to maintain regular communication about Covid-related updates.<sup>10</sup> In general, every Central American member-state, except for Nicaragua, has ordered strict restrictions to reduce transmission rates, and to protect their population.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, South America and the Caribbean are lacking such a comprehensive response.

The question that this paper seeks to answer is understanding what could explain the differences between Central America and the broader region of Latin America regarding their ability to respond effectively to the crisis. In Central America, every member-state, except for Nicaragua, has taken the crisis seriously and ordered strict restrictions to protect their population.<sup>12</sup> Nicaragua's divergence is not particularly detrimental for multilateral cooperation, since the nation does not typically play a leadership role, as opposed to Brazil who has failed to provide the regional leadership that it usually establishes. Also, in Central America, the prevalence of SICA as the main, established regional forum, has facilitated its response initiative. In South America, the sheer amount of different, overlapping regional organizations has incited a diffusion of responsibility, wherein no specific organization has the mandate to comprehensively respond to every aspect of the crisis. Based on the argument described above, this paper will show that tensions and disagreements that inhibit cooperation between nations are exacerbated at the scale of the whole region, and that, in the absence of clear leadership from any specific nation or regional organization during the crisis, multilateralism has become extremely difficult.

## **2. Diplomatic Tensions Inhibiting Multilateral Coordination**

First of all, regional coordination in South America in response to the coronavirus was likely inhibited by tense diplomatic relations between member-states throughout the crisis. In particular, two main factors can be placed at the root of diplomatic tensions: (1) border issues,

---

<sup>9</sup> The Caribbean Council, "Central America confirms first cases of COVID-19". Accessed at <https://www.caribbean-council.org/central-america-confirms-first-cases-of-covid-19/>

<sup>10</sup> Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana. *Plan de Contingencia Regional del SICA frente al Coronavirus*. 26 March 2020. Accessed at <https://www.sica.int/coronavirus/plan>

<sup>11</sup> BBC News, "Coronavirus: el mapa interactivo que muestra las medidas o distintos tipos de cuarentena que adoptaron los países de América Latina", 27 April 2020. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52248497>

<sup>12</sup> BBC News, "Coronavirus: el mapa interactivo que muestra las medidas o distintos tipos de cuarentena que adoptaron los países de América Latina", 27 April 2020. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52248497>

and (2) wide disparities in terms of various governments handled the crisis. Importantly, while such tensions may also be present in Central America, there are many more of them at the scale of the Latin American region, which makes them more detrimental to regional cooperation. We will also see that these tensions are exacerbated by the fact that most of them concern the prominent nation of Brazil, and that regional integration in South America is more vulnerable to political frictions than in Central America.

### Border Issues

As seen all over the world, the Covid-19 pandemic placed nation-states in an unprecedented position of extreme isolationism. To preserve individual health systems and limit transmission due to international travel, most countries in the world adopted border restrictions of some sort. According to the Pew Research Center, more than 91% of the population lived in a country affected by some travel restrictions by April 2020, two-thirds of which were only partial closures.<sup>13</sup> In Latin America, complete closures were closer to the norm, with some countries, like Ecuador, extending the travel ban to even their own citizens and residents.<sup>14</sup> These sudden closures created confusion and complications for travelers and citizens abroad, requiring coordination between the administrations of each country to organize their repatriation while limiting the unnecessary movement of populations. However, such coordination was often difficult to put in place, creating tensions between nation-states that share a common border.

