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Commentary

The foreseen loss of the battle against COVID-19 in South America: A foretold tragedy

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In South America, strained and underfunded health systems, deep social inequalities and increasing poverty, slow vaccination rates and increased spread of new variants are leading to a surge of COVID-19 related deaths [1]. South America has only 5% of the world's population, but currently accounts for almost a quarter of all COVID-19 deaths. The steep rise of highly contagious SARS-CoV-2 covariants, "COVID-19 fatigue", crowded neighborhoods, suboptimal vaccine coverage and relaxed social distancing restrictions have sparked new waves of SARS-CoV-2 in most South American countries [2].

Praised as an early success story, Paraguay recorded the world's highest daily proportion of COVID-19 deaths in late June 2021 –18.09 deaths per million, compared with 2.71 in India. Colombia reached 100,000 confirmed deaths just as the government lifted some of its last restrictions [3]. Massive protests against rising economic inequality have been organized, while the government allowed nightclubs, bars and cinemas to re-open for the first time in more than a year. Similar to most South American countries, vaccination rollout in Colombia was slow with only 20% of the population having received the first dose [4].

In late June 2021 Brazil exceeded 500,000 COVID-19 deaths - the second-highest in the world. In mid July the country was already registering over 540,000 deaths. The scenario could worsen amid slow vaccination and the start of winter in the Southern Hemisphere. In June 2021 the country reported 70,000 cases and averaged 2000

deaths daily [5]. The virus continues to spread as President Jair Bolsonaro refuses to recommend social distancing and facemasks, and only 12% of adults are fully vaccinated. The country is home to 2.7% of the world's population, but by 30 June 2021 accounted for roughly 13 percent of all recorded fatalities. Despite the worrying current scenario, Brazilian governors and mayors have relaxed restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus. In many cities, restaurants, pubs and shops have reopened whereas wearing face masks and following social distancing have been ignored by many people. Brazil once vaccinated 10 million people for polio in a day. But erratic planning, a president who is leading a "Coronavirus-denial" movement, and a growing anti-vaccine movement have set the country up for failure as it faces wave after wave of coronavirus infections [6].

The tragic scenario in South America highlights deep global inequalities in the access to COVID-19 vaccines. In most countries from the Northern Hemisphere COVID-19 is receding due to vaccine coverage increase, and countries are steadily reopening. However, in South America only one person in 10 have been fully vaccinated. According to the WHO, more than 85% of COVID-19 shots administered worldwide were in high-income countries, while only 0.3% of doses were administered in low-income countries. Worldwide, on average 1 in 4 people from high-income countries have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to just 1 in more than 500 persons in low-income countries [7].

The geographical inequalities in the global distribution of vaccines is one of the key factors influencing the impact of COVID-19 in South America. Until June 30, 2021, one million people have died across the 12 countries in the region: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Uruguay. Colombia and Argentina, countries that together have 95 million inhabitants, have three times as many COVID-related deaths each day than all the African region - home for over 1.3 billion persons [8]. Argentina has just crossed the 100,000 deaths mark while having vaccinated 45% of the population with at least one dose and 11% with two doses. Effective quarantine policies have proved impossible to enforce in a region where between 30% and 60% of workers

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Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people, Jul 14, 2021

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death means that the number of confirmed deaths may not be an accurate count of the true number of deaths from COVID-19.

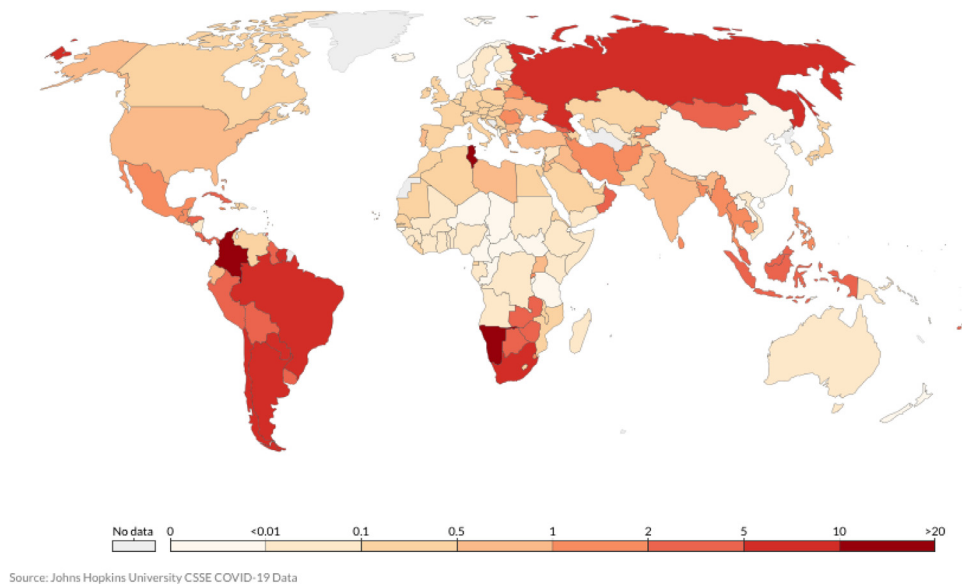


Fig. 1. Daily new confirmed cases (per million people, July 14 2021.). Sourced from John Hopkins University, CSSE COVID-19 Data.

are employed in the informal sector. Besides the alarming numbers of deaths associated with COVID-19, the impact of the pandemic in the region are likely to reverberate for the next forthcoming years. COVID-19 enlarged the social inequalities and moved millions back into deep poverty, increasing the number of families struggling with homelessness and severe food insecurity throughout the region [9].

A worse scenario is still expected across most countries in South America, where hospitals have collapsed, ICU occupancy rates are above 90% and vaccine coverage remains insufficient. Decades of underinvestment in public healthcare, entrenched poverty, political turmoil and corruption is costing lives, hundreds of thousands of lives in the region [6–8]. South America is now an ideal breeding ground for new variants that are likely to move on to the rest of the world. It is urgent to invest in global roll-out of vaccines to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic locally and globally [10].

Fig. 1.

Contributors

MM conceived, drafted the manuscript and coordinated subsequent edits and revisions. MVV, CMFPS, ABS and SAS participated in drafting the manuscript and its finalization. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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