

Nicaragua's Converging Crises

Impact and Challenges to Support
its Vulnerable Populations

February 2021



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Photo: Lukáš Jančík in Pixabay

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Nicaragua's Current Context: Multiple and Converging Crises	6
3. A Potential Humanitarian Crisis in the Making?	12
4. Strategic Priorities: Humanitarian and Recovery Response	31
5. Conclusions and Recommendations	39

Acronyms

BCIE	Spanish Acronym for Central American Bank for Economic Integration (Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica)
BM	Spanish acronym for World Bank (Banco Mundial)
CABEI	Central American Bank for Economic Integration
NCB	Central Bank of Nicaragua
CCVA	Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FIDEG	Spanish Acronym for International Foundation for the Global Economic Challenge (Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global)
FUNIDES	Fundación Nicaragüense para el Desarrollo Económico y Social
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GFF	Global Financing Facility
GCI	Global Competitiveness Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
ICG	International Crisis Group
IFC	International Financial Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LGBT	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender
MARENA	Spanish acronym for Nicaragua's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales)
MIFAM	Spanish acronym for Nicaragua's Ministry of the Family (Ministerio de la Familia)
MINED	Spanish acronym for Nicaragua's Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación)

MINSA	Spanish Acronym for Nicaragua's Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Salud)
OEA	Spanish acronym for the Organization of American States (Organización de Estados Americanos)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PEA	Spanish acronym for Economically Active Population (Población Económicamente Activa)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, sanitation & hygiene
WB	The World Bank
WFP	UN World Food Programme

Any part of this report can be quoted. Reference to the report will be appreciated.

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1. Introduction

Nicaragua is currently facing the consequences of multiple crises on several fronts

The combined impact in the last three years of the political unrest that began in April 2018, COVID-19 and two back-to-back Category 4 hurricanes (Eta and Iota) in November 2020 has created a dire and precarious situation for the country. If the present circumstances continue unchanged, the short- and long-term outlooks for Nicaragua are one of grave political instability and increased poverty, with a disproportionate impact falling on its most vulnerable populations.

This report aims to contextualize the realities of Nicaragua's worsening situation and, in the process, inform and motivate the international community to focus and act quickly in the face of what could be a potential humanitarian crisis. In this sense, an overarching theme throughout the text is that the international community (including international development agencies, multilateral banks, international NGOs and donors) is well-positioned to play an active role in at least preventing the Nicaragua situation from worsening, while ensuring that international resources are implemented with full accountability.

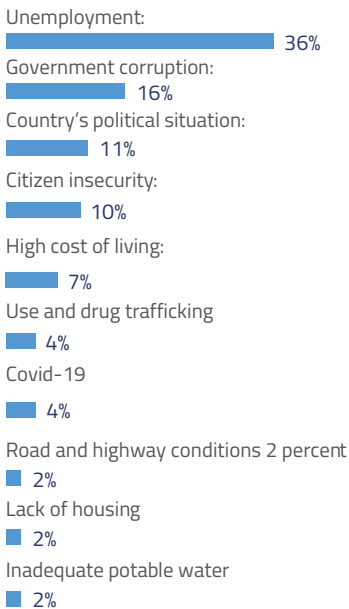
The structure of the report is as follows. It first provides a broad overview of the multiple crises recently afflicting Nicaragua, with a particular focus on their impact on the country's most vulnerable populations. Next, it outlines the impact of these crises across several socioeconomic domains and for each proposes a set of strategic priorities to support the most vulnerable population groups and respond to the increasingly critical situation. Finally, the report identifies and lays out recommendations in key areas where opportunities may exist to address several current and future challenges. These relate to the need to: (a) access better data to assess the impact of the crises; (b) prioritize the most vulnerable population groups in response strategies; (c) ensure a prominent role for civil society in any comprehensive strategy and; (d) have accountability and transparency when it comes to international assistance.

It should be emphasized that the identified areas and their recommendations are by no means exhaustive. Instead, they, and this report in general, are an attempt to bring attention to areas where help for Nicaragua is needed and in which the role of the international community could be particularly constructive in terms of positive long-term impact.

2. Nicaragua's Current Context: Multiple and Converging Crises



Graph 1: Perceptions of the population: main problems faced by Nicaraguans



Source: CID Gallup Estudio de Opinión pública No.98 January 2021

The potential humanitarian challenges looming in Nicaragua occurs in the context of an ongoing socio-political crisis that erupted in April 2018 reflecting accumulated political and structural tensions. To add to Nicaragua's frail context and list of troubles, in 2020 the country began to face the COVID-19 pandemic and was later impacted by Hurricanes Eta and Iota. The effects of the socio-political crisis, the pandemic and the natural disasters continue to be present to date.¹

Nicaragua, has been ranked as the second poorest country in the hemisphere after Haiti. Despite positive economic growth during previous years², GDP has been falling since 2018 with an impact on the overall socio-economic situation of the country. This has been accompanied by shrinking democratic and civic spaces and increase of political polarization.

The January 2021 CID Gallup poll³ provides a snapshot of the overall views in Nicaragua during recent times. The poll covers a wide range of issues and themes, including households' perceptions of the direction of the country, the economy, cost of living, safety, among other topics.

Sixty percent of the population perceived that the country was on the wrong track, with only thirty-one percent suggesting that the path was the correct one – back in 2017, thirty-nine percent perceived that the country was on the wrong track, and forty-nine considered that the country was on the correct one. The current uncertainty and political insecurity motivate that almost six out of every ten Nicaraguans would migrate to other countries if they had the opportunity. Graph 1 presents household perceptions, according to the January 2021 CID Gallup survey.

1. UN News on 1 February 2021 highlighted "Nicaragua: Amidst 'Socio-Political and human rights crisis'" adding the human rights crises to the multiple crisis addressed in this report.

2. Nicaragua's real (inflation-adjusted) GDP growth of 5% between 2012 and 2017, surpassed the Latin American average of 2.3 percent.

3. CID Gallup S.A. Estudio de Opinión Pública Número 98, January 2021, presents information collected between 10-25 January 2021.



Photo: Carlos F. Huez

a. Political Crisis

The April 2018 events erupted in response to the government's announcement of the reduction of social security benefits as a cost-cutting measure. This, in turn, set in motion significant street demonstrations which were quelled in a crackdown by pro-government security forces. In the months that followed, the Nicaraguan government violently sought to put an end to the growing unrest and demands for a democratic opening.⁴ The end result of the government's vicious response was more than 325 dead, thousands wounded, mass detentions, and the exodus of nearly 100,000 persons who fled the country.⁵

In the almost three years since this first crisis erupted, continual efforts by national opposition groups to foster a democratization process have dwindled over time and not been successful. The same can be said of efforts by the international community to broker negotiations between the government and national opposition groups. At the start, a series of fragile processes were set in motion to advance dialogue, first in May 2018 between civil society representatives and the government, and later in February-March 2019 between the government and the Alianza Civica (Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy), pursuing an agenda on the release of political prisoners, electoral reforms and respect for human rights. Framework accords regarding the release of political prisoners and the restoration of civil rights reached in March 2019 were only partially successful as they failed to result in full compliance.

From the start, the international community responded to the crisis by seeking to promote a negotiated solution,

although these calls have been intermittent and fragmented. The United States, Canada, the European Union, and several Latin American countries were swift in expressing concern regarding the government's response to the April 2018 protests. Some even implemented a targeted sanctions against specific government individuals and entities⁶ International and regional bodies such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an autonomous organ of the Organization of American States (OAS), carried out extensive on-the-ground reporting on the human rights situation.⁷ However, in an abrupt series of events, both UNHCR and the IACHR were compelled to leave Nicaragua in 2018.⁸

The UN engaged in the crisis largely through their human rights body, the OHCHR, and has maintained a low profile throughout from the start. Local UN agencies in Nicaragua are now serving as conduits for funding approved by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).⁹ The Coalición Nacional (National Coalition), comprising sectors of the opposition, has argued for the appointment of a UN Special Envoy.¹⁰ The OAS' Secretary General has implied that Nicaragua may face sanctions based on the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Meanwhile, opposition forces in Nicaragua have expressed urgency regarding the need for the OAS to play a critical role in ensuring that the 2021 elections are conducted according to democratic standards.

At the 45th session of the Human Rights Council, 14 September 2020, Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted that since her last report on Nicaragua (July 2019), "there has been no progress in the human rights situation and no sign

4. "The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) report covers the period from 18 April (2018) when protests against planned social security reforms began, to 18 August 2018. Among the violations and abuses of international human rights law documented in the report are the disproportionate use of force by police, sometimes resulting in extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; widespread arbitrary detentions; torture and ill-treatment; and violations of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and of peaceful assembly." <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23481&LangID=E>

5. For further details see www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/3/5e6759934/years-political-social-crisis-nicaragua-force-100000-flee.html

6. The sanctioned list includes the National Police and other government and private entities, as well the Vice-President, the head of the armed forces, ministers of finance, health, among others.

7. "Two years into the human rights crisis in Nicaragua. It also confirms that a fifth phase of State repression is consolidating in the country. This consolidation includes more intense surveillance, harassment, and selective repression against individuals who are believed to oppose the government, as well as acts of violence in rural areas and against indigenous communities. The IACHR urges the State to restore the rule of law and respect for human rights." April 18, 2020.

8. UNHCHR team was asked to leave Nicaragua in August 2018 after a critical report on governmental responsibility for human rights violations and the OAS' IACHR's GIEI (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes) and MESENI (Mecanismo de Seguimiento para Nicaragua) were expelled from Nicaragua in December 2018.

9. Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB).

10. For more on the United Nations and Nicaragua, see: www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/united-nations-and-nicaragua-opportunities-and-risks.

that the Government is constructively addressing the tensions and structural problems that triggered the socio-political crisis in April 2018, and that during this period, her office has recorded 30 cases of threats and intimidation against human rights defenders, journalists, students, peasant leaders and members of the Catholic clergy, among others¹¹.

Bachelet further noted "Civil society organizations report that 94 persons perceived as opponents of the government, are still arbitrarily detained, mostly on charges of common crimes". She called on the Government to release all those arbitrarily deprived of their liberty in the context of the protests or for expressing opinions critical of the Government. This would be a significant step towards restoring rights and reducing existing polarization¹².

Nicaraguan Civil Society: Under Severe Pressure

Civil society is currently under great pressure from the Government, limiting its operating capacity and necessary role in public decision-making. A recent report, "Análisis de la libertad de asociación en Nicaragua (2007-2020)"¹³ details different government efforts specifically aimed at non-profit organizations: official efforts range from ignoring civil society's public concerns, to cancelling their legal status and aggressive harassment by police, to approving laws that establishes additional controls over these organizations.

The report describes how the government cancelled the legal status (*personería jurídica*) of numerous non-profit organizations: CISAS in November 2018; and in December 2018 IEPP, HADEMOS, CENIDH, CINCO, IPADE, ILS, Fundación Popol-Na, Fundación del Río, IPADE, and ILS.¹⁴ In March 2019, during the second round of negotiations between the Government and the Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia (ACJD) there was an agreement to reverse the government decisions. However, the reversal decision was not implemented, and these organizations continue without legal status and their occupied properties have not been returned.

The government sponsored, toward the end of 2020, several laws that further limits a role for civil society. These laws have been rejected by the European Council, the U.S. Government and more recently by members of the U.S. Senate¹⁵.

Two of the newly approved laws deserve special attention:¹⁶

- a. Foreign Agent Regulation Law: seeks to identify and register any natural person or legal entity, receiving financial or other support from foreign sources that engage in activities that may delve into affairs the Nicaraguan government deems of interest. Those are defined very broadly to include all activities that may infringe on the Independence, self-determination, and national sovereignty, as well as the country's economic and political stability.
- b. Cybercrime Special Law: enacted to "prevent, investigate, prosecute and sanction crimes committed through technology and communication against natural persons or legal entities, as well as overall protection of systems that rely on such technologies, including content and any of its components."

As a result, Nicaraguan civil society is severely hampered in its ability to operate and constrained in terms of openly voicing criticism or concerns and some civil society participants have been compelled to remain anonymous.¹⁷ This limits their ability to participate in open consultations regarding the use of foreign assistance and the transparency of its operations, in all its diverse expressions. These circumstances and limitations need to be considered for any initiative that considers civil society engagement.

11. Please see <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26228&LangID=E>

12. UNHCHR. Ibid.

13. Análisis de la libertad de asociación en Nicaragua (2007-2020) Fundación Popolna and Fundación del Río. December 2020

14. Centro de Información y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud (CISAS); Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos de Políticas Públicas (IEEPP); Hagamos Democracia (HADEMOS) Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH); Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos de Políticas Públicas (IEEPP); Hagamos Democracia (HADEMOS), el Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Democracia (IPADE), Instituto de Liderazgo las Segovias (ILS), Fundación Popol Na para la Promoción y Desarrollo Municipal; la Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo del Sureste de Nicaragua (Fundación del Río).