Border closures created tensions between member-states in two main scenarios: (1) when governments did not plan for the repatriation of their citizens, and (2) when large waves of people still crossed the borders, posing sanitary and economic threats to the destination country. An example of the former is the case of Chile and Bolivia. At the end of March, tensions grew between the Chilean Chief of National Defense in the Tarapacá region, general Guillermo Paiva, and Bolivian authorities who allegedly refused to let Bolivian nationals cross the border to return to their country, despite official announcements authorizing their return.<sup>15</sup> In a public address, the General called Bolivian authorities “indolent and stubborn,” while the Bolivian Minister of Defense Luis Fernando López explained that they had closed the borders because they lacked the infrastructure to place returning travelers into quarantine and did not trust them to voluntarily isolate themselves in their homes.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Phillip Connor, “More than nine-in-ten people worldwide live in countries with travel restrictions amid COVID-19,” April 1, 2020, Pew Research Center. Accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/more-than-nine-in-ten-people-worldwide-live-in-countries-with-travel-restrictions-amid-covid-19/>

<sup>14</sup> The New York Times, “Coronavirus Travel Restrictions, Across the Globe,” July 16, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-travel-restrictions.html>

<sup>15</sup> General Guillermo Paiva, “General Chileno critica Tozudez Indolencia de Añez y su canciller por impedir ingreso de bolivianos,” Noticias Bolivia, March 30, 2020. Accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGmyRMGuOIM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGmyRMGuOIM)

<sup>16</sup> Correo del Sur, “General chileno ve "tozudez" e "indolencia" en el Gobierno por impedir el ingreso de connacionales,” March 30, 2020. Accessed at [https://correodelsur.com/politica/20200330\\_general-chileno-ve-tozudez-e-indolencia-en-el-gobierno-por-impedir-el-ingreso-de-connacionales.html](https://correodelsur.com/politica/20200330_general-chileno-ve-tozudez-e-indolencia-en-el-gobierno-por-impedir-el-ingreso-de-connacionales.html)



The question of receiving large waves of returning citizens is especially relevant in the case of Venezuela and Colombia, which illustrates the second scenario. The economic crisis caused by the pandemic hit Venezuelan refugees in Colombia extremely hard, which prompted many of them to return home. A study by the Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos (GIFMM) shows that, while 91% of households reported paid employment as their main source of income before stay-at-home measures were implemented, the number dropped to 20% after the lockdown, with 48% of respondents reporting no source of income at all.<sup>17</sup> Their living conditions make them particularly vulnerable to the virus: out of the 1.8 million Venezuelan refugees in Colombia, about 30% of households do not have access to either water or soap. 67% of the respondents who required a medical treatment during the last few months did not receive adequate treatment, most commonly because they are not affiliated to the Colombian health system.<sup>18</sup> Because of this situation, namely an important loss of resources, lack of access to health services, and high rates of eviction, more than 12,000 Venezuelans decided to leave Colombia since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Yet, with all official travel routes closed since March 13<sup>th</sup>, those wishing to return to Venezuela are forced to do so through irregular migration pathways.<sup>20</sup>

Border zones and illegal crossing points in Colombia are largely controlled by criminal groups and armed militias. This means that migrants on their way to cross the border are more vulnerable to exploitation, assault, and crime now that the official borders are closed.<sup>21</sup> During their journey, the conditions they travel in make them more likely to contract and transmit coronavirus, and therefore bring it back to their country. Venezuela, which was already suffering from a rampant economic and social crisis before the pandemic, lacks the infrastructure to isolate or treat returning migrants. Many Venezuelans were reliant on buying medicine and medical supplies in Colombia or in black markets to compensate for the health system collapse in their country, but border closures have disrupted these habits, leaving Venezuelans extremely vulnerable.<sup>22</sup>

While this humanitarian crisis is taking place, the Venezuelan and Colombian government are unable to coordinate effective border policies, primarily due to the fact that Ivan Duque, the Colombian President, does not recognize the government of Nicolás Maduro as legitimate. In the words of Maduro himself:

“Our chancellor has been calling the Colombian chancellor, and they don’t answer the phone; the Venezuelan minister of Health has been calling the minister of Health in

---

<sup>17</sup> GIFMM, *Colombia: Evaluación Rápida De Necesidades Ante Covid-19*, May 2020. Accessed at <https://r4v.info/es/documents/download/76031>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> GIFMM, *Reporte Situacional*, May 2020. Accessed at <https://r4v.info/es/documents/download/77220>

<sup>20</sup> REACH, “Updates on Ongoing Research on The Impact of Covid-19 in Crisis-Affected Countries,” March 30, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.reach-initiative.org/what-we-do/news/updates-on-ongoing-research-and-activities-linked-to-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Annette Idler and Markus Hochmüller, “Venezuelan migrants face crime, conflict and coronavirus at Colombia’s closed border,” *The Conversation*, June 5, 2020. Accessed at <https://theconversation.com/venezuelan-migrants-face-crime-conflict-and-coronavirus-at-colombias-closed-border-137743>.

