Impact of COVID-19 on Andean America

Analysis and recommendations for the European Union

December 2020

solidar

Liga española de la educación
De Utilidad Pública

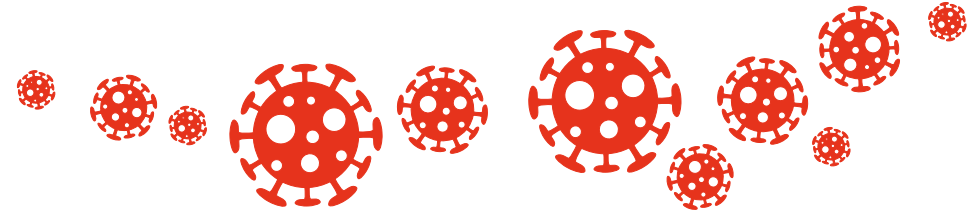PAZ | Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz
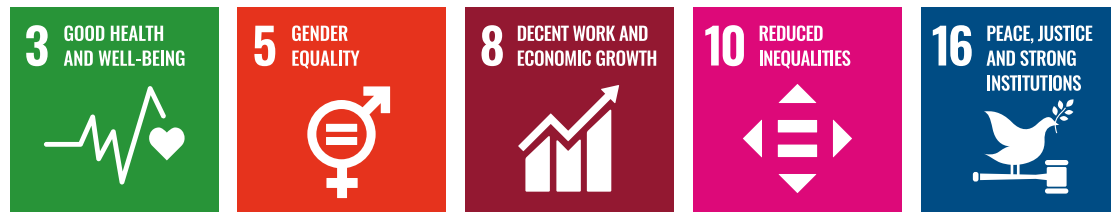
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1. INTRODUCTION

SOLIDAR is a network composed of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that works to advance economic and social rights within and outside of Europe. On an international level, SOLIDAR is engaged in the process of creating the SOLIDAR network through the Organising International SOLIDARity (OIS) program, which aims to strengthen collaboration among our members and their capacities for a more fruitful and impactful effect. The OIS program has a strong geographical focus on Andean America, specifically on a national level our priority countries are Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

Part of the objective of the OIS program is to monitor the progress of economic and social rights in Andean America. The current situation in terms of the spread of COVID-19 in Andean America has increased CSO's concerns about the militarisation of the law enforcement agencies, the repression of freedoms, the recession faced by the countries of the region as a result of an outdated economic model, the regression of rights, as well as the increase in inequality, insecurity, poverty and corruption as an indication of the lack of adequate governance. With the SOLIDAR Network we wish to conduct an initial analysis of how the current health crisis has worsened the economic and social situation in the Andean region, while also putting at risk the achievement of these countries' development objectives and of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In this context, the SOLIDAR Network in Andean America calls on their governments, the international community and the EU to redouble their efforts in ensuring the attainment of the SDGs, paying special regards to:

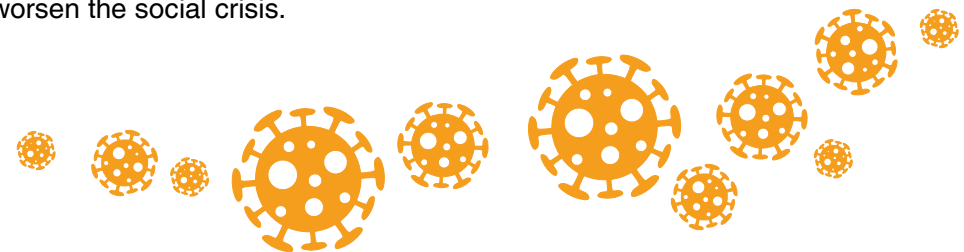| 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING | 5 GENDER EQUALITY | 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES | 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS |

2. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Over the past 20 years, the Andean region has experienced rapid economic growth and reduced its high rates of poverty.