15. Bipartisan letter led by Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Ted Cruz (R-Tx), December 15, 2020

16. Also, the reform Art. 37 of the Nicaraguan Political Constitution would permit life-in prison sentences.

17. For example, the Observatorio Ciudadano for COVID-19 and the Observatorio Azul y Blanco, among others.



Photo: Carlos Herrera

b. COVID-19 Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented challenge to all countries, both in terms of health and their social and economic situations. Although virtually all countries have faced serious crises of varying dimensions, COVID-19's consequences have a differentiated effect on countries depending on healthcare management, political response, and financial policy response. Countries whose policy responses to the pandemic have been most effective are those who implemented early and aggressive containment and vigilance policies, robust testing and contact-tracing processes, strong public messaging, economic stimulus packages and income support mechanisms.¹⁸

COVID-19 has exacerbated the dire situation in Nicaragua. The first reported COVID-19 case was in March 2020. In one of the more startling national responses to the disease, Nicaragua dismissed the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding necessary precautions and its suggested public health policy responses, openly encouraged large-scale public activities, and was the only country in Central America to not declare a national emergency. Nicaragua's public stance and policies regarding the pandemic have been variously described as "erratic" and "haphazard,"¹⁹ as its

leadership argued that the country's economic challenges made quarantine largely untenable, and that Nicaragua would pursue Sweden's policy of "herd immunity", despite the dramatically different national capacities of these countries.²⁰ By July 2020, as the pandemic progressed, the Government discourse changed in tone, and a range of limited measures were put in place.

National and international stakeholders in the health sector have expressed considerable concern that downplaying the risks and potential impact of the virus undermines important mitigation efforts and could severely tax or collapse fragile public health infrastructure.²¹ The country's fragile conditions are captured by the 2019 Social Progress Index,²² that ranked Nicaragua 103 among 149 countries, with a score of 58.97/100.²³ Government health expenditure in 2017 was five percent of its GDP.²⁴

Reliable data regarding the extent of COVID-19's impact has been consistently difficult to obtain. Civil society initiatives such as Nicaraguan Medical Association, the Citizen COVID-19 Observatory and FUNIDES provide considerably different statistics to those presented by the government.²⁵

Considering the negative macroeconomic assessments, there is an increasingly dire prognosis for the impact of

18. Please see <https://time.com/5851633/best-global-responses-covid-19/>.

20. Pearson, Andy A., Andrea M. Prado, Forrest D Colburn. "Nicaragua's surprising response to COVID-19-19". *Journal of Global Health*, June 2020 • Vol. 10 No. 1 • 01037.

21. Op. cit. Lancet.

22. Based on a variety of indicators showing several social metrics such as health care and basic medical attention.

23. p. 7., 2019 Social Progress Index www.socialprogress.org

24. Health expenditure is distributed among three public institutions: The Ministry of Health, The Nicaraguan Social Security Institute, and the Defence Ministry, Op cit, Pearson et al.

25. See Health under section 4 of this report Strategic Priorities: Humanitarian and Recovery Response for further information

these interdependent crises on the most vulnerable populations. This report seeks to explore the impact of these crises. An *Atlantic Council* post underscored the consequences of these crises:

“ The humanitarian and political crisis in Nicaragua has not been as publicized or scrutinized by the international community as the severity of the situation necessitates. The current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic should change that—although it has not yet. In addition to the existing human rights concerns that were punctuated by the 2018 proposed social security cuts and the ensuing protests, where more than 300 protesters died, the lack of preventative measures in the face of COVID-19 and the fragility of the Nicaraguan healthcare system are a deadly combination for the country, its neighbours’ in Central America, and the Western Hemisphere.²⁶ ”

c. Back-to-Back Hurricanes

Then, in November 2020, compounding the deepening crisis, two major (Category 4) hurricanes, two weeks apart, hit the country’s Northern Caribbean region. Hurricane Eta was considered to have been the most destructive natural disaster to impact the region since Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Hurricane Iota came two weeks later, also striking Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast, affecting some of the same communities as the earlier storm, as well as additional areas.²⁷

Preliminary data indicated that approximately 256 indigenous communities suffered flooding, affecting more than 112,613 people in the municipalities of Puerto Cabezas, Prinzapolka and Waspam. More than 50,000 persons were evacuated, 70,000 families left without drinking water, over 8,000 homes damaged, among other serious impacts. In addition to the emergency needs, the damage to livelihoods in the medium term in the face of precarious economic conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis present a highly concerning panorama. According to the Nicaraguan Finance minister, a reported 3 million people were affected by hurricanes in 56 municipalities with estimated economic damage of \$738 million.²⁸

26. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nicaraguas-response-to-COVID-19-endangers-not-only-its-own-people-but-also-its-neighbors/>.

27. The November 2020 hurricanes are just another reminder of the high level of vulnerability of Nicaragua vis-à-vis climate change. Germanwatch places Nicaragua among the 10 most affected countries in the world regarding the global climate risk index (1999-2018) www.germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/20-2-01s%20KRI%202020%20-%20Kurzzusammenfassung_4.pdf

28. Please see <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/11/24/gobierno-de-nicaragua-presenta-informe-preliminar-de-danos-provocados-por-los-huracanes-iota-y-eta/>.

3. A Potential Humanitarian Crisis in the Making?



a. Nicaragua's vulnerable population groups

It is not unreasonable to assume that the combined impact of the crises outlined above has fallen disproportionately on Nicaragua's most vulnerable population groups. As a result, this report is particularly interested in highlighting the circumstances and risks faced by the most vulnerable population given their precarious situation even before the onset of the current circumstances.

As a working definition for most of this report, 'vulnerable populations' are considered to be individuals living in households under extreme poverty. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)²⁹, describes extreme poverty (or indigence) as the situation in which resources are not available to satisfy at least basic food needs. Following this definition, the extreme poor are individuals residing in households whose income is not enough to acquire a basic food basket. Total poverty (ECLAC) is the situation in which income is lower than the value of a basic basket of goods and services (containing both food and non-food). This report also employs other definitions of 'vulnerable populations' when discussing food security and nutrition, as well as water and sanitation. In this second case, the basis for identifying 'vulnerable populations' are a set

of sector-specific indicators identified by the report as crucial for each sector being discussed.

The degree of overlap between individuals considered to be in vulnerable population groups according to the two views (i.e., 'extreme poverty' and based on sector-specific indicators and circumstances) is likely to be large in the case of Nicaragua. That being said, verifying the degree of overlap is beyond the scope of the report; emphasizing the vulnerable populations from different angles—that is, using these two views—is useful in order to contextualize how various basic needs are being endangered as a result of Nicaragua's combined crises.

Table 1 showcases poverty rates for 2020 and estimated poverty counts for 2021 according to poverty definitions and thresholds. Table 1 likely offers only an incomplete view of the current poverty situation in Nicaragua. This is because the underlying primary data for the poverty figures correspond to 2016–2020 estimates and do not account for the impact of the two hurricanes.

29. ECLAC document "Indicadores de pobreza y pobreza extrema utilizadas para el monitoreo de los ODM en América Latina" please see: www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/static/files/indicadores_de_pobreza_y_pobreza_extrema_utilizadas_para_el_monitoreo_de_los_odm_en_america_latina.pdf

Table 1. Poverty Counts and Rates, Nicaragua, latest year available

Estimated Total National Population in 2021	Total Poverty		Extreme Poverty	
	Poverty rate (percent of Total National Population) in 2020	Estimated number of people in 2021	Extreme Poverty rate (percent of Total National Population) in 2020	Estimated number of people in 2021
6,664,364	52.7	3,512,120	22.8	1,519,475

Note: The total 2021 national population figures are own estimates based on data from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa) (August 2020) and INIDE (2019). The total national population covers all of Nicaragua. Poverty and extreme poverty rates are based on data from Filgueira et al. (2020). The number of poor according to each concept were derived by applying the poverty rate to the estimated national population for 2021.

Sources: MINSa, Statistics Department Projections (August 2020) and Filgueira et al. (2020)

According to poverty rate estimates from a UN ECLAC report co-authored by Filgueira et al. (2020)³⁰ and our total national population projections based on official data from the Nicaraguan government (INIDE 2018, MINSa 2020), the number of people in 2021 in total poverty is expected to be 3.5 million (52.7 percent of total population). The population in extreme poverty, on the other hand, is estimated at 1.5 million people (22.8 percent of total population).³¹

In terms of the profile of Nicaragua's poorest groups, a recent World Bank post³² describes that rural populations, indigenous peoples, and Afro-Nicaraguan ethnic communities have historically experienced the most economic deprivation and social exclusion. The post adds that most of the Nicaraguan poor, including its indigenous populations, live in rural and remote communities.

According to estimates based on MINSa (August 2020)³³ 58.6 percent of the country's population is urban (3.9 million persons), and 41.4 percent is rural (2.7 million persons).

Table 2 shows poverty using again different definitions and thresholds for selected demographic groups, including pregnant women, seniors, adolescents, children and those with health conditions. The poverty figures are again sourced from Filgueira et al. (2020) and are included to highlight groups considered particularly vulnerable from a health perspective. The estimated total number of people in extreme poverty in 2021 across all of the demographic groups shown in Table 2 is approximately 760,000 people, representing almost 50 percent of the estimated total population in extreme poverty in 2021 (Table 1).

30. F. Filgueira and others, "América Latina ante la crisis del COVID-19: vulnerabilidad socioeconómica y respuesta social", serie Políticas Sociales, N° 238 (LC/TS.2020/149), Santiago, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), 2020.

31. Poverty estimates in this report were also included as part of Alicia Barcena's, ECLAC's Executive Secretary, July 2020 presentation on poverty and Covid-19 in Latin America."

32. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2017/08/09/toward-more-shared-prosperity-in-nicaragua>

33. MINSa, Statistics Department Projections (August 2020) was used to project Nicaragua's population for the 2021-2025 period for the December 2020 report on "National Financial Sustainability Plan".

Table 2. Poverty counts and rates, by Selected Demographic Groups, Nicaragua, latest year available

Demographic Group	Number of people, poor and non-poor estimated in 2021	Total Poverty		Extreme Poverty	
		Percent of Total National Population 2020	Estimated number of people in 2021	Percent of Total National Population 2020	Estimated number of people in 2021
Girls and Boys under 5	769,849	6.1	405,710	2.6	175,526
Girls and boys between 6 and 9 years old	538,566	4.3	283,824	1.8	122,793
Adolescents (10-19 years old)	1,276,510	10.1	672,721	4.4	291,044
Seniors (older than 65 years old)	393,834	3.1	207,551	1.3	89,794
Pregnant women	161,063	1.3	84,880	0.6	36,722
Persons with Disabilities	158,446	1.3	83,501	0.5	36,126
Persons with communicable and non-communicable diseases	35,000	0.3	18,445	0.1	7,980
Total national population belonging to the demographic groups listed above	3,333,268	26.4	1,756,632	11.4	759,985

Note: The estimated number of people in 2021 per indicator were derived by applying the percentage rate in each to the total national population for 2021 reported in Table 1. Population estimates for 2021 are based on the data from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa).

Sources: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO

From a food security and nutritional perspective, the main vulnerable groups are those suffering from food insecurity and nutritional deficiencies. Table 3 presents estimates for 2021 of the total number of Nicaraguans suffering from undernourishment, the total number of stunted children under the age of 5 and the total number of women in reproductive ages with anaemia. The estimates are based on prevalence rates reported in the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 (SOFI), an annual flagship report jointly prepared by the

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), for the latest available years. The impact of COVID-19 and the two hurricanes is still not reflected in the estimates for these indicators. However, it is worth noting that even before 2018, Nicaragua already topped all Central American countries for prevalence of undernourishment in the total population.

Table 3. Food security and nutrition, Nicaragua, latest year available

Indicator	Percent of Total National Population	Estimated number of people in 2021
Prevalence of undernourishment in the total population	17.2 (2017-19)	1,146,271
Prevalence of stunting in children under the age of 5	17.3 (2012)	133,184
Prevalence of anaemia among women in reproductive ages (15-49)	16.3 (2016)	295,297

Note: The estimated number of people in 2021 per indicator were derived by applying the percentage rate in each to the total national population for 2021 reported in Table 1. Population estimates for 2021 are based on the data from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa).

Sources: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO.

