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Global development

Paraguayans go hungry as coronavirus lockdown ravages livelihoods

Early, aggressive measures seem to be controlling the disease but the pandemic has laid bare the country's social inequalities

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William Costa *in Asunción*

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When Covid-19 arrived in South America, Paraguay was one of the first countries to take measures to contain the virus, closing schools and banning public gatherings after just the [second confirmed case on 11 March](#).

The nationwide lockdown seems to be controlling the spread of the disease, but it has created another problem: large numbers of Paraguayans are going hungry in their own homes.

Paraguay has reported some of the lowest infection rates in South America - currently 129 confirmed cases and six deaths.

But the government of President Mario Abdo Benítez has been heavily criticised for failing to support people left without income during the total quarantine - which is now coming to the end of the third week and is [set to continue until 19 April](#).

Sixty-five per cent of Paraguay's workers earn their living in the [informal economy](#) and have no access to benefits during the coronavirus crisis.

And while the government has been authorised to secure [loans of \\$1.6bn to face the crisis](#), only a small part of a promised scheme of [emergency payments](#) of about \$76 and food packs have reached those left in need. A further payment scheme is yet to be implemented.

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Valentina Osuna, a craftswoman and mother of four from the indigenous Qom village of Rosarino, said she was no longer able to sell her work.

“There’s no support, there’s nothing from the state. My children are hungry.”

Abdo Benítez has [apologised for the situation and called for patience](#). But when he briefly boarded a public bus last week to greet passengers, he was [heckled with demands for the promised support payments](#).

The scale of the crisis has been shown by the recent launch of [AyudaPy](#) - an open-source, non-governmental website allowing users to request and offer help. Thousands of messages are being posted daily by people describing dire circumstances and requesting basic items like milk, bread and medicine.

Óscar Pereira, member of a residents' organisation in the deprived Tacumbú neighbourhood of Asunción, the capital, said: "The mutual solidarity on display is outstanding; poor people are helping other poor people. We're all helping and giving what we can: we're cooking communally so that we can get food to people."



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As it has across Latin America, the coronavirus crisis has laid bare social inequalities and the poor state of public infrastructure. Amid widespread [outrage](#), the government has promised a [reform](#) of a state that is underfunded and plagued by [corruption](#) and [highly skewed tax policies](#).

However, for Alicia Amarilla, national coordinator of the Organisation of Rural and Indigenous Women, not even promises of reform can guarantee greater dignity for Paraguay's many poor families.

"We're going to see many more difficult situations come from this crisis - we're in a country with far too much inequality. We know that the government won't take privileges away from those that have them. The people who are most in need are the ones who will continue suffering."

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