In most cases, the growth of the Andean economies is based on systems of concentration of land and production resources owned by a small minority and promotes unequal access to the benefits of development, leaving out large population groups (indigenous people, people of African descent, rural communities, women, etc.). Furthermore, an extractivism model of exploitation of natural resources takes precedence over the human rights of the population. This situation makes economic growth in recent years highly vulnerable to external factors, such as a fall in commodity prices or an change in international financial conditions, including the foreseeable effects of climate change.
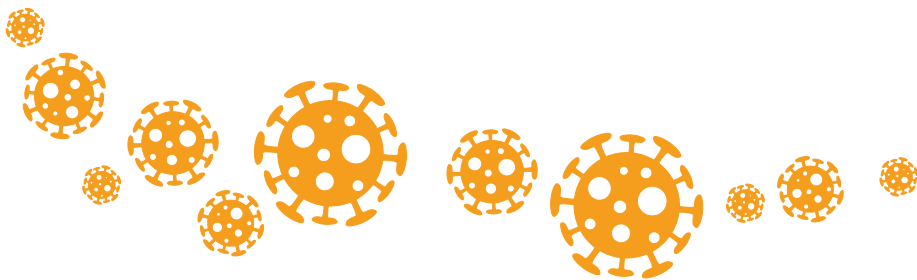
The level of income per capita is the main criterion used to allocate cooperative financial resources for development, regardless of the high levels of inequality in developing countries. This makes most Andean countries ineligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA). As a result, there has been a decline in international cooperation in middle-income countries, despite the fact that they continue to face major challenges in terms of poverty, inequality, violence, social inclusion, and production, institutional and financial abilities. This has also led to a significant increase in external debt to be able to have internal liquidity, subjecting them to the conditions of international organisations for economic and social structural reforms, which worsen the social crisis.

Unofficial labour remains very high. There is still a "repressed" economic model with low productivity growth and little or no government investment in the field (technification, processing, marketing), which makes it less competitive against imported agricultural products. Their economies remain fragile faced with unequal economic openness, lack of research and diversification. On an international level, trade treaties reinforce and even promote this inequality, putting domestic production at a clear disadvantage, favouring imports and not recognising the human rights violations that occur in the different countries of the region.

Among the most vulnerable population groups are people of African descent and indigenous communities that are particularly affected by the exploitation of natural resources in their territories, as well as women and girls, who face greater inequality and violence, and the migrant population.

On a political level, government institutions in the region have been losing legitimacy in recent years due to increased corruption, narco-politics and institutional co-option, as well as less opportunity for dialogue and democratic negotiation.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION IN THE REGION FOLLOWING COVID 19

The COVID 19 health crisis has highlighted this wide range of structural gaps, poverty and inequality that hinder the development of countries and limit and hinder inclusive growth. In particular, in some countries there has been an increase in control and violence by state law enforcement agencies in response to the pandemic, while at the same time the social fabric and organised civil society have been losing strength due to quarantine measures and fear of the disease.

In all countries, spaces for democratic and social mobilisation have been reduced due to states of emergency and unilateral action by governments, which has had severe consequences on labour rights and access to essential services, such as healthcare and education. In terms of protecting citizens, the data have also illustrated a worsening situation and the confinement increased the risk for certain population groups: Femicides and complaints of violence against women, children or dependents increased, as did racism and xenophobia against migrants.

The political situation in Colombia deserves a special mention. Despite signing the Peace Process, it is one of the most dangerous countries for human rights defenders in Latin America. According

to the latest report from the Institute for Peace and Development Studies[1], since the Peace Process was signed in 2016, 971 leaders and human rights defenders have been killed in Colombia, including 95 between 6th March and 15th July. As a result of this violence, practicing confinement is not new, and already in 2019 some 27,600 people were in confinement, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, because of the presence of armed groups that limit mobility between communities and between neighbourhoods.

This situation has intensified in the context of the health crisis. Mainly in rural areas, the guerrilla groups and/or gangs associated with drug trafficking, sons of the paramilitary organisations, have reinforced the measures of social and territorial control. Armed groups have taken advantage of the confinement to increase their position and control in the territories in which they are present, by the use of repressive and violent measures ranging from threats to fear-based control to murder. In these areas, pamphlets are circulating forcing people to stay in their homes or risk being killed. Restrictions on mobility increase vulnerability in at-risk populations, as their routines and location become entirely predictable. Therefore, the murder of social leaders increases at an alarming rate.

