

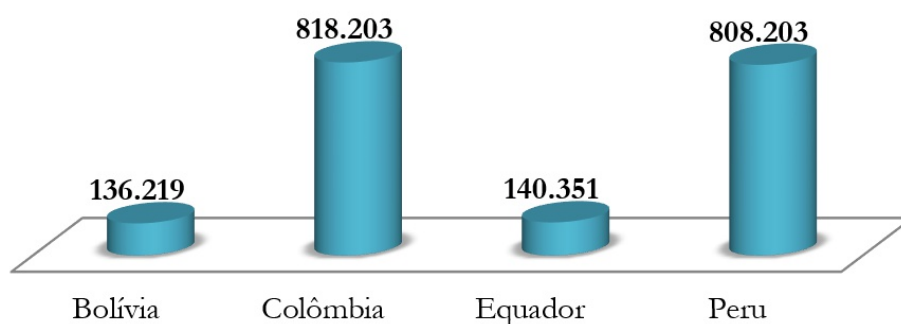
THE ANDEAN COMMUNITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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In Latin America, the confirmed cases of contamination by COVID-19 until October 2020 has exceeded 10 million. However, due to unreported cases and differences in the form of death records in each country, the actual number is likely to be higher. In the countries of the Andean Community (CAN) - Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru - the pandemic has proliferated exponentially. Not everyone was able to remain isolated, as over 50% of workers in the Andean countries work in the informal sector, thus being prevented from staying at home in the face of economic difficulties. Therefore, isolation policies did not contain the spread of the disease.

Regarding the number of infected, Colombia and Peru present similar and significant numbers of confirmed cases, more than 800.000 in both countries (Graph 01).

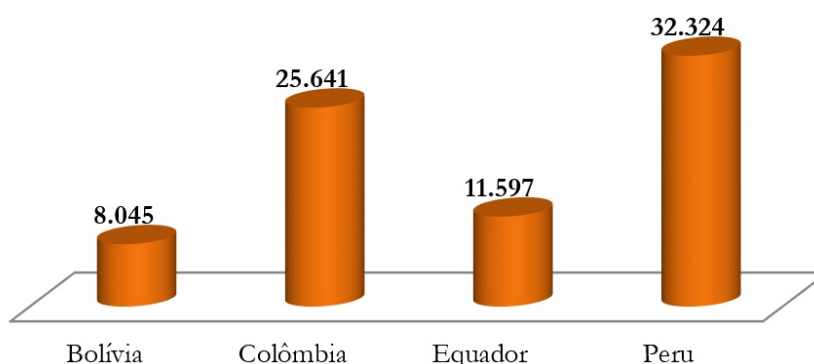
Graph 1. Infected by Covid-19



Source: ORAS-CONHU, 2020.

In turn, Bolivia and Ecuador lead the number of deaths in proportion to those infected among the countries analyzed (Graph 02). In relation to their respective populations, these are relevant numbers. In the world list of the 10 countries with the most deaths per capita by COVID-19, three members of the Andean Community present: Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. The limited amount of tests applied in the Andean countries inhibits knowledge, the interpretation of numbers, and the application of isolation measures for confirmed cases.

Graph 2. Deaths by Covid-19



Source: ORAS-CONHU, 2020.

The countries under analysis showed greater difficulty in caring for severe cases of COVID-19, due to their weak health systems to meet the demand of the most difficult period of the pandemic. Barriers to the purchase of supplies, medicines, and oxygen balloons have been major obstacles to the treatment of more complex infected people. The Peruvian population, for example, when facing the collapse of the health system, faced queues and turmoil to obtain oxygen balloons for the most serious cases of the disease. Peruvian patients with less chance of survival did not have access to all medication in the public health system.

The economic and social difficulties triggered by the restriction policies have given rise to an even more serious scenario in the region. The countries of the Andean Community have become the scene of new political instabilities, such as the revolts against the police that have emerged in Colombia and the electoral instability that has been intensified in Bolivia. Peru and Ecuador experienced crises in the health system, suffering accusations of corruption, through the use of health resources by local authorities in overpriced purchasing schemes related to the acquisition of devices,

medications, and contracts, further aggravating the pandemic crisis.

Among the major challenges in the economies of CAN countries, is the economic reopening without a significant drop in new daily cases. Isolation policies in the region have proven that quarantines are difficult to maintain, due to high informality, inequality, and poverty. According to a report by ECLAC, OECD, CAF, and the European Commission on the economic prospects for Latin America 2020, "the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic are unprecedented in the region" (BBC, 2020a).

Thus, the countries of the Andean integration, seeking to circumvent the economic losses arising from the pandemic, sought to reactivate their economies and achieve greater unity during this world emergency. Within the Andean Community, new economic measures and more contemporary regulations were established to facilitate and encourage intra-Community trade. In addition, the bureaucracies of member countries have also endeavored to digitize procedures, reducing costs, and operational times in the export process with the adoption of Decision 856 (CAN, 2020a).