Colombia, and they don't answer the phone; the minister of Defense has been calling the minister of Defense in Colombia, and they don't answer the phone".<sup>23</sup>

The lack of communication between the neighboring countries inhibits any efficient management of their porous, 2 200 km long border. While governors of the two countries have been communicating to some extent, Duque dismissed any type of discussion with "the dictatorship," given that "its trustworthiness is not guaranteed."<sup>24</sup>

The cases of Chile/Bolivia and Colombia/Venezuela suggest that border tensions, the inability to coordinate policies, and the challenges brought by population flows may inhibit coordination at a broader scale. In the particular case of Venezuela, the fact that several leaders do not recognize Maduro's government necessarily inhibits the possibility of coordinated action. Given the particular vulnerability of border areas, lack of coordination can continue to enhance the damaging consequences of the pandemic in Latin America.

Indeed, border areas are particularly at risk when it comes to global pandemics. Obviously, they see more cross-border travel, but they are also much less prepared for the reception of infected patients. According to the PAHO, border towns tend to lack adequate health infrastructure, and to rely on small clinics with little capacity instead of hospitals. Clinics are often difficult to access from more remote areas, and PAHO data shows a high transmission rate in border areas, for example at the Haiti/Dominican Republic or Nicaragua/Costa Rica border.<sup>25</sup> Most significantly, there is ongoing transmission around borders shared with Brazil (e.g. in Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru), which increases regional tensions directed towards the nation that has two thirds of all cases in South America. This resentment is especially strengthened by the limited response of the Brazilian government towards the pandemic, which brings us to the second point of tension between member states: the widespread disparity in how different governments have assessed and responded to the coronavirus.

### *Response Disparity*

Most countries in the region took the pandemic very seriously from the beginning. Argentina, for example, implemented one of the longest and more restrictive quarantines in the world, lasting since March 21<sup>st</sup> and still in place by the end of July.<sup>26</sup> Countries in the Andean region also took

---

<sup>23</sup> Nicolás Maduro, as cited in "El dilema de Colombia para coordinar la crisis del covid-19 con Venezuela sin reconocer al gobierno de Maduro," BBC News, March 16, 2020. Quote translated by the author. Accessed at [www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51919522](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51919522)

<sup>24</sup> Ivan Duque, as cited in "El dilema de Colombia para coordinar la crisis del covid-19 con Venezuela sin reconocer al gobierno de Maduro," BBC News, March 16, 2020. Quote translated by the author. Accessed at [www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51919522](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-51919522)

<sup>25</sup> Pan American Health Organization, "PAHO Director calls to contain spread of COVID-19 in vulnerable populations in border areas," June 16, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.paho.org/en/news/16-6-2020-paho-director-calls-contain-spread-covid-19-vulnerable-populations-border-areas>.