An increase in the forced recruitment of young people by armed groups has also been identified, which may continue to grow if the context does not offer socio-economic alternatives to this population group. On the other hand, the National Institute of Legal Medicine of Colombia warns that, in 2019, at least one woman was sexually assaulted every two days by an individual involved in socio-political violence.

Obviously, the situation described above has serious consequences for the exercise of social leadership in the country, further increasing the danger faced by human rights defenders, especially in rural communities, indigenous territories and collective territories of communities of African descent, as it means that people under threat are left without international protection and social surveillance.

Author: Eduardo Silva, Pixabay.com

1 INDEPAZ 2020 Special Report: http://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/3.-Informe-Especial-Asesinato-lideres-sociales-Nov2016-Jul2020-Indepaz-2.pdf

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

3.1 Decent work and social protection

The rapid spread of COVID-19 in Andean America has been largely due to a lack of governance to prevent and adequately control contamination, as well a lack of capacity in health systems that were already on the verge of collapse before the pandemic. The fragile social protection systems have not been sufficient to take care of infected individuals and dependent individuals.

The urgent need to reactivate economies in the face of unsustainable compulsory quarantines has led to de-confinement before the peak of the curve, with no guarantee of adequate biosecurity protocols for workers, including in the health sector. Many companies have had to close and there have been massive layoffs, mainly in sectors such as commerce, hotels, restaurants, tourism and entertainment - sectors that generate most of the jobs in the region.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)[2]estimates that GDP will fall by 5.3%, unemployment will hit 38 million people and more than 2 million companies will close. The economic downturn will add 12 million people to the unemployed section of the population (37.7m) and will drive an additional 28.7 million people into poverty (215m) and 15.9 million people into extreme poverty (87m). This situation will require the state to play a central role, with new policies for protecting citizens and injecting resources to activate public investment and decent official employment, as well as for agreements and regulating the financial system to improve access to financing by companies and entrepreneurs. Similarly, it is important to consider these data within a framework of gender inequality, because the economic impacts can generate even more vulnerability for women, who are mostly located in the unofficial sector of the economy or in unpaid work, in the household or in sectors of the economy that will be affected.

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2 https://www.aa.com.tr/es/econom%C3%ADa/cepal-covid-19-producir%C3%A1-la-peor-contrac-ci%C3%B3n-econ%C3%B3mica-en-la-historia-de-latinoam%C3%A9rica-/1813447

On the other hand, low productivity and high levels of unofficial work, which were already two of the main problems characterising the Andean region's labour markets, are worsened by the recession and economic crisis, increasing the possibilities of further undermining the already damaged workers' rights in the face of rising unemployment and precarious employment. From the reduction of working hours, the suspension of work contracts without payment and the dismissal of staff, even those who are ill, to unilateral decrees and labour reforms that harm workers and favour privatisation and reforms relating to social protection. In general, governments have taken unilateral action without opening up a dialogue with trade unions. In Colombia, there are also measures in place to prevent unions from protecting workers, by eliminating labour guarantees won in collective negotiation agreements and encouragement from the same government that companies negotiate with workers without the participation of unions. There are unconstitutional measures in terms of the progression and guarantee of rights.
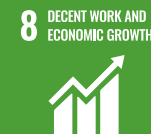
Although social assistance programs have been implemented in several countries during their confinements, they have often been late, insufficient, overly targeted and diminished due to corruption. Official workers have seen their incomes reduced and the informal sector has suffered from hunger and despair as they have been unable to return to their daily work.

Online work and education is posing another challenge for the population, which lacks the material resources - such as computers or internet connections - as well as the knowledge to carry out their work and schooling, which increases the social divide. The workload generated by working from home without an adequate regulatory framework, and in many cases balanced with caring for children or dependents, increased dramatically, generating high psychosocial risks, particularly for women. Without forgetting that it is women who are mostly located in the unofficial sector of the economy or in unpaid work, in the household or in sectors of the economy that will be affected.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The SOLIDAR Network calls on the European Union to:

- Ensure universal, free and high-quality access to health systems, including psychological and psychosocial care. This refers to autonomous and territorialised health management (medical care, disease prevention and health promotion).

