
COVID-19 in Latin America. Few vaccines, few people immunised, while deaths soar as variant infections increase

A third dose is on the agenda. But many have not yet received their first shot, even though they are physicians, elderly or vulnerable groups. A pandemic, which by definition is widespread worldwide, can hardly be tackled when there are significant differences between countries. Yet this is exactly what is happening, particularly in Latin America, the world's least homogenous region. *Confusion characterises the rollout of the vaccination campaign across the Continent.* While the variants are spiking infections and deaths in many countries, from Brazil to Mexico, some are facing the latest wave with only about 3% of the total population having been vaccinated, based on data released at the end of August. Such is the situation in Nicaragua. Guatemala is not faring much better, with just over 6% of the population immunised. Vaccination rates are just over 10% in Venezuela and Honduras, and only the rush of the last few days has brought Paraguay and Bolivia above 20%. The figures in Peru are just slightly higher. Mexico stands at around 25%; but Brazil, Argentina and Colombia are all below 30%. Uruguay and Chile are the only countries where over 50% of the population has received the second shot, both at around 70%. It must be noted that in many cases (starting with Chile), Chinese (notably Sinovac) and Russian vaccines, not approved in Europe, have been widely administered. **Global management shortcomings and widespread confusion.** The rollout of the vaccination campaign is being handled in a very chaotic and diverse manner, to put it mildly," **Eduardo Missoni** told SIR from Mexico City. Our interlocutor, a tropical medicine doctor, has years of experience working for international development and cooperation agencies, besides his academic activities. He served as Unicef liaison in Mexico City. At present, he works for the Health Department in the Mexican capital. He spent a long time in Guatemala and held the position of Secretary General of the World Organisation of the Scout Movement, and was the Director General for Development Cooperation at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said he has his own personal views on the vaccination programme: "I don't believe that the vaccine is the ultimate cure. This is definitely a complex issue, and whoever expresses a different opinion risks being labelled as an anti-vaxxer. The fact is that the vaccine rollout will be effective only if it is carried out worldwide within a very short time, which is impossible. At any rate, "vaccines are obviously essential for protecting vulnerable groups, but their management was marked by major shortcomings in terms of fair distribution and accumulation by the richest countries. The WHO has also called attention to this situation, cautioning that *before thinking of a third dose, priority should be given to the poorest countries. Next, as known, comes the question of COVID-19 vaccine patent waiver.* If we look at Latin America specifically, the most obvious aspect is widespread confusion. Nine vaccines are currently administered across the continent, including Cuba's national vaccine. The criteria for obtaining and administering the vaccines vary greatly, with delays in the delivery of doses and the annulment of previous agreements. The Covax programme was a failure. Two hundred million doses were expected to arrive, but only 35 million have been delivered." Failures are frequently caused by political factors, "by incompetent leaders. *Of course, one would expect a pandemic to be tackled with multilateral instruments, which is not being done. Geopolitical reasons prevail.* Think of China, which conquered many South American markets with its vaccines, available in 15 Latin American countries and not authorised in Europe, to obtain a Green Pass, for example. This means that people in the upper middle class cannot travel to Europe. Then we have the case of Venezuela, which adhered to the Covax programme, but vaccines are not available because a Swiss bank has prevented the government from paying the cost." **Vaccines are virtually non-existent in Guatemala and Nicaragua.** Amidst the countries with low vaccination rates, Guatemala is the most striking case with only 6% of the population having received the second shot of the vaccine and less than 20% the first. Fr **Giampiero De Nardi**, a Salesian missionary serving in San Benito, in the Northern Department of Petén, who was recently infected himself despite having already received the first dose, said: "It is a

very unfortunate situation, which could be defined comical were it not tragic. And the President of the Republic is a doctor..." *In fact, the only vaccines available are those which were donated – inter alia, by Israel, the USA and Russia. The government made known that they have been purchased but there has been a delay in delivery. Information is hard to obtain.* For sure, Guatemala has received considerable funding in humanitarian aid, specifically for the Covid emergency and for the purchase of vaccines. So we should be asking where that money went." The grave delay in the vaccination programme is compounded by a critical social context and a new spike in COVID-19 infections. "The whole country is protesting," the missionary explains, "with massive strikes and people calling for the resignation of President Alejandro Giammattei. *Deaths have soared with the arrival of the Delta variant, and there is a risk of a new outbreak of the pandemic. It should be noted that many people don't want to be vaccinated.* The Department of Petén has been hit especially hard. San Benito has consistently been in the red zone since the colour-coded system was introduced, although restrictions are now milder than they were before. Worse still is the situation in Nicaragua, where Daniel Ortega's regime deliberately failed to disclose national data on the pandemic since the beginning, and only updates the figures, steadily declining, every three weeks. *Doctors who attempted to tell the truth were threatened, some even arrested, and prevented from practising their profession.* Those unwilling to compromise were forced to leave the country, like **Leonel Arguello**, epidemiologist at the Nicasalud organisation. "It must be said", he explains from his country of exile, "that Nicaragua's healthcare system has the full capacity to roll out a vaccination campaign, with a minimum daily vaccination rate of 155,000 injections. But in this case, vaccines are administered on a voluntary basis, and thus the government is exempted from all responsibilities. The saddest thing is that doctors and teachers are not being vaccinated, and no awareness and education campaigns are being carried out whatsoever. Meanwhile, the Delta variant is causing a surge in cases: *"Government reports one death per week, whereas our monitoring centre records about 80 a day. But reliable data is hard to obtain, and doctors cannot talk about COVID-19, as they risk suspension or revocation of their medical license."* *journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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