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Impact of COVID-19 on Central America

Analysis and recommendations
for the European Union

Based on SOLIDAR Network
consultations carried out in April 2020

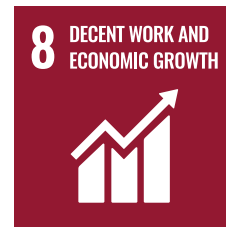


INTRODUCTION

SOLIDAR is a network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that are working to improve economic and social rights inside and outside of Europe. On an international level, SOLIDAR is immersed in the process to create the SOLIDAR Network through the **Organising International SOLIDARity** (OIS) programme, the purpose of which is to strengthen the collaboration between our members and their capacities for greater, more fruitful impact. The OIS programme is strongly focussed on Central America. Specifically, on a national level, our priority countries are Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

One goal of the OIS programme is to monitor the progress of economic and social rights in Central America. The current situation with respect to the spread of COVID-19 in Central America has led to greater uncertainty and alarm regarding the impact of the pandemic on the region, which is one of the most polarised in the world. Through the SOLIDAR Network, we have carried out an initial analysis of the measures that are currently being implemented to combat COVID-19 and how these are contributing to the dilapidation of an already fragile social structure, while also putting at risk the achievement of these countries' development objectives and of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

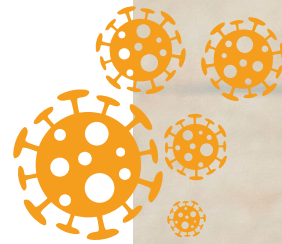
In this context, the SOLIDAR Network in Central America calls on their governments, the international community and the EU to redouble their efforts in ensuring the attainment of the SDGs, paying special regards to:



CONTEXT

Central America has been experiencing a backslide of economic and social rights in recent years. Those who defend human rights are persecuted and their work criminalised, and the governments of the region have prioritised the neoliberal vision of the market and the economy. This vision favours the concentration of wealth and gains in large corporations and transnational companies, simultaneous to heavy exploitation of workers with no fair mechanism for redistribution or investment in basic services such as healthcare and education. This generates profoundly unjust, patriarchal and racist states, based on neoliberal market models, destroying the institutional, community and cultural structures for common welfare and leaving the majority of people without access to dignified living.

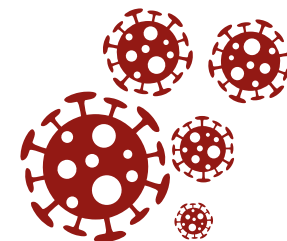
The result is a very polarised society where resources are concentrated in a small percentage of the population or in the takings of exploitative foreign companies. This contributes to the high levels of inequality in Central America, with high rates of violence, impunity and forced migration. Within this situation, women always constitute one of the most vulnerable groups due to the high level of violence and femicide. At the same time, there are serious cases of chronic and acute malnutrition, in addition to violence and teenage pregnancy.





WORK OF THE SOLIDAR NETWORK IN THE REGION

In general, the arrival of COVID-19 in Central America has worsened the situation of economic and social rights, which had already been weakening as a result of the lack of rule of law. This has led to a reduction in social spaces, freedom of association and expression in general and a backslide in human rights. The organisations that make up the SOLIDAR Network present in Central America explain the effects of the measures taken by the governments of the region and analyse their impact in relation to the network's three priority areas: a favourable space and freedom of association for the defence of human, economic and social rights; violated labour rights and access to basic services.



A favourable space for CSOs and Human Rights Defenders

The current measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 are being used by some Central American governments to expand and normalise policies of social control, limit civil spaces and increase repression and persecution. Whilst some governments have imposed a strict curfew, forcing workers to face repression when they have to leave to go to work; other governments have opted to conceal the reality of the crisis, even persecuting and silencing the independent press, thus violating the right and access to information. The state of emergency and confinement is also giving rise to arbitrary detentions and abuse of power on the part of the public security authorities, particularly the police and army, during the enforcement of curfews and states of exception.

Likewise, the states are creating and fuelling arguments that criminalise the actions of Civil Society Organisations. For example, the actions of service provider organisations are being compared to those of organisations dedicated to the defence of human rights. In this respect, unlike organisations that currently distribute medical equipment, food or any other type of material, rights defenders are being portrayed as not supporting the crisis created by COVID-19 in a useful or immediate manner.

This scenario of repression is making the defence of human rights impossible and various affected sectors of society are facing greater levels of violence, specifically:

- **Violence against women and girls:** due to the confinement, female abuse victims are being forced to cohabit with their abusers. Bearing in mind that the only protection these women

can find comes from Civil Society Organisations, whose work is currently paralysed and criminalised, these women are defenceless. Given the high rates of femicide in the region, the consequences of the lack of protective measures for these women are concerning. The possible increase in murders of transsexuals is also of concern, in addition to possible child pregnancies.

