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FEATURED Q&A

How Well Are Covid Vaccinations Going in Latin America?



Some countries in Latin America have started vaccinations against Covid-19. A health care worker in Chile is pictured getting the inoculation last month. // Photo: Chilean Government.

Q Although several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Mexico, Costa Rica and Chile, have begun inoculation programs against the novel coronavirus, the vaccine will not be widely available in most of the region until the second half of this year, next year or even 2023, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit. How do vaccination plans in Latin America and the Caribbean compare to those of the United States and other parts of the world? What sorts of problems have governments and health systems that have started the rollouts encountered so far? Which countries are best prepared for extensive inoculation, and what do you foresee as a realistic schedule for widespread and effective vaccination in the region?

A María Luisa Ávila, chief of the infectiology service at the National Children's Hospital in San José and former Costa Rican health minister: "Vaccination plans in Latin America and the Caribbean are not comparable to plans elsewhere because the realities are very different. Latin America and the Caribbean have an advantage of a long tradition of vaccination, success in the control of preventable diseases through vaccines and weak anti-vaccine movements. Of course, in economic terms, the higher-income countries have more options to acquire vaccines in addition to being more capable of 'monopolizing' vaccine production. However, the general idea is that access to vaccines is fair and equitable. Perhaps the biggest problem is vaccination logistics—having cold rooms to store the Pfizer vaccine, transportation to vaccination centers and the ability of local authorities

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Ford Ending Production in Brazil

U.S. automaker Ford said it would end vehicle production this year in Brazil, closing two plants immediately and a third by the end of the year.

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ECONOMIC

Peru Expecting 5.1 Percent Growth on Average Through 2026

Peru's economy is expected to grow 5.1 percent on average between this year and 2026, the government said. This year could see 10 percent growth, it said.

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POLITICAL

U.S. Designates Cuba a State Sponsor of Terror

The outgoing Trump administration returned Cuba to its "state sponsor of terrorism" list. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Cuba of "repeatedly providing support for acts of international terrorism."

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Pompeo // File Photo: U.S. State Department.

POLITICAL NEWS

U.S. Designates Cuba a State Sponsor of Terrorism

The administration of outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday returned Cuba to the government's "state sponsor of terrorism" list, a move that complicates any plans by President-elect Joe Biden for a thaw in relations between Washington and Havana. "The State Department has designated Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism for repeatedly providing support for acts of international terrorism in granting safe harbor to terrorists," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement. "For decades, the Cuban government has fed, housed, and provided medical care for murderers, bombmakers, and hijackers, while many Cubans go hungry, homeless, and without basic medicine." In the statement, Pompeo said Cuba has refused requests from Colombia to extradite 10 leaders of the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebel group to Colombia after the group claimed responsibility for the January 2019 bombing of a Bogotá police academy that killed 22 people. Cuba has also given support to dissident members of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia rebel group, harbored several U.S. fugitives and has failed to uphold its commitment to stop supporting terrorism after the administration of then-U.S. President Barack Obama removed it from the state sponsor of terrorism list in 2015, Pompeo added. The statement also accuses Cuban intelligence agencies and security forces of helping Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro of maintaining "his stranglehold over his people while allowing terrorist organizations to operate." The move came nine days before Biden is to be sworn in as president and five days after a mob of Trump supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol while Congress was in the process of certifying Biden's win in the country's November presidential election. The violence left at least five people dead, and Trump is accused of inciting the mob. Critics of the Trump administration's move to return Cuba to

the state sponsor of terrorism list called the action hypocritical. "I am outraged that Donald Trump is designating Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism less than a week after he incited a domestic terror attack on the U.S. Capitol. The hypocrisy from President Trump and Secretary Pompeo is stunning but not surprising," said Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "For four years, the Trump administration's policy towards Cuba has been focused on hurting the Cuban people—from drastically reducing remittances in the middle of a pandemic to limiting the ability of Americans to travel to the island." The United States first designated Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982 during the administration of then-President Ronald Reagan. Its return to the list will result in restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance, a ban on sales and exports of U.S. weapons, controls on items with both military and civilian uses, and a withdrawal of support from the United States for loans from organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, NBC News reported. However, due to sanctions that the Trump administration has already imposed on Cuba, it is unclear how much additional hardship returning the country to the state sponsor of terrorism list will pose to the Cuban government.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Peru Expecting 5.1% Growth on Average Through 2026

Peru's economy is expected to grow an average of 5.1 percent between this year and 2026, according to a forecast by the Economy and Finance Ministry published Monday. "In particular, 2021 will register a statistic rebound in all economic sectors, which will allow GDP to reach a growth rate of 10 percent, the highest rate since 1994," the report said. This is due to the "normalization of operations" following a year of lockdowns in 2020, when Peru's economy contracted an estimated 12 percent.