Finally, from a water and sanitation perspective, Table 4 presents 2021 estimates for the number of Nicaraguans without access to safely managed improved water supplies and not using at least basic sanitation facilities.³⁴

Table 4. Water and sanitation, by location, Nicaragua, latest years available

Indicator	Percent of Total National Population 2017	Estimated number of people in 2021, all areas	Rural Population		Urban Population	
			Percent of Total Rural Population 2017	Estimated number of people in rural areas 2021	Percent of Total urban Population 2017	Estimated number of people in urban areas 2021
Population without access to safely managed improved water supplies	48%	3,247,181	71%	1,957,995	33%	1,289,186
Population not using at least basic sanitation facilities	26%	1,673,000	38%	1,047,941	16%	625,060

Note: Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2017. UNICEF (2019), considers that 29 percent of the population in rural areas has access to safely managed improved water supplies, therefore 71 percent does not; and that 67 percent of urban areas has access, therefore 33 percent does not. In terms of sanitation, 74 percent nationally has access to at least basic services, therefore 26 percent does not; 62 percent in rural areas has, therefore 38 percent does not; and 84 in urban areas has, therefore 16 percent does not. The latest available (UNICEF) rates are applied to the 2021 population estimates.

Sources: INIDE Anuario Estadístico 2018 and Filgueira et.al. (2020)

34. Water is at the core of sustainable development and is critical for socio-economic development, energy and food production, healthy ecosystems and for human survival itself. Water is also at the heart of adaptation to climate change, serving as the crucial link between society and the environment. Key aspects for sustainable development and is critical for socio-economic development. Please see www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/water

b. Humanitarian and Recovery Needs: Overview by Sector

The severity of the impact of these crises combined with significant levels of political polarization suggest a challenging outlook that should be of concern to both national and international stakeholders, given little evidence of the prospects of short-term recovery. What follows is a sector-by-sector overview of impact of the combined crises on Nicaragua's most vulnerable population, as identified in the previous section.

This report does not seek to cover all sectors nor address all relevant or potential issues within each. Instead, it attempts to highlight the impact of the current context on the identified vulnerable population in each considering different sectoral perspectives. The focus on the most at-risk and unprotected is carried out despite the many data limitations the report faced to elaborate more thoroughly on each sector.

Economy

This section presents macroeconomic data on the impact of shocks on the broader Nicaraguan economy and its implications for the most vulnerable populations. The underlying motivation here is not to propose policy solutions on economic matters, but rather showcase the realities of Nicaragua's fragile economic condition and outlook.

brought not only a halt in the country's poverty reduction tendency since 2005, but the results of a 2019 household survey to measure poverty carried out by Fundacion Internacional para el Desafio Economico Global (FIDEG), a Nicaraguan think tank, indicated that the poverty rates had increased at the national level, both in terms of general poverty and extreme poverty.³⁵

The political turmoil beginning in 2018 set in motion a steep downturn in the economy. According to the Nicaraguan Central Bank (BCN), Nicaragua's economy contracted 3.9 percent in 2019, compared to 4.0 percent contraction a year earlier, while general inflation increased to 6.1 percent in 2019, compared to 3.9 percent in 2018. The World Bank noted that investment and consumption fell sharply, with the economic contraction reflecting significant employment losses, particularly in labour intensive sectors such as construction, commerce and restaurants. In addition, the onset of Nicaragua's political trouble stemming from the April 2018 unrest

The main global international financial institutions have forecasted that the COVID-19 pandemic will have serious negative consequences for the Nicaraguan economy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF).³⁶ and World Bank expect the Nicaraguan economy to contract in 2021 by 0.5 percent and -0.9 percent, respectively.³⁷ Estimates from ECLAC, the Nicaraguan Central Bank.³⁸ and FUNIDES, a Nicaraguan think-tank, are slightly more optimistic. Figure 2 below shows the different estimates with the caveat that most of these estimates will likely be revised again during the first quarter of 2021.



Nicaragua is ranked as the second poorest country in the hemisphere after Haiti

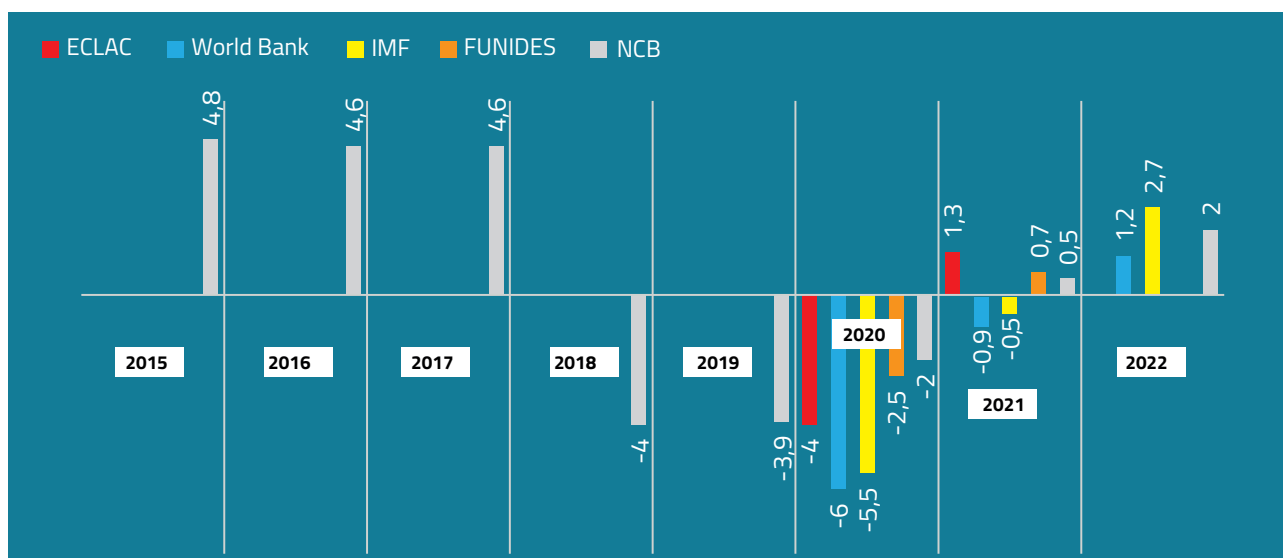
35. Please see www.fideg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Informe-Pobreza-FIDEG-2019.pdf

36. Annual percent change, p.146. IMF. World Economic Outlook 2020

37. It should be noted that there have been several estimates that have been evolving over recent months as a further information becomes available. For 2020, the World Bank estimates that GDP will decrease by 6%, IMF: - 5.5%, ECLAC: 4%, FUNIDES: -2.5% and Central Bank of Nicaragua (BCN): -2%. December 2020.

38. Remarks by the President of the Nicaraguan Central Bank Ovidio Reyes R. at CABEL event "Situación Económica de la Región y Perspectivas 2021" December 17, 2020

BEHAVIOR OF GDP YEARS 2015- 2022



Graph 2. Real (inflation-adjusted) GDP growth rate, By selected source, Nicaragua, 2015-2022

Source: Nicaraguan Central Bank (NCB) (2020), ECLAC (2020), FUNIDES (2020), IMF (2020) and World Bank (2021).³⁹

In its 2020 semi-annual report on Latin America, the World Bank noted⁴⁰:

“The COVID-19 outbreak threatens to deepen and prolong the economic recession sparked by the socio-political crisis. The country faces a weakened external position despite boasting a current account surplus. Fiscal consolidation has been delayed to partially cushion the economic impact of the crisis. Large employment contractions in labour-intensive sectors threaten to continue reversing the achievements in poverty reduction. The economic recovery is expected to be protracted amid modest global rebound, tight external financing conditions and policy uncertainty.”

Table 5. Key Macroeconomic Indicators, Nicaragua, 2017-2022

Year	Population (thousands)	Real (inflation-adjusted) GDP growth rate ⁴¹	Annual Inflation Rate	Public Debt / GDP
2017	6,393.8	4.6%	5.7%	47.1%
2018	6,460.4	-4.0%	3.9%	52.9%
2019	6,527.7	-3.9%	6.1%	57.2%
2020 ⁴²	6,593.0	-4.0%	3.0%	62.9%
2021 ⁴³	6,664.3	0.6%	3.3%	64.1%
2022 ⁴⁴	6,725.5	2.0%	3.3%	63.6%

39. Nicaraguan Central Bank (Comunicado 17 diciembre 2020); ECLAC (Balance preliminar de la Economía Nicaragua, 16 diciembre 2020), FUNIDES (Informe de Coyuntura diciembre 2020), IMF (2020) and World Bank (Perspectiva económica mundial enero 2021)

40. P. 69, Semiannual Report on Latin America and the Caribbean: The Cost of Staying Healthy. The World Bank, 2020.

41. For 2020 and 2021, as a reference, the average of the projections of the IMF, BCN, FUNIDES, WB and CEPAL was used. In the case of the year 2022, the average of the estimates of the BCN, MF and WB was used.

42. Average forecast

43. Ibid

44. Ibid

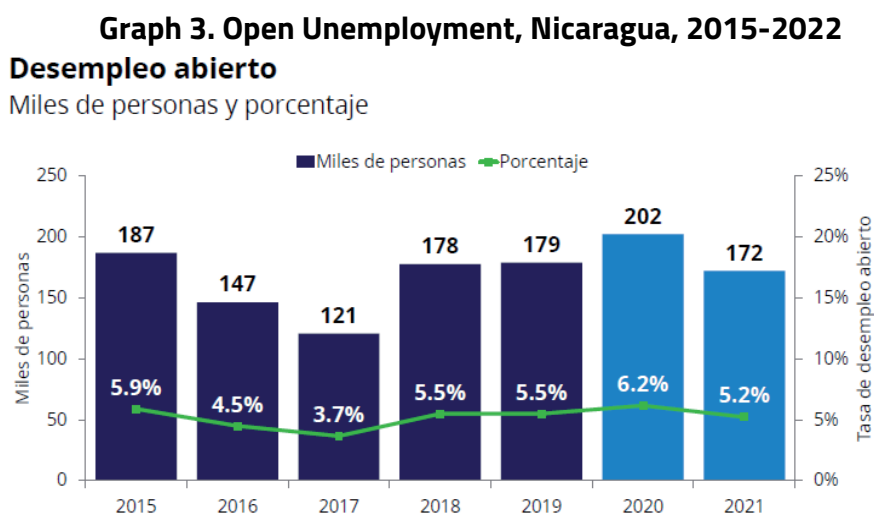
Source: Average estimates for 2021 and 2022 based on IMF, NCB, FUNIDES, ECLAC, World Bank, October and December 2020 estimates.

The Economist's November 2020 "Nicaragua Country Report", based on October 2020 data from the Nicaraguan Central Bank, expects Nicaragua's GDP to contract by 3.2 percent in 2020 (compared with 7 percent previously estimated), followed by a partial recovery of 1 percent in 2021 (in contrast to a further contraction of 1.5 percent previously estimated).⁴⁵ Despite this better-than-expected result, the report notes:

"Furthermore, a number of factors indicate that risks to the near-term outlook remain stacked to the downside. First, despite a recent stabilisation in coronavirus infections, there is a substantial risk that a new wave of coronavirus cases will materialise in the coming months and dampen services activities (even without the imposition of formal containment measures). Secondly, economic growth will be hamstrung by a lack of fiscal support. As a result, job losses and business closures that occurred during the pandemic are much less likely to be reversed than in other countries in the region. Thirdly, increased political instability and social unrest around the time of the November 2021 elections will weigh on consumer and business confidence, while also raising the risk of a run-on Nicaragua's fragile banking system."

The deepening of the economic recession, exacerbated by the decline of two key pillars of the Nicaraguan economy, free-trade zone exports and tourism, with resulting unemployment and loss to family income, is also predicted to further increase poverty. As highlighted throughout the report, it is likely that the hardest hit population groups of any economic contraction will be the already vulnerable population groups.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has noted that 37.9 percent of all employment in Nicaragua is at risk given the impact of the combined crises on the industrial manufacturing, commerce, hotels and restaurant sectors.⁴⁶ Furthermore, as presented in the following graph, FUNIDES in its December 2020 report estimates that the rate of open unemployment, a condition whereby people are willing to work but there is no work for them, would be 6.2 percent in 2020 (approximately 202,000 Nicaraguans), while for 2021, it is expected to drop to 5.4 percent (approximately 172,000 Nicaraguans).



Source: National Institute of Development Information (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo) 2020

45. p.3, The Economist's November 2020 "Nicaragua Country Report."

46. Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT). (2020). COVID – 19 y el Mundo del Trabajo: Punto de partida, respuesta y desafíos en Nicaragua. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-san_jose/documents/publication/wcms_755524.pdf

In terms of exports, a key pillar of Nicaragua's economy, FUNIDES⁴⁷ notes that the first half of 2020 presented a growth of 8.0 percent for commodity exports and predicted that these commodities would grow by 6.6 percent during that year⁴⁸, attributed both to strong international prices, such as for gold, and helped by advance sales for coffee, and robust demand for certain products such as dairy and beef. While this should serve to cushion the currency deficit for 2020, it is predicted that international commodity prices for commodities will be affected by COVID-19, to be reflected in 2021 exports such as coffee, peanuts and sugar.⁴⁹

The industrial sector accounts for the most formal employment, constituted 24.4 percent of GDP by 2014⁵⁰ and by 2016 the sector had 166,923 workers affiliated with the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social, or INSS)⁵¹ FUNIDES predicted a 22.3 percent drop in 2020 in the free trade zone exports, both in the textile sector (by an estimated US\$381 million⁵²), and in the harness sector, a reduction of US\$161.3 million. By May of 2020, it was recorded that out of 83,980 workers in the free trade zones, only 42,167 were still working. 13,045 workers had been placed under the modality of "extended vacation," 23,000 were under "collective suspension," and 5,768 had their work contract cancelled⁵³ FUNIDES suggests that, given the high numbers of women employed in the sector, these job losses will further deepen the economic gender gap, as with the tourism sector where women play a major role.

The ILO emphasized in a recent Country Report⁵⁴ that the informal sector, which comprises 75.7 percent of the working population, is particularly vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. This sector, which has expanded over time in size and weight with respect to the total working population, is not covered by social security

(health coverage or labour protections), are low-income, and tend to be concentrated in small economic units, which make them especially exposed to economic blows. ILO notes that the impact of the crisis is not merely in the increase in unemployment and in the informal sector, but also in income, especially among the less qualified workers and in the informal sector. The crisis will have a "devastating effect" among the working poor, especially among those who cannot even earn the minimum monthly salary wage in their economic activities.⁵⁵ Particularly vulnerable groups are young people; women, because of their labour participation in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, and those who work with no social protections. Vulnerability of households living in poverty and without social protections, among other factors can contribute to a rise in child labour.

Tourism constituted 9.1 percent of Nicaragua's GDP by 2013, as well as accounting for 7.9 percent of employment.⁵⁶ The Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) has noted that tourism is considered to be a key channel to transmit the slowdown in economic momentum. In 2019, tourism accounted for US\$515 million in revenues, down from US\$840 million in 2017.⁵⁷ The political crisis and COVID-19 have seen an estimated 62,000 layoffs, affecting over 80,000 families supported by the tourism industry.

In terms of incoming remittances, mainly from the United States, Costa Rica and Spain constitute an important pillar of the Nicaraguan economy. They represented about 13.2 percent of GDP in 2019 and 20 percent of the income of the poorest households (World Bank, 2020). Analysts initially predicted a sharp fall in remittances, with the country and individual households receiving significantly less transfers.⁵⁸ More recently, FUNIDES has pointed to the tendency of a partial recovery in remittances, coinciding with new analysis from the

47. FUNIDES. Informe de Conyuntura de Nicaragua. P. 71. Agosto de 2020.

48. FUNIDES Informe de Conyuntura de Nicaragua. Diciembre de 2020.

49. FUNIDES. Informe de Conyuntura de Nicaragua. Agosto de 2020

50. "Nicaragua: Economic Outline." Nordeatrade.com. <https://www.nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/nicaragua/economy>.

51. Manuel Bejarano, (September 2016). "Sector industrial espera crecimiento de 3.8% en 2016." El Nuevo Diario. <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/economia/405198-sector-industrial-espera-crecimiento-3-8-2016/>.

52. FUNIDES, Informe de Conyuntura de Nicaragua. December 2020.

53. Despacho 505. <https://www.despacho505.com/COVID-19-afecto-a-mas-de-41000-trabajadores-de-zona-franca/>

54. ILO: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-san_jose/documents/publication/wcms_755524.pdf

55. Ibid.

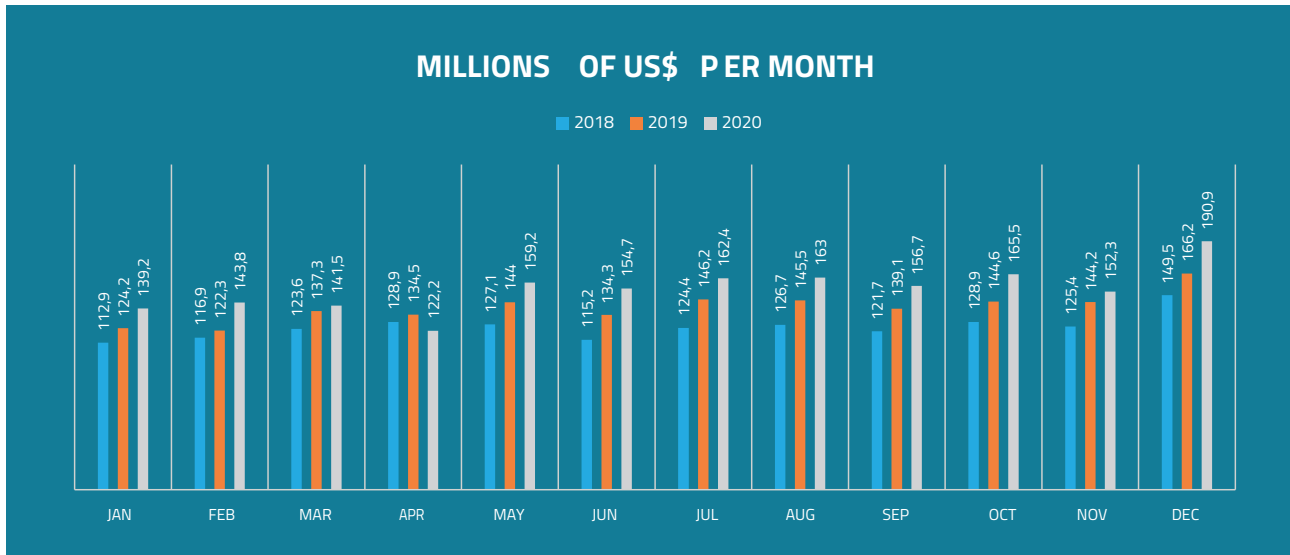
56. op.cit. Despacho 505.

57. Statistics 2119. Nicaraguan Tourism Institute, published on January 08, 2021.

58. Please see www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history, and p. 8, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Country report on Nicaragua, https://economistvision.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Country_Report_Nicaragua_July_2020.pdf

World Bank⁵⁹ Graph 4 below shows a cyclical reduction in remittances during the months from October to November in the three years analysed, and a rebound in December due to the holiday season.

Graph 4. Incoming Remittances, Nicaragua, Jan-Dec 2018-2020



Source: Nicaraguan Central Bank. January 2021.

Regarding Nicaragua's fiscal budget, in July 2020, the Economist predicted that the country's moderate budget surplus would swiftly shift into a large deficit and that the worsening economic conditions would severely affect tax revenues. The Economist's Country Report anticipated that domestic demand would weaken further as the private sector adopts their own social distancing measures and as external demand declines as a result of the pandemic⁶⁰. It also suggested that the extent of deterioration in fiscal accounts would be partially contained, as the government reduces spending in the context of increased financing constraints.

Following the start of the political crisis in April 2018, all international financial institutions—with the exception of the Central American Development Bank (CABEI)—halted new funding to Nicaragua. Nicaragua was even excluded from the initial funding made available to all countries for purposes of the COVID-19 pandemic—as it turns out, requests by the Nicaraguan government were rejected by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the World Bank and the IMF. This dynamic changed in August 2020 as Nicaragua received a US\$43 million from the IADB to assist with the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2020, the IMF⁶¹ approved US\$185.32 million to accommodate needed health related and social spending. In December 2020 the World Bank provided Nicaragua with a US\$20 million loan to support the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic,⁶² in January 2021 the WB approved another US\$80 million credit financed by the International Development Agency, the Bank's fund for the poorest countries in the world, to support Nicaragua's emergency response and recovery needs following hurricanes Eta and Iota.⁶³

The recent approval of funding by international financial institutions to Nicaragua introduces a new and important dimension in the current socio-economic situation. By some estimates, Nicaragua may be receiving over US\$ 1,300 million in funding⁶⁴ namely for COVID-19 response, hurricane relief but also for environmental, infrastructure projects, and budget support. The CABEI leads this funding with over US\$ 600 million in loans – and has been criticized for the absence of conditionalities, with the rest coming from the IMF, the IADB, and the World Bank.

59. The World Bank, Semiannual Report on Latin America and the Caribbean: The Cost of Staying Healthy. The World Bank. [op cit](#).

60. The Economist, op. cit.

61. According to the IMF, the Nicaraguan authorities will transfer one half of the funds to the United Nations Office for Project Services and the World Food Programme which will assist with the transparent execution of targeted expenditure.

62. The project will be implemented in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Project Services.

63. The project will also be implemented in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Project Services.

64. La Prensa, 14 December 2020

To secure the appropriate use of resources, the IMF, IADB and World Bank are channelling part of their funds through United Nations agencies.⁶⁵ In January 2021, given the government's continuing lax attitude towards the COVID-19 pandemic, independent economists called upon the IADB to consider halting disbursements to the government.⁶⁶ Similar calls to the recent financing initiatives by the World Bank and IMF financing can also be expected.

Health

As in all the countries in the Latin America region, COVID-19 has placed a significant strain on Nicaragua's health system, underscoring the existing weaknesses and limitations of access and quality of healthcare. A major concern as the COVID-19 pandemic escalates in low and middle-income countries in Latin America, is that in addition to the specific demands of treatment for COVID-19 contagion, there is a growing risk of widespread disruptions in essential access to reproductive, maternal, new-born, child and adolescent health and nutrition services.

According to the IADB US\$ 43 million loan project document "MINSAs has 72 hospitals throughout the country, of which it has designated 19 for COVID-19 patient care. These 19 hospitals have a combined 3,184 countable beds, 148 intensive care unit (ICU) beds, and one lab for COVID-19 testing for the entire country."⁶⁷ Nicaragua's Ministry of Health indicates that the country had 5,794 physicians in 2015, with 1,762 of them now serving at the 19 hospitals designated for COVID-19 patient care. The ratio of two doctors per 10,000 population reflects the lack of sufficient qualified staff to care for seriously ill patients⁶⁸. Public health officials privately predicted that up to 32,500 Nicaraguans could

test positive for COVID-19, 8,125 of whom could have severe symptoms, and 1,016 of whom might require intensive care beds.⁶⁹ As of March 2020, Nicaragua had only 160 ventilators available.⁷⁰ This fragile health infrastructure requires robust public mitigation and prevention strategies to ensure that the health system's capacity to care for patients is not overwhelmed.

As already noted, in direct contrast to other countries in the region, Nicaragua did not follow the widely accepted recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) on COVID-19 regarding necessary precautions, such as distancing, quarantine, prohibition of large-scale public activities, school shut-downs, or the declaration a national emergency. The IADB noted that on a five-level scale based on the capacity to manage a public health event of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nicaragua has been classified as level two (low capacity).⁷¹ The IADB identified four key areas of weakness in the health system's capacity to face the specific challenges of the pandemic, including: a) early case identification and monitoring due to the lack of timely diagnosis; b) epidemiological surveillance weaknesses in terms of preventing and controlling the virus; c) lack of specific protocols and plan for communicating with the public; and d) health service limitations in managing COVID-19 cases.

The IADB further noted that "Closing these gaps is the priority challenge facing the country since it has not declared a health emergency that would facilitate the timely actions and investments needed in that regard."⁷² In addition to the US\$43 million IADB loan to reduce mortality and morbidity from COVID-19, the IMF approved Nicaragua's request for emergency financial assistance of US\$185.32 million to help the country meet urgent balance of payments needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

65 PAHO/WHO, UNOPS, WFP

66 Please see www.radio-corporacion.com/blog/archivos/78153/gobierno-de-nicaragua-desafia-al-bid-con-prestamo-para-mitigar-el-covid19/

67 IADB (2020). Immediate Response of Public Health to Contain and Control Coronavirus and Mitigate its Effect on the Provision of the Service in Nicaragua. Washington, DC.

68 It is important to point out that an estimated that some 470 doctors and medical staff have been fired or forced to leave from public institutions, as a reprisal to their role in the April 2018 events and the pandemic.

69 Ministerio de Salud (Nicaragua). Protocolo de preparación y respuesta ante el riesgo de introducción de virus coronavirus (COVID-19): Febrero 2020.

