

Statement of EU-LAT Network on COVID-19: defending human rights in times of crisis

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has unleashed a global crisis with no precedents in our modern history, whose consequences for health, economics, and social systems are still unpredictable. During the recent weeks, the governments of all world countries have put in place extraordinary health measures to prevent the virus advancement, already present in all European and Latin American countries.

In these moments of crisis, we EU-LAT Network want to call for **solidarity and cooperation between Latin American and European regions**. We recognize the effort of the countries in stopping the expansion of the outbreak and the need to adopt extraordinary measures. However, these measures must **fit the international legal framework and the respect for fundamental rights**, including the right to health, freedom of expression, freedom of association, non-discrimination, and the right to defend rights, as pointed out by Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Latin America is a region with a long history of states of exception or emergency. This crisis cannot be an excuse to consolidate power and violate the fundamental rights of the population. That is why we EU-LAT Network want to emphasize that extraordinary measures should not be used to limit fundamental rights in a permanent nor arbitrary way, nor should they cover up for repressive actions or be used to silence the work of citizens and groups defending human rights.

The intensification of extractive activities in Latin America is a growing threat to the environment and to people, and especially to rural communities and indigenous peoples. In this current health crisis situation, the impact of extractive companies, such as oil, mining, hydroelectrical, and agro-industrial, can have lethal consequences for the population. These activities are potential sources of contagion and represent a significant ecological hazard. The environmental impact generated by extractive activities can become even more critical since it may affect water sources, land and the sources of survival of the communities living nearby.

It is necessary for the European Union to continue its political relations with Latin American countries and to be able to manage EU's cooperation and development funds to ensure the fostering and protection of human rights, especially of the most vulnerable groups, such as indigenous peoples and rural communities, and women, who are suffering a higher impact during this pandemic. In Latin America, according to the ILO, 47% of workers depend on the informal economy, which leads to highly precarious social situations. COVID-19 will significantly aggravate this precariousness, dragging millions of people into situations of poverty and extreme poverty.

In response to this situation, from EU-LAT Network we urge the European Union to:

- Suspend ongoing negotiations on trade agreements, such as the new EU-Mercosur trade agreement, until democratic control of the process can be guaranteed.

- Ensure that the **activities of European companies and funds** are implemented in accordance with international human rights standards and do not take advantage of the current situation to intensify the extraction of natural resources in the region.

- In its political dialogue and bilateral exchanges, encourage Latin American governments to **respect the fundamental rights** of their citizens, to make sure that restrictive laws are temporary in nature, and that the actions of police and military forces in the application of the law are subject to international human rights standards whilst remaining accountable to civilian authorities.

- Ensure that Latin American governments take urgent protective measures for **rural and indigenous communities**, including information and prevention campaigns in their own languages, guaranteeing access to food, and strengthening the public health systems that serve communities.

- In view of the increase in **gender-based violence** during lockdown, support, through cooperation programmes, civil society organisations in the region that are assisting women, and call on Latin American countries to implement structural measures, ensuring **access to justice** as well as comprehensive care services for women.

- Ensure that the restriction of freedoms during the pandemic is not used to attack fundamental rights and the work of **human rights defenders** and call upon Latin American governments to grant letters of transit to defenders in order for them to carry on with their work and, in line with Michelle Bachelet's statement, to release all those detained without legal basis, including those detained in violation of human rights obligations.

- Take positive measures in line with the European Guidelines for Human Rights Defenders that recognize the work of defenders, particularly in this context, and allow them to continue to safely and freely exercise their mandate.