NEWS BRIEFS

Venezuelan Vice President Criticizes U.S., Guyana Over Naval Exercises

Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez on Monday criticized the United States and Guyana for carrying out naval exercises in what she said was an attempt by the administration of outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump to "create provocations" and "threats," Reuters reported. Venezuela has a territorial dispute with Guyana that the World Court in December agreed to hear, though Venezuela does not recognize the court's authority. A court ruling could potentially determine which country has the rights to certain offshore oil and gas fields.

Chile Locking Down 20% of Population to Fight Covid Resurgence

Chile's government said it will impose new lockdowns on more than 20 percent of its population in an effort to fight a resurgence of Covid-19 infections, Bloomberg News reported Monday. The number of municipalities that will be fully locked down will rise to 42 from 18, Health Minister Enrique Paris told reporters. Approximately 3.9 million of Chile's total population of 18 million will now be subject to the lockdown, said Paris.

Argentina's Córdoba Province, Bondholders Reach Deal: Governor

The governor of Córdoba province in Argentina, Juan Schiaretti, on Monday announced an agreement with bondholders to restructure around \$1.7 billion in debt, Reuters reported. The central province is the second most important after Buenos Aires in terms of contributions to national GDP and had been stuck in talks with creditors including the Ad Hoc group, which holds more than 50 percent of foreign-held debt but had rejected several proposals.

BUSINESS NEWS

Ford Motor Ending Production in Brazil in Restructuring Plan

Ford Motor announced Monday that it will cease its vehicle production in Brazil this year as part of a restructuring and cost-savings plan. The automaker said it would close two plants—in Camaçari and Taubaté—immediately, adding that it will close its Troller plant in Horizonte, in Ceará state, in this year's fourth quarter. The company said it expects to record \$4.1 billion in pretax charges in connection with the decision. "With more than a century in South America and Brazil, we know these are very difficult, but necessary, actions to create a healthy and sustainable business," Ford's president and CEO, Jim Farley, said in a statement. "We are moving to a lean, asset-light business model by ceasing production in Brazil and serving customers with some of the best and most exciting vehicles in our global portfolio." The vehicle manufacturer said it would immediately start working closely with its unions and other stakeholders in order to "develop an equitable and balanced plan to mitigate the impacts of ending production." Ford said it would maintain its product development center in Bahia, its proving ground in Tatuí, in São Paulo state, as well as its regional headquarters in São Paulo. Ford will continue selling vehicles in Brazil that are made in Argentina, Uruguay and elsewhere, the company said. Ford added that it is "actively evaluating its businesses around the world, including in South America, making choices and allocating capital in ways that advance Ford's plan to achieve an 8 percent company adjusted EBIT margin and generate consistently strong adjusted free cash flow." The closures of the plants in Brazil will affect about 5,000 workers, spokesman T.R. Reid told reporters in a conference call, the Detroit Free Press reported. The moves are part of an \$11 billion long-term restructuring plan that started under former CEO Jim Hackett, the newspaper reported.

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to administer vaccines in the shortest time possible. There are also problems with the definition of risk groups, and the obvious desire of several groups to be considered a priority. I would also add questioning among the population of the speed with which the vaccines have been produced and criticisms against some vaccines, such as in Argentina with the Gamaleya-Sputnik V vaccine of Russian origin. The platforms that have led to vaccines have been around for a long time, a lot of economic and human resources have been invested in the development of vaccines and regulatory agencies, without compromising safety, and priority has been given to data analysis needed for the vaccines' authorization. All countries have their weaknesses and strengths; perhaps smaller countries with fewer geopolitical problems will be the most successful, as will countries that have opted for having national health systems focused on public health, which are capable of properly conducting the process. Latin America and the Caribbean can be very successful given that the region has the practical and logistical knowledge of solid national vaccination programs. A realistic scheme includes starting with high-risk and rapid response personnel, then older adults, people at risk and then the general population, aiming for coverage of between 60-80 percent of the target population, with both doses of the current vaccines. Eventually, the possibility of single-dose regimens, for which studies are already being carried out, is encouraging."

