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Access to water in Latin America and its consequences during the pandemic

In 2010, the *United Nations General Assembly* recognized the human right to water and sanitation. That is, all people have the right to have access to sufficient, safe, physically accessible, affordable and acceptable quality water for personal and domestic uses on a continuous basis (WHO, 2019).

Unsafe water and poor sanitation are associated with the transmission of diseases such as cholera, other diarrheas, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid and polio. Non-existent, insufficient or inadequately managed water and sanitation services expose people to preventable health risks. In the Global South, 22% of health facilities have no water sources, 21% have no sanitation, and 22% have no waste management services. These shortfalls mean that both patients and professionals are exposed to greater risks of infection and disease.

With regard to the current situation of the pandemic that the world is going through, the *United Nations* (UN, 2020) assures that the availability and access to water, sanitation and hygiene services is fundamental to fight the covid-19. Moreover, it is estimated that the effects of the virus could be considerably more severe for the urban poor living in slums that do not have access to clean water. That is, something as simple as handwashing, one of the main recommendations for fighting covid-19, is not always assured for everybody.

With respect to Latin America, this is the region of the world that has the highest availability of fresh water per capita, containing 230,000 basins, which translates into more than 30% of the world's water resources. According to the *Inter-American Development Bank* (IDB, 2016), in 2015 around 600 million people in Latin America had access to water and sanitation services. But there was a great disparity between urban and rural areas, since 84% of urban areas had water and sanitation service coverage that year, while only 67% of rural areas did.

According to the *Latin American Water Tribunal* (LAWT, 2012), the vast majority of Latin American countries have water availability that is classified as high or very high in relation to their surface area and population. But the availability of the resource does not necessarily mean that it is accessible to the entire population. This means that most of the countries with high levels of water availability experience low levels of drinking water coverage for their populations. In addition, access to drinking water services is directly related to access to sanitation services.