- Monitor and protect against the privatisation of the health sector. Prevent the privatisation of public health services under insurance schemes, outsourcing and/or privatisation of public systems and the creation of an industrial medical complex.

- Guarantee decent official employment, as well as promote agreements and regulation of the financial system to improve access to funding for small and medium enterprises and entrepreneurs with the aim of protecting rural economies and local production with consistent public policies.

- Promote progressive fiscal policies to sustain a social protection system without economic pressure on families with a lower income. This includes encouraging the creation of a Minimum Income for all economically vulnerable citizens to guarantee their basic needs.

- Ensure the regular and continuous supply of all personal protective equipment to health workers to protect their lives, those of their families and their communities, and above all ensure job stability and decent working conditions for health workers.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING   **8** DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Author: Herbert Brant, Pixabay.com
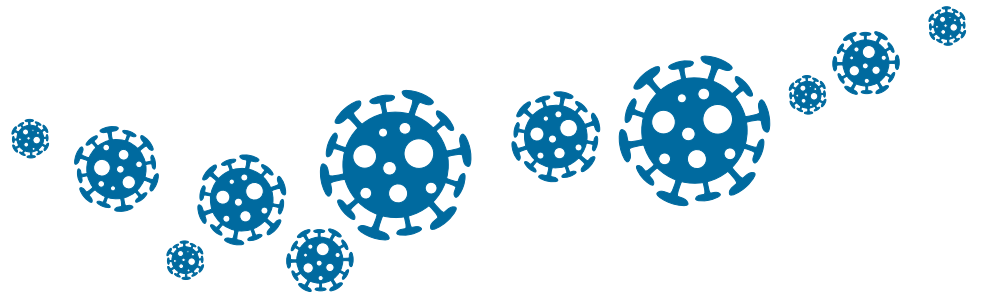
3.2 Democracy and Governability

The state of alert and the control of the population's mobility have been in favour of the exhaustive and violent control of the population. The use of weapons and state violence to control the movement of people, and in particular of trade union and social leaders, as well as to mitigate any kind of social protest, is increasing. This is having direct consequences in the democratic role of trade unions and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which in addition to the cutback in their financial resources, are suffering from more control of their political activity.

In view of the lack of social dialogue and the inefficiency of measures to control the pandemic, civil society has put forward initiatives to mitigate the psychosocial, economic and political consequences of the pandemic and of the government measures taken. Co-responsibility and solidarity are the bases of these important times. These are aspects that need to be strengthened and looked into more deeply, not only when facing the most critical moments of the pandemic, but also with regard to the medium-term effects. During the pandemic, many community initiatives for care and nutrition emerged and were consolidated, which have managed to establish different structures for production and consumption, promoting the sovereignty of the communities. These initiatives, instead of receiving government support, have been confronted with measures that encourage dependence on imported seeds, food and medical supplies.

The SOLIDAR Network calls on the European Union to:

- Support Civil Society Organisations on a financial level to guarantee their survival, as well as at the political level to encourage them to participate in decision-making and in terms of economic and social rights in the region.

- Support and promote public investment in digitalisation with the aim of promoting citizen participation in democratic processes, as well as access to quality universal public education.

- Promote the development of a peaceful culture with citizen participation through educational programmes, as well as to open up new opportunities for dialogue. In this regard, special consideration should be given to the participation of women and other groups that have historically been discriminated against in decision-making processes on local, regional and national levels.

- Recognise and protect the rights of native peoples, as well as to highlight and denounce the violence exercised by the states towards the defenders of human and territorial rights.

- Supporting sustainable environmental initiatives that guarantee the rights of indigenous people, as well as populations that have historically been made vulnerable.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

3.3. Vulnerable population

In a region marked by inequality, the arrival of COVID-19 has further highlighted the lack of equity in access to healthcare and basic services. On the one hand, it shows that there are enormous territorial inequalities in Andean America, where capital cities and some regions have more and better resources and infrastructure to contain the pandemic and provide care for the sick, while rural areas do not have equipment or materials to meet the basic needs of the population during the health crisis. In Colombia and Peru, the COVID-19 had a forceful impact on ethnic and rural territories of the Amazon, where it claimed a large part of its victims. In large cities, the pandemic is not adequately controlled in popularised neighbourhoods and areas where there is greater population density and little or no possibility of working from home or working with health measures.

