



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South

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The impact of covid-19 on the indigenous population of the Amazonia

The Amazonia, colloquially known as the lung of the planet, is the largest forest in the world and is located in Latin America along 9 countries: Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Surinam, Brazil, Guyana, Ecuador, French Guyana and Peru.

It is estimated that in the Amazonia there are about 400 indigenous peoples with their own language, culture and territory who live with more or less contact with the *outside world*. The rights that indigenous populations have in the region differ between the different countries. For example, in Brazil indigenous populations do not have collective land ownership rights while in Peru or Colombia some have obtained title to their lands. Unfortunately however, exploitation of their territories by companies seeking to extract resources and generate profits is a common practice. The loss of territory and resources that so many indigenous people have suffered in recent decades has led to high rates of malnutrition as well as lack of access to safe water and sanitation. As a consequence, their life quality as well as their immune system has diminished, increasing morbidity and risk of developing complications from diseases such as SARS-CoV-2 virus.

According to the *Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)*, as of May 19 (last official data available) there were 20,000 confirmed cases of covid-19 in the Amazonia basin (PAHO, 2020). However, the *Pan Amazonian Ecclesial Network* as of June 1 declares that its count is 174,819 confirmed cases and 7,845 deaths (PAEN, 2020).

PAHO also highlights that the incidence of covid-19 in the provinces of the Amazonia is double that of other states in the same countries. This inequality is attributed to the high rates of food insecurity that Amazonia populations suffer, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, the prevalence of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis or malaria and the difficulty in accessing health systems either because of their unavailability or inaccessibility.

In addition, different studies have shown that a high level of morbidity in diseases affecting the immune system and blood coagulation implies a higher risk of complications in covid-19. As explained in our third report, Latin American countries have a high prevalence of both non-communicable and communicable diseases. Among the latter group, we find Chagas disease, endemic in 21 countries in the Americas. In the Amazonia region, we find an important foci of oral transmission (food contamination). This neglected disease, with a 10% mortality rate if not treated, causes in its chronic phase affections in the cardiac tissue and vascular accidents such as the formation of clots. Dr. Pere Albajar Viñas, head of the Chagas Disease Control Program at the *World Health Organization*, explains that there is a great lack of knowledge about the prevalence of chronic Chagas disease in the region and therefore there are people at high risk of developing complications of covid-19 that are not detected.

Social structural inequalities also increase the risk of being infected and dying from SARS-CoV-2. One example is the lack of access to information in order to take individual and collective protection measures against the virus. Often, this information is only in the official language of the country and is not translated into the different indigenous languages. A good public health campaign of prevention for all is therefore not carried out.

Another example is the lack of availability and accessibility to health care services in the region. In order to reach the few available health centres, the inhabitants of the interior provinces of the Amazonia must travel for 4 days by river or by plane. Once they reach the most populated cities such as Manaus (Brazil), Iquitos (Peru) or Leticia (Colombia) they find that hospitals equipped with intensive care are overcrowded and they struggle to access them. There are several news, which can be read in the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, about indigenous people who have tried to access health centres and have been denied entry (El Tiempo, 2020).

The state of emergency decreed in many countries part of the Amazonia region has resulted in the marginalization of indigenous communities and, in some cases, the militarization of their territories. Similarly, they have been denied freedom of expression and association while large companies continue to exploit their territories and resources.

The high mortality rates that the indigenous people of the Amazonia are experiencing are no longer enough, which, echoing the structural inequalities and racism that they suffer in many countries, they are also losing autonomy and further endangering their food security and life quality.

References:

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The research group BIOCOS-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://biocossc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>