70 Aburto, WM. Hospitales tienen menos de 160 ventiladores para pacientes de COVID-19 2020. Confidencial Information Service: <https://confidencial.com.ni/hospitalesinventiladoresuficientespacientescriticosporCOVID-19/> (March 23, 2020).

71 IADB. op. cit.

72 .Ibid.

The potential strain on Nicaragua's health infrastructure goes well beyond the direct impact of the pandemic itself on services. Substantial disruptions have been seen in outpatient visits and vaccinations for young children in most countries because of the pandemic, as well as disruptions in care for pregnant women, new mothers, and safe deliveries by skilled health workers.⁷³ These significant disruptions put many years of hard-won gains in children and women's health at risk, if efforts are not made to ensure the delivery of essential services.

“ The Global Financing Facility (GFF) report on Nicaragua asserted that the pandemic is a serious threat to the continued delivery of essential health services due to the obstacles faced both from the supply and demand for services. The report noted that “according to mathematical models, if health services in Nicaragua suffer significant interruptions, 168,000 children could remain unvaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough, 24,700 women could lose access to institutional deliveries, and 289,500 wouldn't receive family planning services. If all essential services face interruptions, child mortality could increase by 39 percent and maternal mortality by 86 percent in the next year.⁷⁴ ”

On the supply side, services can be interrupted by heavy demands on medical teams to deal with the pandemic itself, the collapse of health infrastructure due to wide contagion, and the illness of medical staff. Dislocations in the supply-chain for medical supplies, both at the national and international level can also hinder the delivery capacity of health services. It is critical to ensure that interruptions to essential health services as an indirect effect of the pandemic does not undermine progress made to date in increasing access to the health system.

The IADB noted “Nicaragua's epidemiological transition has been uneven due to socioeconomic inequalities. High blood pressure, was the leading cause of morbidity in 2019, followed by diabetes, and heart disease and chronic kidney disease⁷⁵. This means that a large portion of the population has underlying conditions and may require hospitalization and/or intensive care if they contract COVID-19, and options for tracking and monitoring chronic illness are needed to help these patients avoid catching COVID-19.” Less attention had been paid to these non-communicable diseases that are widespread in the population and can be exacerbated by shortages of medical staff, supplies and medicines, brought about by COVID-19.

COVID-19 could deepen the inequities in health and the existing gaps in access to basic services and in health care quality and usage that are found in Nicaragua's poorest and most remote regions, including the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) and the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS), where more than 500 indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are located, as well as in the Dry Corridor. In RACCN and the Central Northern region, including Matagalpa y Jinotega, between 30 percent and 50 percent of the population is in the poorest quintile of national wellbeing. Health indicators in these regions show the greatest comparative disadvantages, whether in the highest levels of low birth weight (12 percent), a third greater than the national average or in high levels of maternal mortality.⁷⁶

⁷³ Please see: www.globalfinancingfacility.org/new-findings-confirm-global-disruptions-essential-health-services-women-and-children-COVID-19

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ High blood pressure: 261.8 per 10,000; diabetes at 130 per 10,000; and heart disease and chronic kidney disease at 24 and 21 per 10,000, respectively.

⁷⁶ IADB. Op Cit.

Pressure on health system capacities can reduce the availability of mental health services and the psychosocial support that the population often requires under these circumstances. The strain of living under challenging conditions with limited mobility generates a range of reactions including anxiety, distress, and fear, can translate into post-traumatic stress and depression, especially for women and girls. Fear of infection, loss of income, stigma related to contagion, and lack of information contribute to mental health states requiring psychosocial support activities.

Data reported by the Nicaraguan government is greeted with scepticism by health experts within Nicaragua and abroad. Official sources have tended to report cases in a sporadic fashion, and national and international actors in public health have expressed deep concern about the lack of transparency and information available to the public regarding the pandemic.⁷⁷ Concerned by both the paucity of official information as well as the lack of vigorous prevention and mitigation efforts, a Citizen Observatory for COVID-19⁷⁸ was formed, as a multidisciplinary, collaborative effort to provide information and data on COVID-19 from independent medical personnel, organizations, networks, and the citizenry which seeks to inform the public.

While by October 2020, the Ministry of Health was only acknowledging 124 deaths from COVID-19, an analysis presented at the 50th National Medical Congress of the Nicaraguan Medical Association estimated that by August 31, 7,569 personas had died of COVID-19. By December 9th, 2020 FUNIDES reported 8,454 deaths directly or indirectly related to COVID-19 and possibly between 257,000 to 330,000 cases in the country. The Citizen Observatory (CO) reported between 31 December 2020 and January 27, 2021, 12,716 suspected cases throughout the country, having verified 2,947 deaths by pneumonia or Covid-19⁷⁹. Nicaraguan official figures reported 6,299 confirmed cases and 170 deaths as of January 31, 2021.⁸⁰

The following section examines food security and nutrition issues which are intricately linked to most facets of health outcomes. There is a need to approach the strengthening of the health care system within an integrated, interinstitutional framework which recognizes the interdependence of a range of factors which condition the incidence of disease, such as water quality, housing quality, effective sanitation and hygiene policies, and environmental issues which affect health.

77. At the end of May 2020, the IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, OAS), expressed "serious concern over the lack of reliable information and the ongoing official disinformation over the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nicaragua "This is a violation of the population's right to access information and is preventing evaluations of how authorities are handling the health emergency" describing Government information as "unclear or unspecific".

78. Op. cit. The Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 Nicaragua ("Observatory") is an informal, non-governmental organization of the civil society of Nicaragua. It is a collaborative interdisciplinary team that aims to contribute to fill the lack of information about the situation of COVID-19 in Nicaragua. The team is composed of volunteers, professionals (including public health specialists and epidemiologists), communication, research, engineering, information technology, and students who contribute using their professional tools to make the effort a reality.

79. Please see the following website for further information: www.observatorioni.org

80. According to Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, www.coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/nicaragua

Migration and Refugees

Migrant and refugees are among the most vulnerable Nicaraguan groups. More than 102,000 Nicaraguans have left the country as a result of the crisis, 81,000⁸¹ of whom have been received by Costa Rica. COVID-19 has compounded the challenges of Nicaraguan migrants, as well as of the host country communities where they are lodged, given the economic contraction in Costa Rica.

The UNHCR has noted “With a large proportion of forcibly displaced people in Latin America reliant on the informal economy, especially as they begin their integration into the communities that host them, COVID-19-related quarantine measures are now impacting livelihoods and driving food insecurity.”⁸²

According to the UNHCR’s August 2020 report “COVID-19 driving Nicaraguan refugees to hunger and desperation” before the pandemic, 20 percent of households consumed 2 meals a day, while 77 percent consumed 3 meals. As of August 2020, 63 percent of households report having 2 meals a day, while only 23 percent consume 3 meals. Almost 20 percent have declared that they do not know where they will live next month; 25 percent have changed their place of residence since the start of the pandemic, most stating their inability to pay rent as the main reason. Before the pandemic, 93 percent of refugee families reported a steady work-related income, after the pandemic, this number decreased to 59 percent, injecting a high degree of uncertainty regarding shelter options.

As of August 2020, 7 percent of households have had a family member return to Nicaragua since the start of COVID-19 and 21 percent of the households have at least one member who is considering returning, for reasons predominantly related to reduced access to income in Costa Rica (90 percent of households) and lack of access to food (40 percent). Of households where at least one family member has considered returning to Nicaragua, 75 percent plan to return to Costa Rica within the next year.⁸³

UNHCR reports that 62 percent of migrant households in Costa Rica have received some form of assistance since the preventive isolation measures started, with 52 percent having received assistance from NGOs and/or the UN agencies and 42 percent from the government. Fifty-seven percent of households required medical services from the outset of the pandemic, but 43 percent reported limitations in access because of not being affiliated with the Costa Rican public health system.⁸⁴

Food Security and Nutrition

International agencies and development practitioners have expressed concern about the potential impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition at a global level. A FAO/CELAC (2020) report⁸⁵ noted “The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus will result in increased hunger and poverty in Latin America (...) this new crisis may have a particularly severe impact on certain countries and territories (...) it is essential to keep the food system alive...”

81. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/8/5f44c56d4/COVID19-driving-nicaraguan-refugees-hunger-desperation.html>

82. UNHCR. Rapid Needs Assessment: Impact of COVID-19 on Nicaraguan PoCs. Costa Rica, August 2020.

83. Ibid.

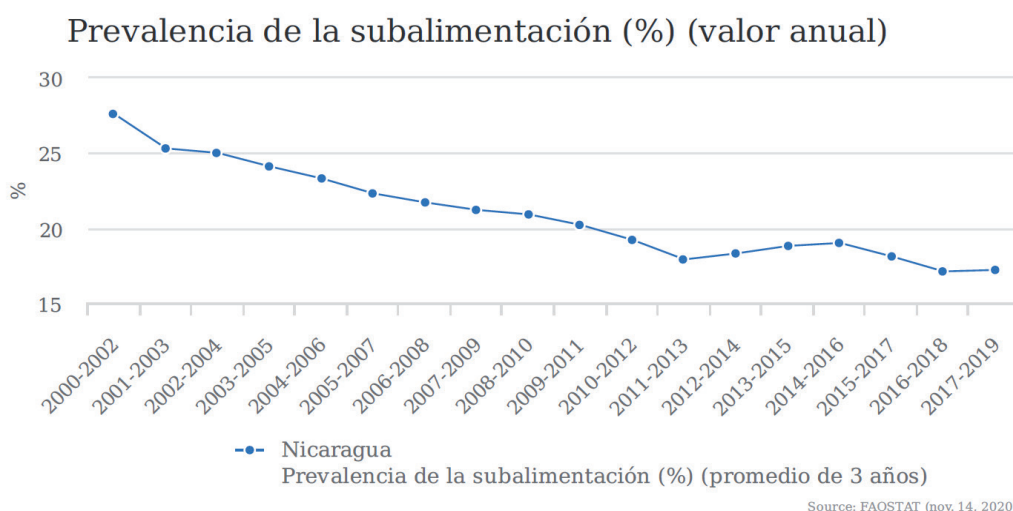
84. Ibid.

85. FAO/CELAC. (2020). Seguridad Alimentaria bajo la Pandemia de COVID-19. Santiago, Chile.

In 2016, Nicaragua had a Global Food Security Index score of 50 out of 100 and was ranked number 72 out of 113 countries. Although Nicaragua achieved sustained economic growth⁸⁶ between 2014 and 2019, with an improvement in nutritional indicators, several factors continue to threaten food security for the most vulnerable population, particularly in the rural sector. UNICEF's 2020 Global Nutrition Report notes "Nicaragua is 'off course' to meet all targets for maternal, infant and young child nutrition (MIYCN). No progress has been made towards achieving the target of reducing anemia among women of reproductive age, with 16.3 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years now affected. Meanwhile, there has also been no progress towards achieving the low-birth-weight target, with 10.7 percent of infants having a low weight at birth".⁸⁷

Although over a two-decade period, the number of undernourished people decreased from 2.3 million to 1.1 million⁸⁸, chronic malnutrition still affects 17 percent of the population and rises to 28 percent and 30 percent in the departments of Madriz, Nueva Segovia y Jinotega.⁸⁹ There is insufficient data to assess the progress that Nicaragua has made towards achieving the target for stunting; however, the latest prevalence data shows that 17.3 percent of children under 5 years of age are affected by undernourishment.⁹⁰ This is higher than the average for the Latin America and the Caribbean region (9.0 percent).