Regarding health prevention measures, CAN members have stipulated new procedures, facilitating control in customs transit operations, which avoid physical contact, handling of documents, and the spread of the new coronavirus in border crossings. In addition, new protocols have been established to avoid the risk of contagion in rural and indigenous areas.

In the April 2020 declaration, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of the CAN countries announced a series of measures to be adopted by the countries of the bloc. The first measure refers to the strengthening of regional health promotion mechanisms. The second criterion consists of the exchange of epidemiological information and diagnoses of the evolution of the disease in real-time, for timely decision making, as well as the exchange of successful experiences in mitigating the spread of the virus. The third step is for the authorities to assess the possibility of jointly purchasing medical supplies, taking into account the needs of each country. A fourth measure consists of the acquisition of funds from the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) for non-refundable technical cooperation. Virtual meetings and meetings coordinated by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs were also established, defining actions in areas of regional interest in the face of the pandemic (CAN, 2020a).

Subsequently, new strategies of the Andean Community were presented by the CAN

Secretary-General to combat the problems caused by the pandemic, such as the coordination of Health and Safety Management Systems aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. Actions to be carried out after the pandemic were also exposed, aiming at the economic recovery of the members: reactivation and diversification of export markets through e-commerce and virtual business rounds; building regional value chains; promotion of research and technological development; digitization and automation of production processes; activation of cross-border transport and regulation of telework to protect workers, avoiding abuse by employers (CAN, 2020b).

The institutional structure of the Andean Community was accompanied by the expansion of the bloc's thematic agenda, including the health area. Derived from the Hipólito Unanue Agreement, the Andean Health Organization (ORAS - CONHU) was created out of the need for cooperation in the health area, adding to the efforts of Andean integration, in the economic, social, and political areas. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, member countries are committed to strengthening health systems, sharing health technologies and practices, as well as improving, preventing, and promoting responsible individual detachment and compliance with international protocols (ORAS - CONHU, 2020).

The pandemic is reaching the most remote regions where the rural and indigenous Andean populations are found. The numbers of those infected in these areas may go unnoticed statistically, but they have serious cultural consequences. The work of ORAS - CONHU must be a priority, strengthening work with vulnerable populations, especially with indigenous populations (NOTISALUD ANDINAS, 2020).

In order to cooperate in the fight against COVID-19, through the exchange of relevant and current information, there was an increase in ORAS-CONHU resources for monitoring cases linked to the pandemic. Within the scope of the regional organization, the Andean countries held eight technical meetings in the first five months of the pandemic, bringing together experts, technical staff, and members of the Andean Committees.

Among the fronts, ORAS-CONHU is working on are the reactivation of the Andean Epidemiological Surveillance Network, cooperation on border health surveillance between Andean countries, and coordination between the Andean National Institutes of Health. meets twice a week to analyze the situation of the pandemic globally and in the

Andean countries (NOTISALUD ANDINAS, 2020).

Regarding the development of the vaccine against COVID-19, the countries of the Andean region showed interest in cooperation in this matter, aiming to obtain access together, overcoming the challenges in its acquisition and in the equitable distribution among the regions. The organization also seeks mechanisms for the acquisition of vaccines in a regional partnership, aiming at safety, fair price, and quality, taking medication to more remote places in the Andean countries. In addition, a commission was determined to study the promotion of technological capacity in order to promote vaccines in one of the Andean countries, in search of protection for the population, especially those most vulnerable, in particular, Andean and Amazonian indigenous peoples (ORAS - CONHU, 2020).

Between April and September 2020, 33 reports were produced on COVID-19 sick, death, and cured data, between Andean countries, third countries, and regions of the world. In addition, documents on mental health support were produced. Advertising materials for prevention, care, and psychological support due to the pandemic by ORAS - CONHU were also developed and widely disseminated. In view of all the efforts and measures adopted by CAN and ORAS-CONHU, CAN Secretary-General Jorge H. Pedraza defends CAN as a symbol of the most active bloc in the Latin American region to combat the pandemic (PEDRAZA, 2020).

However, despite all the efforts of the Andean Community, the pandemic has spread dramatically among the countries of the bloc. In this context, efforts to combat the pandemic and the economic crisis must be multiple and comprehensive, reinforcing the importance of CAN in adopting broad and coordinated regional policies. In the context of integration, the pandemic requires new ways of dealing with a common enemy, COVID-19, promoting common regional policies that serve the interests of Andean societies. Nevertheless, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic can generate conservatism and retraction in trade liberalization and intra-bloc trade. The scenario requires regional cooperation and creative responses to deal with old and unprecedented challenges that reinforce the region's interdependence.

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