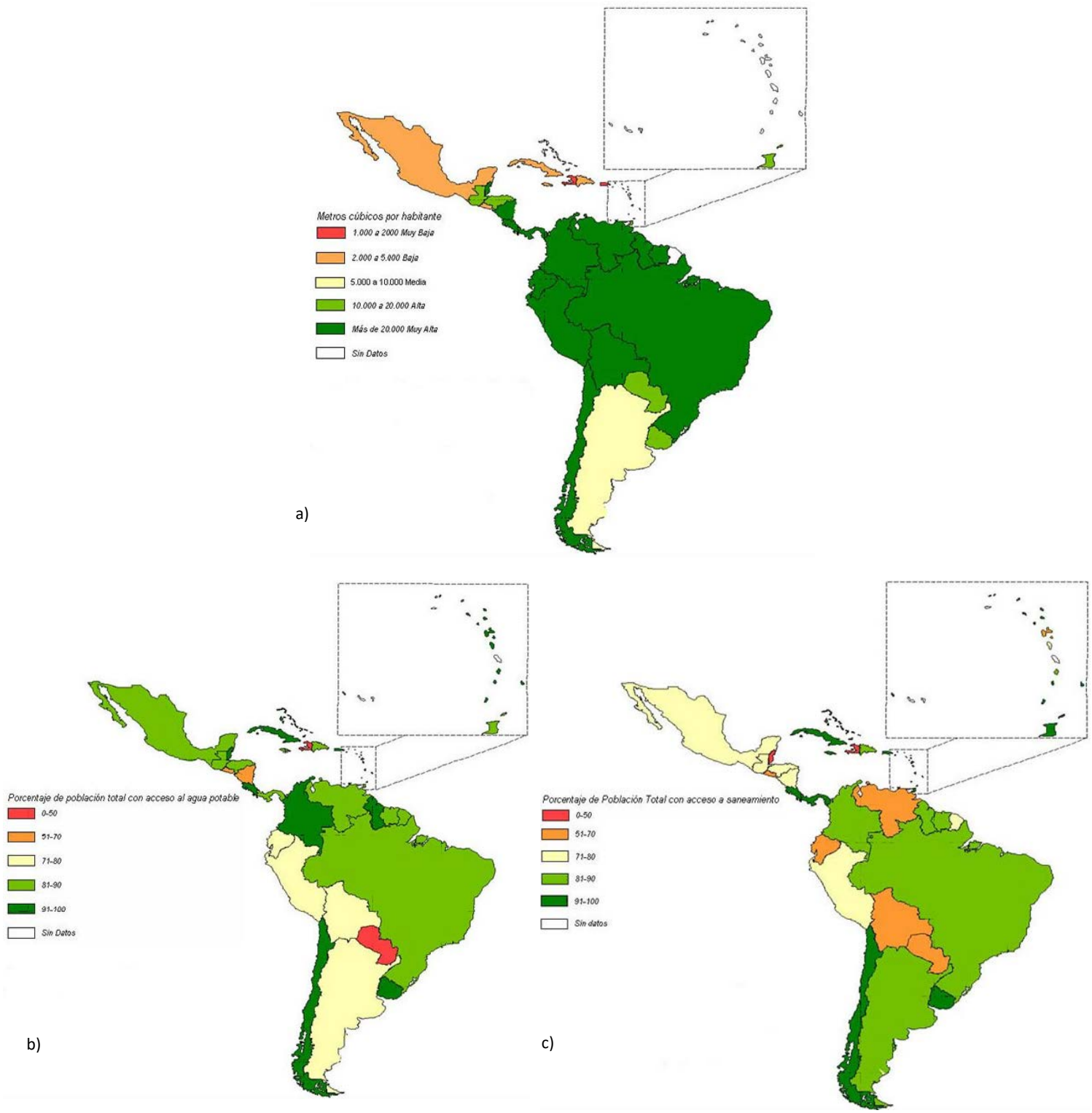

Figure 1. a) Availability of water per inhabitant in Latin American and Caribbean basins; b) Percentage of population with access to drinking water; and c) Percentage of population with access to sanitation. Source: LAWT, 2012.

According to the *World Health Organization* (WHO, 2019), geographical, socio-cultural and economic inequalities, not only between rural and urban areas, but also within cities, are responsible for the fact that people living in informal settlements generally have less access to sources of drinking water than other residents. These inequalities are the main reason why access to water and sanitation is not guaranteed for the entire population in Latin America.

Guayas province, Ecuador's epicenter of covid-19, almost 15,000 cases and more than 1,500 deaths were recorded. In its capital, the city of Guayaquil, according to the newspaper *Primicias,* it is estimated that more than 31% of the population lives in informal settlements. Access to running water in most of them is known to be limited, and this problem is even more serious given the current pandemic situation. In this regard, in Guayaquil it's been reported that one of the causes of the great spread of the virus is the fact that these settlements do not have access to running water.

In the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, there are about 1,700 informal settlements or slums, according to the newspaper *Chequeado.* This province records more than 96% of the country's covid-19 cases and more than 88% of the deaths. An example of the lack of water availability is the case of the so-called *Villa 31*. In this informal settlement where around 43,000 people live, there was no water during the first weeks of confinement, according to the newspaper *La Nación,* making it impossible to comply with the recommended hygiene measures.

A similar situation was experienced in the Magdalena area of Colombia, according to the newspaper *El Tiempo*. Two poor neighborhoods in the municipality of Pueblo Viejo were fenced in to control the entry and exit of people due to outbreaks of infection that occurred there. Mayor Fabián Obispo insisted the Government to send potable water, food and make a field hospital, since there is no health center there to treat patients with the virus.

In the Chilean province of Petorca there has been a water crisis for several years now, reports the daily *La Razón*. The problem again is not the lack of resources, but rather that this crisis is linked to the current legal framework that, on the one hand, allows private agronomists to receive water rights free of charge, and on the other, does not prioritize the types of use of this resource. This results in restricted access to water for the most vulnerable populations, a problem that is even more alarming in this time of pandemic.

Indigenous communities are also vulnerable populations where access to water and health in general is restricted. An example of this is what happened with a Wichí community, an indigenous ethnic group from South America, which is located in Argentina. In this particular case, as explained by the newspaper *Página12*, access to water exists since they have an affordable water source, but the problem lies in the management of this resource. They complain that they do not have electricity to make it work, so they must go to the nearby ravines to collect water, and restrict its use.

In conclusion, access to drinking water is a necessary condition for meeting basic sanitation requirements. But it is clear that the availability of resources is not a sufficient condition to ensure such access. Geographical, socio-cultural and economic inequalities and the poor management of these resources are responsible for the fact that there are millions of people in Latin America who do not have drinking water and sanitation services, despite the fact that it is the region that contains 30% of the planet's water resources. The poorest populations, which generally include the indigenous ones, living in informal settlements or slums, are the most vulnerable and have the least access to this resource. The problem becomes even more

worrying in this context of pandemic where basic hygiene requirements such as handwashing, necessary to stop the covid-19 to spread, cannot be carried out.

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The research group BIOCOM-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19