Graph 5. Prevalence of undernutrition, percentage of total population, Nicaragua, 2000-19

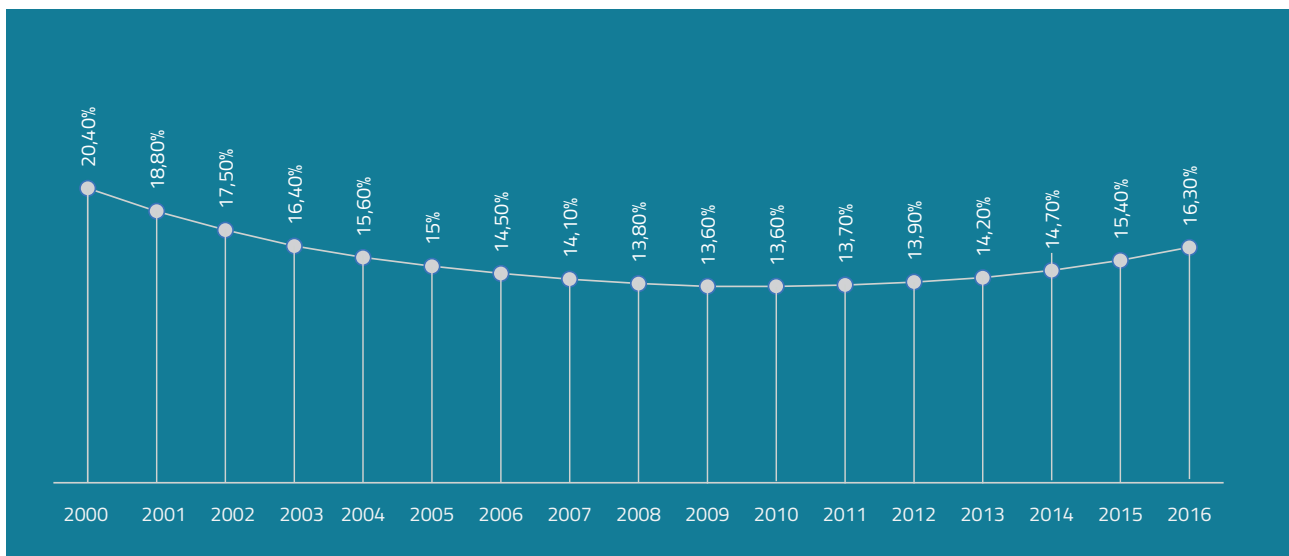


Source: FAO (2020) www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data

Lack of information and inappropriate nutrition practices endanger pregnant women who do not seek health services opportunistically (or do not have easy access to health services). Since 2010, there has been an increase in anemia prevalence among women. These factors and lack of prevention of parasitism all contribute to poor nutrition patterns.

86. WFP Nicaragua Strategy Plan (2019-2023).
 87. Unicef. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/global-nutrition-report-2020/>.
 88. WFP. 2019. Op cit.
 89. Unicef. Op. cit
 90. Ibid.

Graph 5. Prevalence Of Anemia Among Women Of Reproductive Age (15 - 49)



Source: FAO (2020) <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/157>

Another key factor in the pursuit of food security is the need to increase agricultural productivity. Small and medium farmers produce 90 percent of basic foods consumed internally in Nicaragua and 50 percent of agricultural exports.⁹¹ Agricultural production is affected negatively by isolation, climatic events, environmental deterioration, lack of access to agricultural services and shortage of financial resources results, post-harvest losses and poor integration into the market structure. This is further complicated by Nicaragua’s extreme vulnerability to both natural disasters and climate change-related risks, recurrent drought, and flooding. Nicaragua is considered among the 15 countries in the world at highest risk in term of climate-related events.⁹²

In terms of food security and COVID-19, FAO places Nicaragua as medium high in terms of exposure to the pandemic risks for food systems.⁹³ Nicaragua was seen to be at medium high risk for the impact of “changes in domestic food prices due to disruptions in food import flows”, and at high risk for “reduction in national food supply due to sudden increases in export flows and decreased income due to drops in export prices”.⁹⁴

According to the January 2021 CID Gallup poll,⁹⁵ when asked at the household level about their economic situation today compared to last year, forty-nine percent responded much worse, thirty-three percent responded the same, while eighteen percent responded much better. The September 2020 CID Gallup poll⁹⁶ suggested that the cost of the items that make up the basic food basket had gone up and that it has affected the quality of life of the population. Rice, beans, oil, chicken, and meat have all increased in price.

91. WFP Nicaragua Country Strategy Plan (2019-2023)

92. Germanwatch, Índice de Riesgo Climático Global 2019 Table 2 www.germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/Indice%20de%20Riesgo%20Climatico%20Global%202019%20-%20Resumen_0.pdf

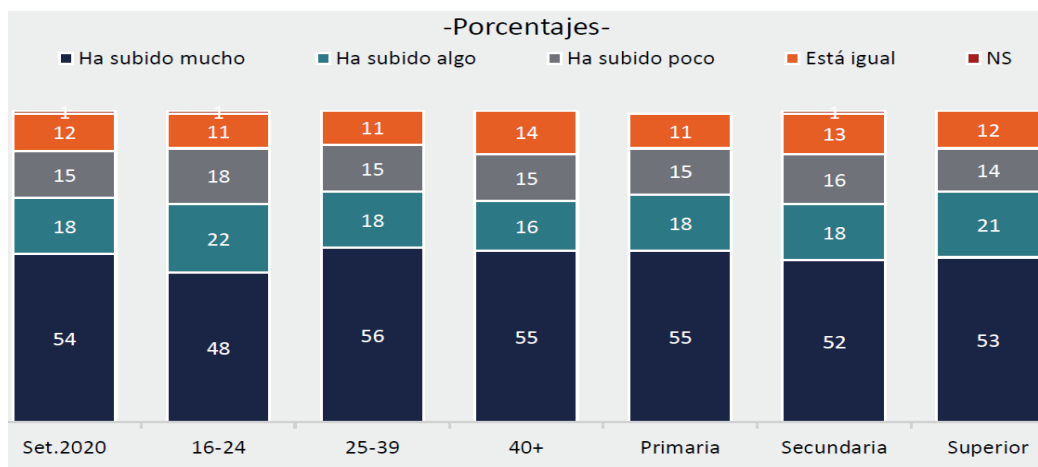
93. The study refers to “limitations in the access to intermediate inputs for food production” (seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, etc.). FAO/CELAC op. cit.

94. FAO/CELAC op. cit.

95. CID Gallup, January 2021.

96. CID Gallup, [September 2020](#)

Graph 6. Cost of living in September 2020 compared to previous 4 months



Source: CID Gallup Encuesta de Opinión pública No.97. September 2020

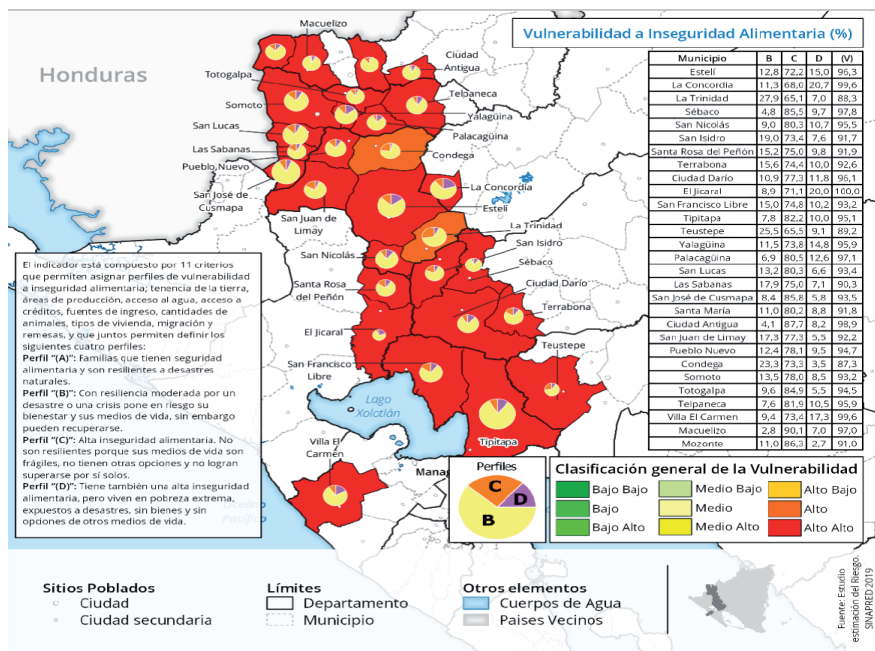
In terms of geographical focus, two regions should receive particular attention given their levels of food insecurity: The Dry Corridor and the Northern Caribbean Region (RACCN). According to the World Bank, “Nicaragua’s highest poverty and malnutrition levels were found along the Caribbean coast, a largely isolated and culturally diverse area with 23 Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant territories. In 2013, the prevalence of underweight children under five years old was higher in this area (25 %) than in the nation overall (22 %) and well above the LAC regional average of 3 %”. The Dry Corridor and the Caribbean Coast region have been affected by disasters of natural origin in recent times, therefore exacerbating those conditions.

Nicaragua’s Dry Corridor

One of the geographical regions most vulnerable to food insecurity is in the Dry Corridor. In 2019, SINAPRED and the WFP carried out a rapid assessment to determine the effects of drought on food security in 29 municipalities prioritized by the government. The study estimated that 221,952 people (44,390 families) in these municipalities had a high risk of facing food insecurity, largely due to losses of livelihoods for subsistence farmers. Of these, some 75,414 persons (14,883 families) required aid. Family survival strategies include sale of household goods and savings, reduction of expenditure in health and education; reduction in food consumption (quantity and quality); and migration. According to the study, 40 percent of households allocate more than 75 percent of their income to the purchase of food: 24 percent allocate between 65 and 75 percent of income, 22 percent between 50 and 65 percent, and 13 percent spend less than 50 percent. In other words, 87 percent of households experience food insecurity given that they spend more than 50 percent of their income to buy food.⁹⁷

Graph 7. Vulnerability in 29 prioritized municipalities of the Dry Corridor, Nicaragua, 2019

97. World Food Programme (2020). Estudio de Evaluación del Impacto y medición del riesgo de sequía en 29 municipios del Corredor Seco de Nicaragua 2019: Proyecto de fortalecimiento de capacidades para la preparación ante el Fenómeno El Niño en el Corredor Seco. Managua, Nicaragua.



Sources: Compiled by WFP, based on SINAPRED/INETER/MAG/MFCCA/UNAN. Nicaragua drought 2019

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene crucially underpin health and nutrition, whether in household contexts, education institutions, learning spaces, community centres or shelters. These issues attain even greater critical importance in the context of COVID-19, where hygiene and health requirements put greater strain on the system as social spending for this sector may diminish. Nicaragua has made important advances over the last two decades, although significant gaps in coverage remain, with strong disparities between the urban and rural sector.

Regarding percentages of the population using improved water supplies, a 2017 UNICEF/WHO report⁹⁸ compares data of 2000 and 2017, both at the national then and then urban and rural. In 2000, the total population's access to safely managed improved water was 48 percent, by 2017, it was 52 percent. In 2000 in the rural sector, it was 26 percent, by 2017 it had risen to 29 percent. The population's access to safely managed improved water in the urban sector in 2000 was 66 percent, by 2017, it was 67 percent.

Regarding sanitation, the rural urban gaps are also significant. In 2000, at a national level, the percentage of the population using at least basic sanitation was 58 percent, and by 2017, it was 74 percent: 84 percent in the urban sector and 62 percent in the rural sector. See Table 4 for estimated populations without access to safely improved water supplies and not using basic sanitation facilities.

A new effort in this sector is being initiated by CABE's \$100 million "Project to Improve and Expand Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Systems in 19 Cities". The project intends to benefit an estimated 348,000 people presently who lack drinking water service, as well providing more than 384,500 people with improved sewage services in urban and rural areas. The project will contribute to disease reduction derived from lack of potable and deficits in hygiene conditions and will seek to service medical centres and educational facilities.

Children and Adolescents Protection, and Gender-Based Violence

98. Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2017. Special focus on inequalities. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization, 2019.

COVID-19 and the November hurricanes have caused additional differentiated needs. Therefore, it is critically



important to assess the impact of such crises on the lives of children and adolescents, considering the lasting effect that some essential deprivations—access to health, nutrition, and or being exposed to violence—represents both for their overall development and well-being.

According to a UNICEF Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children⁹⁹ there are three principal ways in which children are affected: a) infection with virus itself and its possible consequences; b) the immediate socioeconomic impacts of measures to stop transmission of the virus and the end the pandemic; and c) the potential longer-term effects of delayed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is particularly concerning given that even before COVID-19, many Nicaraguan families and children were already living in poverty. The latest estimates show that about 52 percent of children and adolescents live in poverty and 23 percent in extreme poverty.

Without adequate support, already marginalized children and their families have a difficult time protecting themselves and mitigating the impact of the crisis.

Among the possible impacts predicted¹⁰⁰ are: 1) school non-attendance due to parental perception of financial insecurity, and possibly forcing some children to drop out of school; 2) reduction in food consumption and quality potentially leading to malnutrition, as a result of decreased access to food; 3) reduction in household income in poor families can result in cutting back on essential health expenditures, which in turn will reduce access to and demand for essential child health services (neonatal care and vaccinations) as well as medicine with possible increases in child mortality and morbidity ; 4) potential increases in child labour to compensate for lost family income; 5) an increase in migration and the accompanying family decomposition. There are other vulnerable child populations for whom the effect of the current crisis represents a high risk and therefore deserve special attention: children with disability, migrant children, and children of the indigenous population, among others.

