Introduction

The world is currently experiencing the most serious pandemic in the last hundred years. On December 31, 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of the occurrence of cases of unknown pneumonia in the city of Wuhan. A month later, on January 30, 2020, WHO classified the epidemic caused by a new coronavirus as an International Public Health Emergency, calling Covid-19 the new disease. As of April 2020, there were already over one million confirmed cases worldwide, with tens of thousands of deaths.¹

If the global reaction to Covid-19 was initially insufficient and late,² the fight against the pandemic is now accelerating, and the urgency of a global response is clear. Countries need to adopt, in a coordinated manner, a series of measures for infection prevention, monitoring and testing, transparent communication, patient care and social support.

In this context, the ALLIANCE OF PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATIONS OF THE AMERICAS (APHAA), a regional body of the World Federation of Public Health Associations, urges government authorities, private companies and civil society in all countries of the Region to engage firmly and cooperatively to combat the pandemic.

In this call to action, AASPA emphasizes that the effectiveness of facing Covid-19 requires the development of strategies informed by the best scientific evidence, the expansion of health care and the strengthening of ties of solidarity between peoples.
The situation of the pandemic in the Americas until April 3, 2020

Epidemiology and preventive measures
According to PAHO / WHO data, by April 3, 2020, across the Region, 279,543 cases, 6,802 deaths and 9,401 cures had been confirmed, with a 13% relative increase in the number of confirmed cases since the beginning of the pandemic. The data by sub-region are shown in table 1, highlighting that 91.2% of the cases were registered in North America.

Table 1 - Covid-19 confirmed cases, by sub-regions of the Americas, April 3, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-region</th>
<th>Confirmed cases</th>
<th>Confirmed deaths</th>
<th>Recovery</th>
<th>Relative increase of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>254,945</td>
<td>6,056</td>
<td>8,604</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>2,197</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>19,387</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>3,014</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>279,543</td>
<td>6,802</td>
<td>9,401</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In order to better understand the situation, however, identifying the trend of the number of cases is more useful than recording the absolute number of cases, despite the uncertainty inherent in the projections.

A study carried out by researchers at the British Imperial College estimated that Covid-19 would infect more than 80% of the population in the Americas, if no containment measures were taken, and more than 50%, if social distancing was adopted. The number of deaths, in turn, would exceed four in every 1,000 inhabitants of Latin America and the Caribbean and would reach 8 / 1,000 in North America, if no measures were adopted. With the adoption of social distance, the number of deaths would be over 2 / 1,000 in Latin America and the Caribbean and about 4 / 1,000 in North America.

The elderly and individuals with pre-existing medical conditions should be a priority as they have the highest death rates. One projection, analyzing deaths by age group, estimated the number of deaths of people over 70 in the Americas at more than 800 thousand, if the infection reaches 10% of the population and the lethality rate recorded in China is repeated in the American continent.
Combating the COVID-19 in the Americas is of great concern as it can evolve into a serious disaster in terms of both health and economic outcomes unless it is addressed aggressively by all countries. Unfortunately, to date, there are no effective technologies to contain the pandemic, such as vaccines or antiviral drugs; instead, only the preventive measures of isolation and social detachment are available.

Social distancing aims to minimize physical contact between individuals and, thus, reduce the speed with which new infections arise. Use of social distancing and other public health measures (e.g., washing hands, covering your mouth while coughing, staying isolated when sick, etc.) can slow the evolution of the epidemic – e.g., “flatten” of the case curve (figure 1) –, which, in turn, would prevent the overcrowding of health services, increasing the chances that everyone who gets sick will receive the necessary care.

Detecting Covid-19 cases outside known transmission chains (e.g., “community transmission”) is a strong sign that measures of social distance, such as closing workplaces and schools, cancelling mass events and quarantining affected areas, should be initiated.

The early declaration of a public health emergency and comprehensive implementation of “stay at home” orders will be more effective in delaying the spread of the virus than in a late implementation. Although the real impact of social distance measures is still unknown, there are already reports of positive effects in reducing the transmission of the disease.

![Flattening the COVID-19 Case Curve](image-url)
Pressure on health services

Projections for the numbers of infected and deaths are often accompanied by estimates of the pandemic pressure on health services. Again, the predictions are alarming, as the two examples below show.

In the United States, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington estimates that, at the peak of the epidemic in the United States, 262,092 hospital beds will be needed, 87,674 more than the available quantity. In Intensive Care Units, 39,727 beds will be needed, 19,863 more than the available number.

In Brazil, it is estimated that, if the infection rate reaches 1% in the period of one month, the health system will collapse, with the necessary number of beds being greater than the amount available throughout almost the entire country.

More alarming than the projections, however, are the reports and images that the media transmit daily from different places where the pandemic has been pressing the response capacity of services in countries around the globe (e.g., Italy, Iran, Spain, New York in the United States, etc.)