The pandemic has also brutally proven that the home is not a safe place for millions of women and girls. Violence against women, which already showed alarmingly high figures in the region, has

only been exacerbated when women and girls have been forced to live with their aggressors without access to care and protection services. In Peru, according to the Crime Observatory of the Public Prosecutor's Office, 60% of femicides occur in the home, so compulsory confinement has dramatically increased the risk for women. After the first 8 weeks of confinement, 12 femicides and 226 rapes were recorded, of which 132 were minors[3]. The 226 rapes during the quarantine are a worrying increase compared to the same period last year. In total, more than 2600 cases of domestic, family or sexist violence were addressed by the Aurora program between 16th March and 5th May through its various services for assistance and prevention. What has been happening in Peru has been replicated in several countries in the region. The confinement measures used against the coronavirus highlighted that the domestic environment is precisely where much of the violence against women occurs, most often within the family environment itself.

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3 The AURORA National Programme for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP)

Sexual violence in particular does not stop because the perpetrator is often very close to the family or even part of it. In Colombia, UN Women reports that 77% of reported sexual violence occurs in the home and usually the aggressor is someone close to the victim. We are also concerned that the health crisis is leading to cutting back on staff, human resources, equipment and technological resources due to relocation to medical areas directly related to the pandemic; the closure of Sexual and Reproductive Health clinics; and the shortage of contraceptive methods and specific medicines related to the reproductive health of women and girls. There is also concern about the temporary suspension of prenatal care programmes and educational programmes for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

The under-recording of data on gender-based violence is also a cause for concern, whereby official figures do not represent the reality, particularly now that the state of emergency has made it difficult for female victims of violence to access protection systems. The SISMA Mujer organisation in Colombia denounces greater difficulties for women to remove themselves from cases of violence, the loss of support networks due to confinement, uncertainty and the lack of own income or employment, which increases vulnerability and makes it difficult to break the cycles of violence. They also point out difficulties in implementing measures to evict aggressors, and women have not been provided with alternatives to live a life free of violence, as is their right.

The pandemic has also highlighted, in an unprecedented way, the importance of caregivers and the low visibility that they have. The unjust social organisation of care is made evident since it is women who, whether paid or unpaid, do most of these tasks. Firstly, UN Women denounces that women are in the front line of response and risk of this global health emergency as social, health and volunteer professionals and caregivers. Additionally, they are the ones who do more than three-quarters of the unpaid care work. And in times

5 GENDER EQUALITY

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

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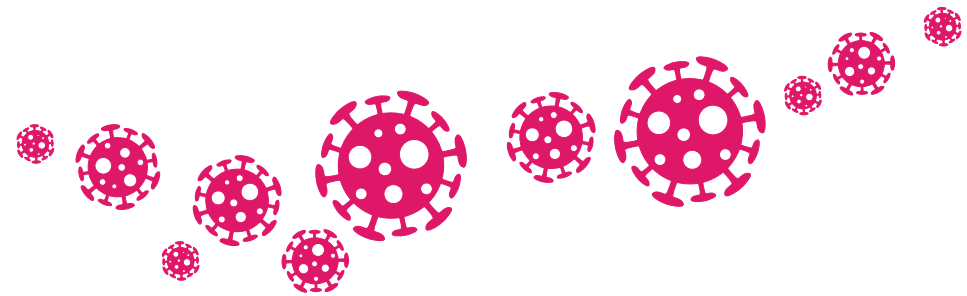
of crisis all this work, invisible but essential, is magnified due to the saturation of health systems, the closure of schools and the lack of access to social services. Without forgetting that among the people who have lost their jobs, the majority are women.