<sup>26</sup> Abel Gilbert, "Argentina endurece el confinamiento ante el avance del covid-19," El Periódico, June 27, 2020, Buenos Aires. Accessed at <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/internacional/20200627/argentina-endurece-el-confinamiento-ante-el-avance-del-covid-19-8016566>



the crisis seriously with high levels of restrictions.<sup>27</sup> Most of them invested a lot of resources in response to the crisis, with Peru spending up to 9% of its GDP.<sup>28</sup> However, three countries stood out in the region for denying the gravity of the crisis and for their weak response to the pandemic. In Mexico, staying at home was recommended, but not legally enforced. In Brazil, social distancing was suggested, but barely any restrictive measures were put in place at a national level. Finally, Nicaragua took the least action to protect its population from the virus, with 0% of the GDP spent on an emergency response and no restrictions implemented whatsoever.<sup>29</sup> Disparities in how countries responded to the crisis also gave way to disparities in terms of how much countries are currently affected by the pandemic. For example, while Uruguay stands out as an exceptional success story in the region, cases in Brazil and Argentina keep soaring, and Peru and Chile's health systems are on the verge of collapsing.<sup>30 31</sup>

Such disparities have created tensions at both a population and a government level. First, at a local level, the pandemic exacerbated xenophobic tendencies towards foreign nationals living abroad. In Chile, stigmatization and racism against Haitians were heightened, with instances of Chileans throwing rocks at Haitians because some had tested positive to the virus.<sup>32</sup> An article by the United Nations points out that crisis situations tend to exacerbate stigmatization and discrimination towards minority groups, and the coronavirus pandemic is no exception, as migrants have been blamed for the emergence of the virus in many countries. Diseases such as this one are often perceived as being of "foreign" origin, and migrants are often the first to be vilified for spreading the virus more rapidly.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence, increased xenophobia has reduced levels of trust between the populations of different Latin American nations.

At a larger scale, some governments have been extremely critical of the way others have handled the crisis. Leaders are blaming each other for high rates of transmission in their own countries, and publicly calling out each other's failures. This phenomenon is most often directed towards Brazil: Alberto Fernández, president of Argentina, publicly declared that Brazil was a poor

---

<sup>27</sup> BBC News, "Coronavirus: el mapa interactivo que muestra las medidas o distintos tipos de cuarentena que adoptaron los países de América Latina," April 26, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52248497>

<sup>28</sup> BBC News, "Coronavirus: los 10 países que más han gastado en enfrentar la pandemia (y cómo se ubican los de América Latina)," May 18, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-52686453>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jill Langlois, "Uruguay Emerges as a Rare Pandemic Winner in Latin America," Foreign Policy, July 21, 2020. Accessed at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/21/uruguay-coronavirus-pandemic-success-latin-america/>

<sup>31</sup> France 24, "Brasil y Perú, los países más perjudicados en América Latina por la pandemia," May 19, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.france24.com/es/20200519-peru-brasil-colapso-sanitario-covid19-coronavirus>

<sup>32</sup> Lucia Newman, "Coronavirus-fuelled racism adds to Haitians' plight in Chile," Al-Jazeera, May 17, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/coronavirus-fuelled-racism-adds-haitians-plight-chile-200517133635187.html>

<sup>33</sup> UN Department of Global Communications, "COVID-19: UN counters pandemic-related hate and xenophobia," May 11, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/covid-19-un-counters-pandemic-related-hate-and-xenophobia>

example of fighting against coronavirus; in Paraguay, health authorities called out Brazilians for being at the origin of many cases in the country.<sup>34</sup> In this environment, it is not surprising that multilateral coordination would be inhibited, both by tensions and disagreements between major leaders regarding the gravity of the crisis, and by the habit of blaming other countries for the emergence and continued spread of the virus.

While these regional tensions definitely contribute to an incapacity to coordinate at a regional scale, Central America is not exempt from such challenges and yet still succeeded in collaborating in response to the pandemic. Of course, the mere difference in scale necessarily exacerbates existing tensions in Latin America, but the real defining factor is the distribution of power and influence in the region. Existing power dynamics intertwine with growing tensions, and lead to the absence of a driving force among nations and institutions during this crisis. The aforementioned obstacles to collaboration are especially heightened by the role of Brazil in this crisis, who has failed to assume its position as a leader and role model in the region. With no such leadership, Latin America is left drowning in an abundance of different regional organizations, none of which assume the mandate of spearheading pandemic relief efforts.