- **Migrant population:** migrants are being stigmatised, whilst deportation without applying the minimum healthcare standards continues. Care in migrant centres is insufficient and the living conditions are degrading. There is a lack of aid for migrants who find themselves at borders and the consequences of the crisis will be harsher for workers with no social security. Additionally, many families who depend on the migrant work of neighbouring countries (e.g. the US) will not have sufficient resources to guarantee food.





Dignified Work and Labour Rights Violations

The economy of Central America, which was already characterised for being weak and unequal, is becoming even more precarious. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), the already slow economic growth of the last 7 years in the region, characterised by high rates of poverty, extreme poverty and inequality, will be worsened as a result of COVID-19, with a significant effect on women. The calculations of this organisation point to poverty in the region potentially reaching 3.5 percentage points and affecting 107 million women. This is particularly concerning for workers in the informal sector, whose survival depends on their income and who now cannot work.

The impact of COVID-19 will be higher on this region due to the high rates of informal work, making workers without access to employment protection measures more vulnerable. In Central America, workers in free trade zones are falling victim to the violation of labour rights, such as unjustified mass lay-offs, the suspension of

work without salary, forced holiday, forced “voluntary redundancy”, unjustified discounts, infractions of health and safety conditions, a lack or scarce provision of biosafety material, a lack of sanitisation of tools and work areas, etc.

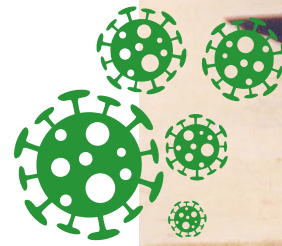
In the case of the assembly line industry, we need to put an end to the avoidance of responsibility and the violation of workers’ rights on the part of companies of the region’s free trade zones. Far from being an excuse to ignore the basic pillars of decent work, COVID-19 should be an opportunity, as expressed by the Network of Central America and the Caribbean (REDCAM), to guarantee the sustainability of employment, improve social security, prevent dismissals and protect workers in a situation of vulnerability.

The difference compared to other more developed economies is that these populations do not have the capacity to survive without their normal income, added to indebtedness, which will make the situation drastic. As pointed out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), all this demonstrates that the crisis caused by COVID-19 is not just a healthcare crisis; it is also a social and economic crisis the resolution of which requires a global and local effort involving international organisms, governments, communities, families and companies.

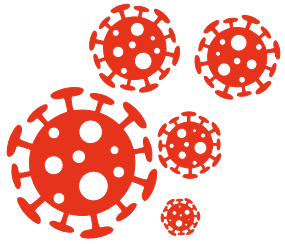
Access to basic services

The inequality throughout Central America also applies to access to basic services. Whilst some segments of the population have basic services and goods guaranteed, the vast majority of the population have no access to essential services like healthcare. No aspect of drinking water and waste water disposal services is guaranteed, which is incompatible with the sanitary measures required to avoid the spread of COVID-19. This situation puts already vulnerable groups, like working women, at risk, as the majority work within the informal employment market and therefore have no healthcare. This, together with the exposure of women to COVID-19 given their traditional role as caregivers, implies a severe health risk for at least half the population. Likewise, homeless people are one of the most affected groups during this healthcare crisis, as they have no access to healthcare services or drinking water.

In some states, the public healthcare institute is primarily responsible for dealing with patients with symptoms of COVID-19. However, public hospitals find themselves with no resources and in a precarious situation. The so-called provisional hospitals, where insured workers go and which have more resources, are not dealing with coronavirus patients. This measure not only cancels out the right to be assisted by a more capable healthcare service but also contributes to collapsing the country's weak healthcare system.



- 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
- 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
- 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



RECOMMENDATIONS

The SOLIDAR Network calls upon the European Union, as well as other relevant international players to:

- I. Offer humanitarian aid to Central American countries. We are also calling for political dialogue to pressure the region's governments to guarantee the economic and social rights of the whole population.
- II. Promote the implementation of the Association Agreements in line with the Sustainable Development chapter. The impact of these agreements must reinforce human and labour rights, in addition to protecting the living conditions of rural and indigenous communities.
- III. Redefine the agenda for bilateral cooperation with Central American countries to guarantee access to healthcare and education, in addition to protecting and promoting dignified work and a favourable space for CSOs.



CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS

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SOLIDAR is a European network of 60 NGOs working to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the concerns of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the policy sectors social affairs, international cooperation and lifelong learning. For more info www.solidar.org

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Organising International Solidarity (OIS)

A presentation of the OIS programme can be found at the following link:

<https://prezi.com/view/9zuxuivoqUSD3w1pGJSz/>