The migrant and refugee population in the region, who were already struggling to survive even before the pandemic, face an even more complicated situation than the rest of the population because they lack certain citizenship rights. The pandemic has destroyed their sources of income to cover their basic needs and, without social support networks, they are at greater risk than the general population of being evicted from their homes, stigmatisation, homelessness and exposure to infection. In addition, the migrant population is often left out of the social protection assistance provided by states. In the Andean region, the migrant and refugee population comes mainly from Venezuela. Without the relevant documentation they have no access to the health system. For this group, which survives from doing unofficial work, it is unthinkable to comply with the rules of confinement without social measures to help with the most basic needs.
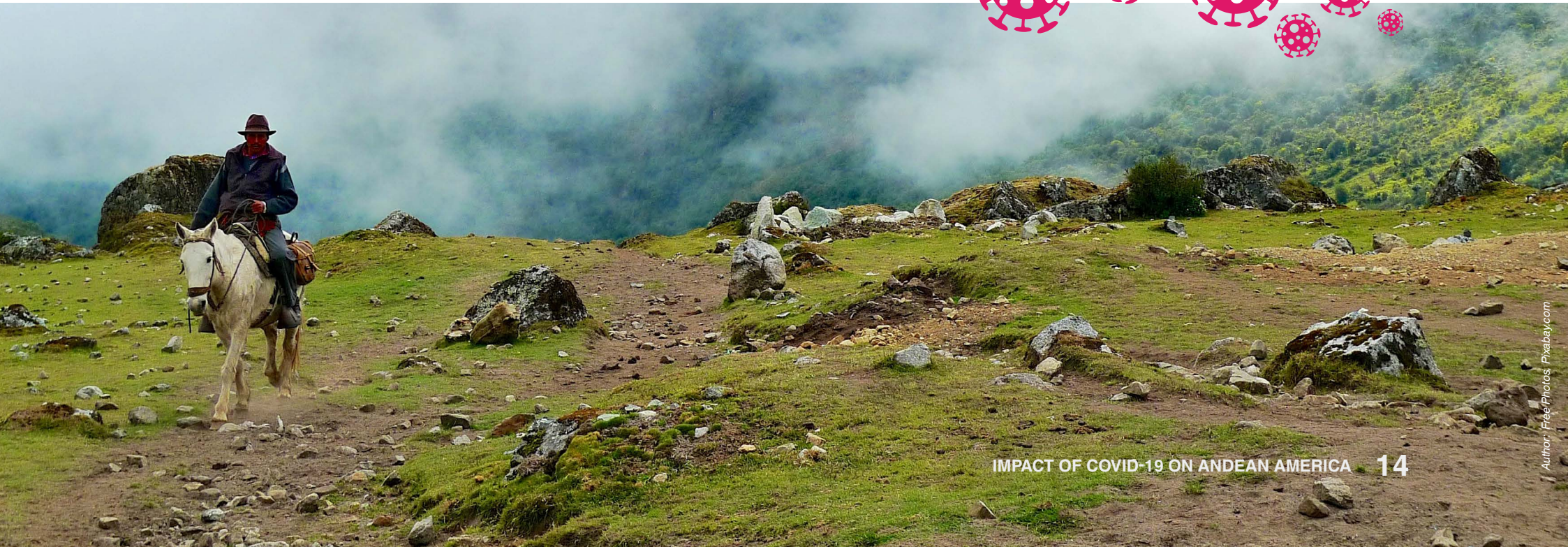
5 GENDER EQUALITY

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

The SOLIDAR Network calls on the EU to:

- Support the availability and continuity of sexual and reproductive health services to women and girls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Highlight and denounce cases of feminicide, violence and rape of women and children in the region to the States, laying down that the States should adopt protection and security measures in order to have any economic or political agreement between the EU and the countries of the region.

- Implement protection and prevention measures against human trafficking networks, increasing efforts to identify those responsible for such networks and ensure they are brought before the law.

5 GENDER EQUALITY

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

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ORGANISING INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

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CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS:

Liga Española de la Educación y la Cultura Popular (LEECP)
Fundación Forjando Futuros (FFF)
Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (ACPP)
Associazone Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (ARCI)
Fonds voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (FOS)
Instituto Sindical de Cooperación al Desarrollo (ISCOD)
Movimiento por la Paz (MPDL)
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