Regarding Gender-based violence (GBV), according to UN Women, one in three women worldwide experience physical violence or sexual violence mostly by an intimate

99. UNICEF. The Impact of COVID-19 on Children, UNICEF Policy Brief (15 April 2020).

100. UNICEF (2019) Study on the Economic Crisis and its Impact on Child Rights. Managua, Nicaragua.

partner.¹⁰¹ According to UNICEF, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys globally, have been sexually abused or exploited before reaching the age of 18.¹⁰² Since the outbreak of COVID-19, international data reveals a worrisome trend of increasing evidence of all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, demanding a prioritized response to this situation.

In Nicaragua, this trend is no different. Pressures and tensions generated by fear and isolation, along with additional stress, tensions and financial insecurity, exacerbate existing abuse patterns, with COVID-19 confinement creating additional barriers that prevent victims from seeking help and reporting their situation. Nicaraguan women's organizations have asserted that both femicide and adolescent pregnancies have increased as a result. Femicides, with 50 reported up to 31 August 2020, show a rise in comparison with 44 in the same period in 2019. Organizations report 68 documented attempts at femicide, compared to 52 in the same period in 2019. Official data only reports 11 femicides between February 1 and 7 August, 2020, suggesting possible under-recording, making it difficult to take effective measures to counter these crimes.¹⁰³

The situation of GBV was very serious before the pandemic. According to the Institute of Forensic Medicine (Legal Forensic Institute), 60 percent of the more than 150,500 forensic analyses between 2013-2015 involved cases of physical and psychological violence against women, girls and female adolescents, 17 percent of which were classified as sexual abuse. A total of 82 percent of victims of sexual abuse were girls and adolescents under 17 years of age, with most cases occurring in the family and community environment.¹⁰⁴ The Nicaraguan Ministry of the Family (Mifam) applied special protection measures for 19,774 girls, boys and adolescents between 2012 y 2017.¹⁰⁵

Adolescent pregnancy is linked with sexual and intra-family violence. According to Mifam, 1 out of every 2 girls (42 percent) and adolescents who received attention from the Department of Psychosocial Attention of MIFAM, were pregnant as a result of sexual abuse. Almost 63 percent of women between 20 and 24 stated that they had had their first sexual encounter before they were 18.¹⁰⁶



101. Please see: www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19

102. www.unicef.org/media/89096/file/CSAE-Report-v2.pdf

103. Please see: www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26228&LangID=E

104. https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Nicaragua_2018_COAR.pdf

105. <https://www.unicef.org/nicaragua/prevención-y-respuesta-la-violencia-abuso-y-explotación>

106. *ibid.*

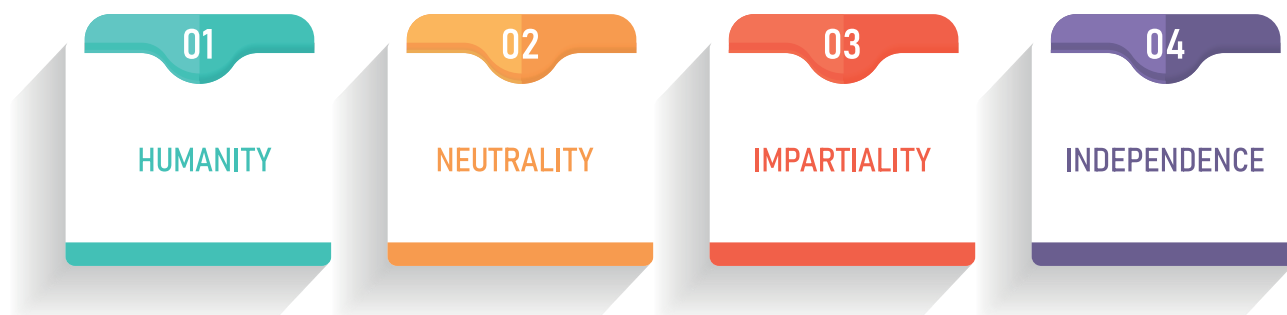
4. Strategic Priorities: Humanitarian & Recovery Response

This section presents elements for a required strategic approach to support the most affected and vulnerable populations and respond to an increasingly critical situation.¹⁰⁷ These approaches are the result of a comprehensive review of the limited available information of the impact of the crises and projections.¹⁰⁸ Thorough assessments are needed to ensure and confirm humanitarian and recovery needs, as well as to adjust the scope and areas of intervention. Clearly, a number of these recommendations relating to the social protection system will have an impact on other underserved and affected populations.

The approach employed in this section takes into account three broad areas of needs of the most vulnerable: a) humanitarian and recovery assistance for basic needs; b) contributions to resilience building and livelihoods, including access to basic services; and c) Strengthening institutional mechanisms for the prevention and protection of children and adolescents against all forms of violence. This section focuses on how these three broad areas may be addressed in varying time frames for the areas/sector of Health; Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihoods; Protection; and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.

These approaches have three interconnected strategic objectives to respond to humanitarian and recovery needs: first, to ensure the well-being of the most vulnerable and affected people; second, to contribute to the sustainability of basic services provision, contribute to resilience and livelihoods; and third, to prevent, mitigate and respond to protection risks by strengthening community and institutional mechanisms. The proposed multi-sectoral response should be implemented in line with the humanitarian principles, using a rights-based approach, which takes age, gender and diversity into account.

Humanitarian Principles¹⁰⁹



107. The July 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan with Humanitarian Needs Overview: Venezuela (Humanitarian Program Cycle 2020, OCHA) serves as a useful model for international stakeholders of how critically important data can be consolidated for evidence-based joint strategic response planning for humanitarian needs.

108. This section contains estimates based on available data from organizations such as FAO, Unicef, and WFP previous to 2020 - the year that marks an important deterioration among the population. Available data has been applied to the projected population estimates for 2021. Hence, it can be expected that the actual numbers are actually higher than the 2021 projections that are presented in this report given the drastic change in conditions beginning in 2018.

109. As per United Nations General Assembly resolutions 46/182 (1991) and 58/114 (2004)

Many of the proposed responses should involve integrated interventions to multiple simultaneous needs, and while the following sections are broadly sectoral, they will reflect inevitable overlapping and combined strategies. Each proposed area/sector identifies the vulnerable population at risk and their possible projected numbers for 2021, recommending both short and medium-term

strategies to address predicted priority needs. The most vulnerable population correspond to those presented in section 3A of this Report. This does not seek to imply that other groups have not been adversely affected by these crises, rather that groups presented in Section 3A are the most vulnerable to severe shocks.

Health



Photo: Marcos Cola in Pixabay

The vulnerable population considered are the following groups: Girls and boys under 5; Girls and boys between 6 and 9 years old; Adolescents (10 - 19 years old); Seniors (older than 65 years old); Pregnant women (expected pregnancies); Persons with Disabilities; and Persons with communicable and non-communicable diseases. As presented in Table 2, the total number of persons in these categories living in extreme poverty is nearly 760,000 – including some 175,000 children under age 5, over 36,000 pregnant and lactating mothers, and nearly 90,000 persons over 65 years of age.

Priority should be given to efforts to tackle COVID-19, following WHO guidelines for deterrence of the spread of the virus, as well as a national vaccination strategy. This should closely follow GAVI COVAX¹¹⁰ guidelines to ensure the necessary vaccines; establish a vaccination strategy with clear prioritization criteria and calendar, all in a transparent manner and in consultation with

civil society. The potential strain on Nicaragua's health infrastructure goes well beyond the direct impact of the pandemic itself on services.

Considering that Nicaragua has been classified by IADB as level two (low capacity for COVID-19 handling) priority attention should be for the following vulnerable populations: children under age five, pregnant and lactating women, adolescents, the elderly, people with disabilities, indigenous communities, people living with non-communicable and communicable diseases who require continuous and specialized attention, and health workers, due to their degree of exposure to COVID-19.

Public health practitioners in the region have expressed concern that substantial disruptions may well occur in outpatient visits and vaccinations for young children because of the pandemic, as well as disruptions in care

110. COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The ACT Accelerator is a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. www.gavi.org/covax-facility

for pregnant women, new mothers, and safe deliveries by skilled health workers.¹¹¹ These disruptions put many years of hard-won gains in children and women's health at risk, if efforts are not made to ensure the delivery of essential services. Integral health services have not closed in Nicaragua; however, one of the main reasons for reduced access is the transportation costs for people to reach health centers, particularly in rural areas.

Given these persistent and multidimensional vulnerabilities that have been compounded by COVID-19, the proposed response in this sector will follow two strategic lines of action:

Strategic Line of Action A

Strengthen the national response plan to the pandemic, ensuring the implementation of the protocols and recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO).

Attention should be mainly on existing gaps in inter-sectoral coordination, monitoring and testing access through the national lab network. Actions should include strengthening capacity for planning, monitoring, and follow up at the local level; incorporating new communication strategies of risk with communities to promote appropriate messages tailored to age and risk groups; establish monitoring and detection processes at the local level; strengthen a national network of laboratory capacity; strengthen institutional capacity for case management with an emphasis on geographical areas with lesser response capacity; support timely acquisition of inputs and equipment for adequate treatment and personnel protection.

The proposed response seeks to strengthen capacities in priority hospitals and healthcare centres designated for COVID-19 response. At the same time, it is critical that support for COVID-19 case management at primary care centres is provided. The previously mentioned IADB

loan¹¹² is specifically aimed at reducing the mortality and morbidity from the virus, and it is essential that humanitarian actions are effectively coordinated with all international interventions specifically directed at pandemic mitigation. The principal results sought by this loan effort is guaranteeing the publication of daily and weekly epidemiological bulletins; increasing the number of laboratories with COVID-19 diagnostic capacity, and thus increase the number of detected suspected cases; the approval and implementation of protocols for management and attention of COVID-19 cases; increasing the percentage of health personal trained in the use and disposal of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); and increased numbers of health units with capacity to apply the attention algorithm.

Strategic Line of Action B

Strengthen access to a comprehensive health services network to meet existing and potential priority needs related to communicable and non-communicable diseases, and other health needs.

This intervention has among its priorities the strengthening of maternal and child health services, and sexual and reproductive health management, providing care for non-communicable diseases, and assisting indigenous communities, many of whom are experiencing health service disruptions as a result of the grave consequences of the November 2020 hurricanes. Vaccination and control activities are also required to respond to prevent outbreaks of preventable diseases, including measles and diphtheria.

Interventions in this sector should work closely with WASH interventions for vector control, reduction of waterborne diseases, improvement of access to water services at both community and institutional levels, maintenance of hospital hygiene protocols, and infection prevention and control in health facilities.

111. Please see www.globalfinancingfacility.org/new-findings-confirm-global-disruptions-essential-health-services-women-and-children-COVID-19

112. Respuesta Inmediata de Salud Pública para Contener y Controlar el Coronavirus y Mitigar su efecto en la Prestación del Servicio en Nicaragua (ni-I1161) propuesta de préstamo. Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), 2020.

Food security and Livelihoods

As indicated in Table 3, according to SOFI 2020 undernourishment is prevalent among 17.2 per cent of the population—the highest in Central America; 17.3 per cent of children under 5 years of age are affected by undernourishment making them vulnerable to stunting; and anaemia is prevalent among 16.3 percent among women in reproductive age (15-49).¹¹³

Given the persistent poverty levels, existing malnutrition levels, vulnerabilities exacerbated by economic shocks, as well as the ongoing risk of natural disaster, the proposed strategy for food security and livelihoods includes two broad objectives: a) assistance for the well-being requirements of the most vulnerable; b) support to strengthen livelihoods and build resilience, while ensuring access to basic services. Particular attention should be paid to age consideration and mainstreaming of gender, considering the impact of the crisis on women and children. To ensure the appropriate targeting, scale and response, specialized agencies or institutions should conduct comprehensive assessments.

The poorest regions of the country—the Dry Corridor and the Caribbean—are considered to be the most food insecure in the country. The total population for 2021 of the Dry corridor is estimated at almost 800,000 persons and the Caribbean region (RACCN and RACCS) at 960,000 persons. Although the estimates for chronic undernutrition are not available for those regions, the number is above the national average.

Two strategic lines of action are proposed:

- Given that the principal factor behind severe food insecurity is the insufficient access to food, this line of action proposes the provision of food assistance and support to the targeted populations through direct assistance and the expansion of existing national programmes.
- Given the extreme vulnerability of significant sectors of the rural population to economic upheaval and climate

change, as well as the impact of the November hurricanes, this line of action proposes to provide critical productive assets, promote labour creation, and supply credit and technical assistance, while responding to systemic limitations that affect the production, transformation and consumption of food, to foster more resilient and sustainable small farming systems.

Strategic Line of Action A

This line of action proposes relief and recovery food assistance to affected populations. Targeting criteria should aim at the most vulnerable, including pregnant and lactating women, families with children under five suffering from malnutrition, and school-age children and adolescents.