In addition to infection prevention measures aimed at “flattening the curve” of cases, facing pressure on health services requires expanding the health system’s capacity so that there are enough spaces, supplies and healthcare workers to provide care. This expansion will, in many cases, require the cooperation of both public and private insurers. It has never been more evident that health should be a universal right, free at the point of care.

The expansion of current capacity must be accompanied by the reorganization of services, including: (a) conducting testing with reporting to monitor the epidemic (b) determining the first contact strategy for possible cases of Covid-19 (by telephone, online, in person), (b) designating hospitals to receive patients and prepare ICUs, capable of offering ventilatory assistance, (c) mobilizing and training the health workforce, ensuring the protection of health workers’ physical and mental health, (e) overcoming logistical and operational barriers and (f) assuring financial support to address the pandemic.

As the WHO director-general states, it is essential to mobilize the business sector for an industrial conversion that increases the production of medical and hospital equipment and supplies, including personal protective equipment, ventilators and respirators, diagnostic tests, etc. It is important to develop centralized purchasing strategies in order to maximize the most efficient use and distribution of scarce resources.
**Economic and social effects of the pandemic**

The main measure to contain the epidemic – “stay at home” orders - has a strong impact on economic activities. In fact, keeping workers away from work and consumers away from consumption reduces economic activity. Although the precise effects are not yet known, the China experience, after 50 days of quarantine, shows that the economic losses were greater than many analysts had expected. Industrial production fell 13.5% in January and February, 2020, compared to the median estimate of -3%.\(^{12}\)

The social effects of the economic recession could be tragic in middle and low-income countries in Americas region. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) projects that a 1.8% reduction in GDP in Latin America and the Caribbean will increase unemployment rates in the region by 10 percentage points. The number of people in extreme poverty will rise from 64.7 million to 90 million and the total number of poor people may reach 35% of Latin Americans.\(^{13}\)

To mitigate these effects, rapid and profound measures need to be taken, both at the international level and in each country. It is necessary to reduce the number of personal and business bankruptcies and assure that people have money to spend, especially when they are not working. The measures should include strengthening social security, banning evictions, assuring healthy housing conditions, postponements or exemption from taxes, loans and guarantees for companies and, especially, a universal basic income as a right of citizenship.

Providing food security for all is essential, which requires the guarantee of the flow of goods and services from agricultural producers to final consumers with adequate measures to protect those involved against infection.

Finally, the economic stimulus measures must be guided by the principle of sustainable development, overcoming the predatory practices that brought the world to the situation of climatic emergency.

It is very important, especially for low-income countries, that international cooperation and multilateral organizations support the fiscal pressures of countries by using technical and financial strategies so that all peoples have access to the necessary resources to address the pandemic. International cooperation is also necessary at the scientific level to accelerate the production of knowledge and technologies to combat the virus.
As recommended by dozens of world leaders, the twenty richest countries in the world must immediately allocate eight billion dollars - as predicted by the Global Readiness Monitoring Council - to fill the most urgent gaps in the response against Covid-19, with emphasis on the donations to the poorest countries.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, if the Americas are currently free from major armed conflicts between nations on the continent, it is imperative to remove any threat to peace, including actions taken under the pretext of combating drug trafficking.

**Recommendations**

In view of this serious situation, the ALLIANCE OF PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATIONS OF THE AMERICAS addresses and calls upon governments and peoples of all countries on the continent to:

- Adopt actions informed by the relevant *scientific evidence to face the Covid-19 pandemic* in fulfilling public responsibilities;
- Increase investment and international collaboration in *research and technological development*;
- Reinforce the recommendation of *isolation, quarantine and social distance*, as measures to contain the pandemic growth, preserving respect for human rights;
- **Support universal health systems** that are essential to overcome this health emergency and so many other public health problems;
- Organize, adapt and **expand the public health network**, requesting the private sector to assist in the early diagnosis and treatment of Covid-19 cases, without prejudice to the attention to other diseases and health problems;
- **Strengthen the actions of epidemiological and health surveillance**, at national and continental levels;
- Encourage **private companies to support prevention and control actions**, ensuring the use of personal protective equipment and workers' income, even when prevented from working in view of the repercussions of Covid-19;
- **Strengthen social protection systems and policies, prioritizing vulnerable populations** (elderly people, people with chronic disabling conditions, people on the street, in shelter and / or confinement institutions, populations without access to basic sanitation, informal workers, among others), who are more exposed to negative impacts of this pandemic;
- Guarantee a minimum citizen's income that promotes the dignity of all, to be established immediately and maintained even after the control of the pandemic;
- Promote **solidarity** among the people of each community and among the people of all countries, preserving **peace** on every continent.
References


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