A **Katherine E. Bliss, senior fellow at the CSIS Global Health Policy Center:** "With more than 15 million confirmed cases of Covid-19, Latin America and the Caribbean have been hit hard by the pandemic, making the successful distribution of vaccines to prevent infection critically important to the region's recovery. A strong record of achievements in immunizations, including the elimination of polio and rubella, as well

as vaccine manufacturing capacity in several countries, give the region a solid base of expertise upon which to build. But even before the pandemic, there were signs of strain within immunization programs, with stagnating coverage and sporadic measles outbreaks pointing to challenges related to health equity and access to basic services. Most countries in the region have joined COVAX, the international facility negotiating the purchase and distribution of vaccine doses through the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. But COVAX is likely to provide enough vaccines for just 20 percent of participating countries' populations over the next several months. To secure additional doses, several countries have hosted clinical trials of promising vaccine candidates, while others have pursued bilateral deals with multiple manufacturers, including Pfizer/BioNTech, Janssen, Sinovac and Gamaleya Research Institute, which produces Sputnik V, the Russian vaccine. Cuba is reportedly developing its own vaccine, while Mexico, Argentina and Brazil have signed agreements with Oxford/AstraZeneca to manufacture its vaccine locally. While local production of vaccines and procurement through mechanisms such as COVAX may help lower prices, countries can also prepare for a smooth distribution by identifying priority groups, training health workers to deliver the vaccines and building confidence in Covid-19 immunization programs."

A **Arachu Castro, Samuel Z. Stone Chair of Public Health in Latin America at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and Paulo M. Buss, president of the American Alliance of Global Health:** "Effectively controlling the Covid-19 pandemic will require the deployment of a systematic vaccination strategy to ensure that a large portion of every country's population receives the vaccine. Incoherent with this basic epidemiological principle, some countries are procuring more vaccines

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than needed to cover their own populations, while undermining low- and middle-income countries' ability to access, or even produce, enough vaccines to guarantee herd immunity. Unless governments and the pharmaceutical industry take urgent action to ensure that enough Covid-19 vaccine doses are produced, the majority of Latin American countries will only be able to vaccinate one in five people against Covid-19 by the end of 2021. Chile and Mexico have purchased enough doses of the most promising vaccines to cover more than 100 percent of their population, and three other countries have a potential coverage greater than half of their population: Peru (74 percent), Brazil (63 percent) and Argentina (53 percent)—according to Duke's Launch and Scale Speedometer. Without an equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines throughout Latin America, the regional economy will not recover, causing greater human suffering and premature mortality. Therefore, to protect people's lives, an effective and safe Covid-19 immunization strategy should be considered a global public good, and vaccines should be produced at larger volumes, distributed equitably between countries and provided at no cost to the user. This can be achieved by waiving intellectual property rights to vaccines, tests and treatments related to Covid-19, openly sharing the vaccines' technology and intellectual property through the World Health Organization (WHO), fully funding COVAX, stopping bilateral deals, supporting WHO efforts and investing in the strengthening of national health systems. Governments should abide by their human rights obligations and promote, as opposed to hinder, worldwide access to the vaccine."



Cuahtémoc Ruiz Matus, chief of the Pan American Health Organization's Immunization Program:

"PAHO is working with member states to ensure their immunization programs are well prepared to roll out Covid-19 vaccines as they receive them. This includes support with vaccine plan-

ning, logistics and cold-chain management, strengthening surveillance of adverse effects following immunization, as well as information systems, training of health care workers, generating vaccine demand and communication. COVAX is part of the ACT accelerator, for which the GAVI Alliance is serving as an administrator. All Latin American and Caribbean countries that participate in COVAX will do so through the PAHO Revolving Fund, and there won't be independent purchases with those specific producers outside COVAX. As part of the COVAX facility, PAHO timelines for distribution are tied to that of the facility. Some countries have made direct agreements with different manufacturers for the procurement of vaccines. Each country has its own national regulatory authorities, analogous to the FDA in the United States, which approves the vaccines they will use. PAHO can support these countries in the adoption of appropriate regulatory frameworks to ensure that they can implement these procedures using international standards. For PAHO to procure a vaccine on behalf of the COVAX facility, the vaccine must be prequalified by WHO or listed under the WHO Emergency Use Listing (EUL) procedure. So far, WHO has approved one vaccine under that scheme, the Comirnaty Covid-19 mRNA vaccine for emergency use, making the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine the first to receive emergency validation from WHO since the coronavirus outbreak began. The EUL opens the door for countries to expedite their own regulatory approval processes to import and administer the vaccine. It also enables UNICEF and PAHO to procure the vaccine for distribution to countries in need. PAHO is also monitoring where countries are in terms of readiness for vaccines, using the Covid-19 Vaccine Introduction Readiness Assessment Tool (VIRAT), a tool for national authorities with a roadmap to monitor progress in the introduction of the vaccines. It covers regulations, COVAX agreements, national coordination bodies, the designation of primary target groups for the vaccines, cold-chain capacity and other factors."

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Erik Brand

Publisher
ebrand@thedialogue.org

Gene Kuleta

Editor
gkuleta@thedialogue.org

Anastasia Chacón González

Reporter & Associate Editor
achacon@thedialogue.org



Michael Shifter, President

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