Efforts should be made to strengthen and scale-up existing social protection systems and programmes to maximize the impact and coverage of food assistance. The most extensive effort in Nicaragua is the national School Feeding Programme,¹¹⁴ which provides at least one nutritional meal per day per student, reaching 1.2 million children in public schools nation-wide. This programme could serve as a strategic mechanism to be expanded and fortified. Consideration should be given to vertical expansion so that two meals are provided instead of one. Other programmes could also be strengthened to play an expanded role both in social protection as well as education in nutrition and gender equity.

Strategic Line of Action B

This line proposes combining needs for short-term food assistance and restoration of livelihoods under circumstances of medium and moderate food insecurity, with a longer-term focus on building resilience and sustainability for vulnerable communities and subsistence/small-holder farmers.

In addition to the impact of shocks, stable food production and sustainable food systems are constrained by climate variability, climate change, and degradation of ecosystems. This line of action proposes providing technical assistance and agricultural inputs, equipment and tools to smallholder farmers¹¹⁵ to restore livelihoods and build more robust production systems.

113. It should be noted that considering ECLAC's definition of "extreme poverty" - those persons whose income is not enough to acquire a basic food basket - includes 22.8 percent of the population.

114. Nicaragua Country Strategic Plan (2019–2023), World Food Programme.

115. According to its 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan, The WFP will target 4,500 smallholder farmers in Jinotega, Nueva Segovia, Matagalpa, Madriz and Estelí departments, who have the potential to produce food surplus and 6,000 subsistence farmer families in rural and peri-urban areas to strengthen resilience and capacity to reduce face disaster risk.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Because of lack of access to safe water and basic sanitation conditions, persons living in poverty are already at a higher risk of death due to water-borne diseases, and the malnourished pregnant and lactating women and children face additional complications due to limitations in WASH conditions. The impact of the two hurricanes in November 2020 underscored the importance and fragility of this sector. Priorities should include improving access to safe water and sanitation services to reduce the vulnerability to mortality and morbidity risks associated with communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Water, sanitation and hygiene, as well as other essential services, are critical for the implementation of the humanitarian and recovery responses in health, nutrition and protection sectors and constitute an essential part in preventing and protecting human health during infectious diseases outbreaks, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. The estimated total population without access to safely managed, improved water supplies was 48 percent of the population, and not using improved sanitation facilities, 26 percent (2017),¹¹⁶ equivalent to approximately 3.2 million and 1.6 million persons respectively. These are overlapping population sectors, since persons in these two groups may have access to neither service - consequently, the total vulnerable population is difficult to approximate. As already noted, most facilities at the municipal level are concentrated in urban areas.

Strategic Line of Action

This line of intervention proposes to strengthen access and capacities to secure water, sanitation and hygiene services for vulnerable populations in prioritized communities, as well as public spaces such as health care centres, schools, and marketplaces, to reduce mortality and morbidity.

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene, is not only fundamental for health but also for the eradication of poverty. In the context of COVID-19, it is essential to maintain access to minimum disinfection standards and hygiene products to limit the spread of the virus. Interventions would be implemented to ensure access to water and sanitation, promoting good hygiene practices, distributing hygiene kits, improving waste management, and training in service and infrastructure maintenance. This should include, depending on specific local conditions, installation of storage and community filters, and trucked in water supplies. Communication strategies should be fostered emphasizing risk and preventive measures.



Photo: Carlos F. Hueso

116. Based on UNICEF's Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2017. Special focus on inequalities New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization, 2019.

Children and Adolescents Protection, and Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based Violence

Vulnerability to gender-based violence crosses all social strata. Violence against women and children has been recognized as a pervasive social and public health problem in Nicaragua. Domestic violence has increased in the context of COVID-19, as the extended confinement has facilitated abuse, combined with existing deeply rooted cultural norms which have historically endorsed the use of violence against women and children. According to ENDESA, 1 in every 9 women surveyed reported having experienced some form of sexual violence between 2011 and 2012, and of this group, 26 percent were between 15 and 19 years-old; and 17 percent were between 10 and 14 years old. It is important to note that the above data refers to reported cases, which are dramatically underestimated vis-a-vis the actual extent of violence and abuse.

Priorities should include strengthening the capacities of public institutions, civil society and affected communities to prevent violence against women and children, creating awareness on the risks and drivers of violence, discrimination, inequality, and harmful gender and violence norms; ensuring the provision of economic and livelihood support to mitigate financial strains and poverty, which are risk factors for exploitation and abuse. Equally important is to respond to protection risks for women, children and adolescent victims of, or at risk of, violence and other forms of abuse by supporting local services (such as helplines) in coordination with community organizations for children and women's safety and well-being. This response should include women and children from indigenous and afro-descendent populations.

Child and adolescent protection

The protection risks for children and adolescents due to poverty and deprivations, exacerbated by the mitigation actions to contain the spread of the virus, and the socio-economic crisis are expressed in different manners. The risk of violence, neglect and exploitation of children and adolescents may increase given reduced financial capacity of households, parents, and caregivers to care for children, or by the loss of parents or caretaker due to pandemic. The economic uncertainty of parent given reduced incomes, disruption of family livelihoods

combined with the lack of access to basic services, may put at risk the survival and development of children, increasing the risk of malnutrition or exposure to preventable diseases.

Priority actions for children and adolescent protection must include: a) full access to health and nutrition services, including a specific comprehensive package of essential care that makes routine immunization and therapeutics available to all; b) access to clean water, sanitation services as well as hygiene education combined with communities engagement in behaviour change initiatives that include handwashing as part of the life-saving practices; c) expansion of social protection programmes that includes access to services and childcare; d) support to gender-sensitive mental health psychosocial support for children and young people; e) increase access to safe school to address children been out of school, promote school retention, while maintain while maintaining their support system, including protection, mental and physical well being.

Strategic Line of Action

This line proposes strengthening the operational and functional capacity of critical services to confront Gender-based violence (GBV), facilitating access to comprehensive psychological support and medical care for cases of violence against women, girls and adolescents. Considering the important role that families, community organizations, NGOs and government institutions have in preventing GBV, this intervention proposes to strengthen the capacity of these organizations to respond effectively to protection risks, including prevention, case management, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. Although these are longer-term interventions, short term actions should be considered. This line of response would place particular emphasis on strengthening community protection mechanisms against GBV, including establishing hotlines, safe spaces, and access to legal and support service.

Community level action would also support prevention mechanisms such as behavioural change efforts directed at men and boys as well as rights education for women and girls regarding sexual and reproductive rights and access to services for victims and survivors.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The combined consequences of the political crisis that began in April 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the November 2020 hurricanes, have had a far-reaching impact on the population, deepening the critical challenges that the most vulnerable people faced even before 2018. Nicaragua confronts not only a political and human rights crisis but considering the volatile political situation, this could eventually evolve into a humanitarian crisis. Tensions will increase with the approaching 2021 planned national elections, with civil and political rights being further restricted by the government. A continuation of the current situation may have consequences not only for Nicaragua but for the region as whole. Migration has traditionally¹¹⁷ been an “escape valve” and may well turn north given diminishing opportunities in Costa Rica¹¹⁸.

As indicated, the information provided in this report are estimates based on limited available data. While information may not be as complete and extensive as the authors may have wished, one can easily conclude that the impact of the multiple shocks has had major socio-economic consequences for most of the population. Substantial sectors of the population have been identified in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty, the latter population of 1.5 million requiring particular attention and whose vulnerability is further exacerbated by multiple crises: almost 760,000 persons in extreme poverty are highly vulnerable to health challenges; the prevalence of undernourishment affects over 1.1 million persons; over 3.2 million persons remain without access to safely managed improved water, and 1.6 million without improved sanitation facilities.

These are clearly overlapping demographics as the poor face a range of vulnerabilities; therefore, the above figures point to large segments of the population who face deteriorating conditions.

The increased deterioration of the already vulnerable groups of the population are further aggravated by the weak social protection system and deep political polarization and instability. The report's findings warrant an open and transparent discussion among all stakeholders, including civil society.¹¹⁹

Nicaragua's civil society – weakened, dispersed, and persecuted – demands greater access to timely and reliable information, as well as more and improved channels for engagement in a meaningful manner for decisions that affect the population. As underscored by ECLAC in an October 2020 report,¹²⁰ the current socio-economic realities faced by the region, make it imperative that political leaders listen the full range of their citizens' voices. The ECLAC report emphasizes the participatory approach that States need to exercise for planning, programming, and executing actions in a timely and geographically comprehensive manner. ECLAC also underlines the importance of committing to a new development model capable of eradicating extreme poverty, closing income, wealth, and access gaps, generating quality employment, ensuring healthy lives, promoting well-being for all at all ages, and tackling climate crisis, to ensure that no one is left behind.

117. According to a 17 February, 2021 Inter-American Dialogue on Central America, the number of Nicaraguans apprehended at the U.S. border increased from 3,000 in 2019, to 14,000 in 2020.

118. Although Nicaragua has not been included in the U.S. “northern triangle” proposals given the relatively low number of Nicaraguan migrants and refugees arriving to the U.S. southern border; this may change with a worsening of the situation. Costa Rica has been the traditional preferred destiny for Nicaraguan migrants and refugees but is also facing the consequences of the global economic crisis.

119. As previously indicated, for this Report civil society included NGOs, private sector, faith-based organizations, academia, social and grassroots organizations.

120. Political and social compacts for equality and sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean in post-COVID-19 recovery No.8 Special Report COVID-19 15 October 2020 ECLAC

The international community plays a key role for Nicaragua. The brunt of the impact on the most vulnerable populations can be mitigated by prompt actions. International humanitarian, relief and development assistance is needed. Nevertheless, ensuring respect for human rights is a priority.

Given the international community's concerns regarding the present human and civil rights situation, the recent approval of multilateral funds for Nicaragua may be viewed as contradictory. These approvals provide an opportunity for the international community to ensure its appropriate use and to leverage in favor of improved human and civil rights with suitable mechanisms in place.¹²¹.

Five recommendations follow:

Need for Reliable Data and Ongoing Assessments on the Impact of the Current Crises: given the growing need to ensure that humanitarian and recovery response programs are evidence-based, thorough assessments are needed to ensure and confirm humanitarian and recovery needs, for the priority areas addressed in this report as well other areas such as education and housing. Considering Nicaragua's complex situation and the limited availability of data, independent assessments are needed. Findings would contribute to a better understanding of the impact of the multiple shocks on the population, determining their needs and facilitate responses that would effectively prioritize the most vulnerable. Assessments should be carried out in a transparent manner, in close consultation with civil society, the affected populations and the international community.¹²²

Develop a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to respond to the critical needs of the most vulnerable populations based on assessments: ensuring accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, particularly for the areas of health, food security and water & sanitation. This encompass' launching a program to tackle COVID-19, following WHO guidelines, and establishing a vaccination strategy with a clear prioritization criteria and calendar - all in a transparent manner and with civil society engagement.

Ensuring civil society's participation: This is particularly challenging in the current Nicaraguan environment. The principles of the 2018 Escazú Agreement¹²³ must be complied with in terms of a participatory, informed, and inclusive society. Citizen participation is a right enshrined in the Nicaraguan Constitution, and citizen participation under Law 475 establishes specific participatory mechanisms. Citizen engagement has been considerably undermined in the context of the current political crisis. Efforts and support are needed to restore conditions that allow citizens and civil society to exercise their right of participation to facilitate dialogue with the population and international community.

International assistance should be made available under conditions of strict accountability, transparency, with civil society engagement and with the affected population: Improved coordination is required at all levels - at the community and at the national levels; funding should be channelled through international organizations such as United Nations and international NGOs. Donors, IFIs and the UN should jointly use their leverage to ensure full compliance of the correct use of resources.¹²⁴

A platform should be established to facilitate comprehensive and coordinated international assistance: whereby interventions are agreed considering evidence-based needs, accountability, transparency and above all, respect for human rights. This platform should be composed by key donor representatives, international financial institutions, and international organizations, in order to reach consensus on a coherent policy on international assistance, and with civil society engagement.

121. Attention should be given to Transparency International's 28 January 2021 report: Nicaragua occupies position 159 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perception Index. www.transparency.org/en/countries/nicaragua

122. Robust and transparent mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and communication are needed, using rigorous and established methodologies such as those utilized by ECLAC and UNDP.

123. Escazu is the regional agreement on Access to information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean. It was ratified by the Government of Nicaragua in February 2020.

124. The Secretary General of the UN has called on countries to effectively implement the UN Convention against Corruption, stating that corruption is a threat to people's well-being and an obstacle to rebuilding a better world after the pandemic. The UN is positioned to play an active role in preventing corruption and fostering transparency, while engaging not only to government counterparts but to civil society as well.

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