### **3. A Lack of Dedicated Leadership in the Health Sector Hindering Regionalist Efforts**

First and foremost, Brazil has historically been a significant actor in the Latin American multilateral arena. Specifically, it became the driving force of regionalism under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), in an effort to assert itself as a post-liberal regional power over the United States.<sup>35</sup> Along with Mexico, it had a significant leadership role in CELAC, and was, with Argentina, the driving force behind the creation of MERCOSUR. Most importantly for our purposes, Brazil largely contributed to the creation of UNASUR, which had been very much focused on health diplomacy, with a social policy agenda guided by healthcare.<sup>36</sup> Both Brazil and Venezuela had been pioneers in the realms of healthcare, social policy, and international diplomacy, and important members of UNASUR. In 2020, however, neither UNASUR nor Brazil, or even Venezuela, are able or willing to spearhead any coordinated action in response to the coronavirus.

#### *Decline of UNASUR and Diffusion of Responsibility in the Health Sector*

UNASUR, for one, has seen an important decline in the past few years. In 2018, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru suspended their memberships to the organization, due to

---

<sup>34</sup> Marcia Carmo, "Coronavirus: el temor que genera la situación de la pandemia en Brasil en sus países vecinos," BBC News, May 14, 2020, Buenos Aires. Accessed at [www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52651900](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52651900)

<sup>35</sup> Quiliconi, Cintia y Raúl Salgado Espinoza. "Latin American Integration: Regionalism à la Carte in a Multipolar World?". *Colombia Internacional* (92): 15-41. Accessed at <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/rci/n92/0121-5612-rci-92-00015.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> María Belén Herrero and Diana Tussie. "UNASUR Health: A quiet revolution in health diplomacy in South America." *Global social policy* vol. 15,3 (2015): 261-277. Accessed at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4639827/>

ideological frictions within South America that were inhibiting consensus-finding. The organization had not had a Secretary-General since 2017. UNASUR was a key negotiation space for issues such as health and the environment, which have now been left without an equivalent forum.<sup>37</sup>

As described in the introduction of this paper, there are many international organizations in the region, but none of them focus on the intersection of health, economics, and social policy as much as UNASUR did. In consequence, the region suffers from a diffusion of responsibility when it comes to handling the current pandemic. Most of these organizations have overlapping responsibilities, and none of them have the mandate to specifically address health-related concerns *in addition to* their socio-economic implications.

Indeed, examining the role of the major regional organizations as defined in their own descriptions of themselves shows little focus on health and its socio-economic implications. NAFTA and MERCOSUR are primarily trade-centered: their main objectives are to generate business and investment opportunities within the regional, and to integrate member economies into the competitive international market.<sup>38</sup> The mission of the OAS, as defined in Article 2 of its Charter, focuses on peace, cooperation, democracy, and dispute management, with no mention of public health or other social issues (except for poverty).<sup>39</sup> While CELAC has established hunger and poverty as priorities in its actions, it never mentions a specific focus on health emergencies. Instead, it broadly defines its mission as seeking peace, socioeconomic development, and regional integration.<sup>40</sup> The PAHO, on the other hand, is explicitly and uniquely focused on health, but it lacks the authority to address economic recovery and other related aspects of the health crisis. Therefore, because of UNASUR's decline in the years that preceded the coronavirus pandemic, the region is lacking the presence of an organization with the mandate to take charge during such a crisis.

### *Lack of Leadership at a National Level*

At the scale of individual nations, Venezuela has lost its position as a role model for social policy since the beginning of its economic, social, and political crisis about a decade ago. The Brazilian administration, on the other hand, could have used its resources and influence to spearhead a coordinated response. What is preventing such an action is not a question of ability, but rather a question of willingness to address the crisis. The Brazilian response to coronavirus has not only been marked by a denial of the gravity of the pandemic, antagonizing of medical professionals

---

<sup>37</sup> Sean Burges, "UNASUR's Dangerous Decline: The Risks of a Growing Left-Right Split in South America," *Americas Quarterly*, May 3, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/unasurs-dangerous-decline-the-risks-of-a-growing-left-right-split-in-south-america/>

