

# Tropical disease prevalence in Latin America presents opportunity for US, expert says

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Recently published prevalence estimates of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in five Latin American countries—Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela—could suggest a new direction for United States foreign policy in the region, according to a tropical-disease expert at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Dr. Peter Hotez, the fellow in disease and poverty at the Baker Institute, outlined his insights in a new editorial, "The NTDs and Vaccine Diplomacy in Latin America: Opportunities for United States Foreign Policy," published in the open-access journal *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases*. He is available for media interviews on the topic.

"NTDs are commonly found wherever poverty is pervasive and the Latin American and Caribbean region's major NTDs—Chagas disease, cutaneous leishmaniasis, dengue, intestinal helminth

infections and malaria (mostly vivax malaria)—are highly endemic in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela, while dengue is also an important NTD in Cuba," Hotez said. "Approximately 14-15 percent of the cases of these NTDs occur in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela, despite the fact that these countries only comprise about 10 percent of the region's population."

Hotez said such high numbers of people affected by NTDs afford potential opportunities for the U.S. to work with these countries in programs of science and global health diplomacy. "These programs might include bilateral cooperative efforts to implement disease control and elimination programs for the major NTDs, potentially relying on shared expertise between the U.S. and the disease-endemic countries," he said.

There may also be specific opportunities for "vaccine diplomacy," a form of science diplomacy focused on "joint development of lifesaving vaccines and related technologies" conducted by scientists from "nations that often disagree ideologically" or even those "actively engaged in hostile actions," Hotez said. Both the U.S. and Cuba stand out for their programs of vaccine research and development, with Cuba's Instituto Finlay, for example, belonging to the renowned Developing Countries Vaccine Manufacturers Network. "Joint U.S.-Cuba programs in NTD vaccines, possibly including scientists from Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua or Venezuela, offer additional mechanisms on this front," Hotez said.

Hotez is dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, where he is a professor in the Department of Pediatrics and the Department of Molecular Virology and Microbiology, head of the Section of Pediatric Tropical Medicine and the Texas Children's

Hospital Endowed Chair of Tropical Pediatrics.  
Hotez is also president of the Sabin Vaccine  
Institute and Texas Children's Hospital's Center for  
Vaccine Development.

**More information:** *PLOS Neglected Tropical  
Diseases*, [www.plosntds.org/article/info: ...  
journal.pntd.0002922](http://www.plosntds.org/article/info:journal.pntd.0002922)

Provided by Rice University

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