<sup>38</sup> MERCOSUR, "¿Quiénes somos? En pocas palabras." Accessed at <https://www.mercosur.int/quienes-somos/en-pocas-palabras/>

<sup>39</sup> OAS, "Our Purpose." Accessed at <http://www.oas.org/en/about/purpose.asp>

<sup>40</sup> FAO, "The Community of Latin America and Caribbean States." Accessed at <http://www.fao.org/americas/prioridades/plan-celac/en/>

and health experts, and the sabotage of local efforts to quarantine and protect populations; it was also marked by Bolsonaro's rejection of WHO recommendations, accusations of a conspiracy against him, and threats to abandon the international organization.<sup>41</sup> Such a response resembles largely that of his American counterpart, Donald Trump, who also has failed to spearhead coordination efforts in his own country and in the Americas as a whole. This attitude has caused both leaders to be largely criticized throughout the world, and the high number of cases in their countries can probably be attributed, at least in part, to their denialism and carelessness. Importantly for our purposes, Brazil's rejection of internationalism and negation of the gravity of the crisis has necessarily hindered cooperation efforts, because it is not in a position to lead the region as it historically has.

#### *Differences with Central America and Implications for Regional Cooperation*

Of course, the counterpoint to this argument is that Central America's comprehensive response was not inhibited by Nicaragua's similarly passive posture. However, the positions of Nicaragua and Brazil are not comparable, as Nicaragua does not have the leadership role in Central America that Brazil does in the broader Latin American region. The decision-making process in SICA, where other countries such as Costa Rica have taken a leadership position, was not hindered by Nicaragua's failures. In South America, however, the contrast between Brazil's traditional role and its current posture has had significant repercussions on the region's ability to respond.

In addition, Central American regionalism is aided by the fact that it comprises of a single, well-established organization. While SICA exists since the early 90s, regional integration in Central America began in 1951, with the Organization of Central American States (ODECA).<sup>42</sup> The nations of Central America have more than half a century of experience working together despite occasional political rivalries. In contrast, regionalism in South America is dispersed among various, more recent organisms, which have proven vulnerable to political tensions and changes of governance. The example of UNASUR and its decline shows that multilateralism in the region can easily be weakened by rising tensions and ideological cleavages. Specifically, members of UNASUR disagreed about the Venezuelan crisis. Currently, shared resentment against Brazil and the non-recognition of Venezuela's administration are important obstacles to regionalist efforts. Because of Latin America's complicated multilateral landscape, the growing tensions previously described in this paper are more likely to inhibit cooperation in the broader region than they would be in Central America.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this complex situation leaves Latin America with little leadership, large discrepancies in terms of how the crisis is addressed, diplomatic tensions between many

---

<sup>41</sup> Télam, "Bolsonaro acusa a la OMS de querer quebrar a Brasil con sus recomendaciones frente al coronavirus," June 10, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202006/474708-bolsonaro-oms-queiebra-brasil-pandemia.html>

<sup>42</sup> SICA, *Integration at a Glance*. Accessed at [www.sica.int/sica/vista\\_en.aspx?IdEnt=401&Idm=2&IdmStyle=2](http://www.sica.int/sica/vista_en.aspx?IdEnt=401&Idm=2&IdmStyle=2)

member-states, and overlapping institutions that suffer from diffusion of responsibility. While diplomatic tensions and disparities are not in themselves sufficient to inhibit cooperative action, as illustrated by the case of Central America, they are exacerbated by both a larger scale and the fact that Brazil, traditional leader of the region, is the source of many tensions. In addition, multilateral organisms in Latin America are numerous, overlapping, and relatively young, with a tendency to decline when regional ideologies diverge. While current tensions may not prohibit Central America, a region whose integration has been strengthened for the past 70 years, from reaching a consensus, they are sufficient to cause chaos in the broader Latin American region.