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ARTICLE

**GONE WITH THE  
PANDEMIC: THE  
ABCs OF RESTORING  
BUSINESS HEALTH  
AND CONFIDENCE**

Madrid, August 2022

***Urgent need for greater  
investments, partnerships and  
better communication***

***A herculean challenge: making  
up for lost years in healthcare***

The pandemic not only claimed the lives of loved ones, healthcare workers and thousands of people unable to get a vaccine or adequate medical care, it also wiped out thousands of jobs, generating an unprecedented economic crisis that served to prove just how essential health and wellness are for the global economy.

COVID-19 elicited catastrophic evidence of how ill-prepared governments and their health systems are to deal with health emergencies, and also the lack of support for health professionals who lack the equipment, hospital infrastructure, clinical supplies and in some cases medicines to help their patients.

The pandemic's most tenacious impact has been felt by patients whose health has deteriorated over the course of two years, as they have been left without medical services, medication, complete vaccination schedules and support services, not to mention the basic necessities to maintain their level of health and quality of life.

Before 2020, governments had failed to prioritize global healthcare until it was too late; and the results have been disastrous. Governments were unprepared for a pandemic of this magnitude, as they had reduced investment in healthcare and failed to bolster their healthcare systems.

The pandemic posed challenges for all actors in the health sector, governments, the medical community, and pharmaceutical, device and health technology companies. The latter, a sector highly criticised for a lack of transparency and responsiveness in demonstrating the value of research and development of molecules and technologies that help minimise the impact of diseases and contribute to a healthier and more productive society.

We will review here the impact of the pandemic on service delivery and the provision of healthcare supplies and analyse current needs and possible solutions for how governments and businesses can work together to restore confidence and, more importantly, make up for lost years in terms of public health and wellness.



## WHO FLAGS EXPOSURE TO DEVASTATING AND... PREVENTABLE DISEASES

Recent data released in mid-July 2022 by the WHO highlights a 30-year decline in childhood immunisation; for example, vaccination against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, considered a marker of international vaccination coverage, declined by 5 % between 2019 and 2021 to 81% coverage, meaning that in 2021 alone, 25 million children did not receive one or more doses of the vaccine and displaying an increase in children exposed to devastating but preventable diseases. These problems were largely caused by disruptions to services and pandemic containment measures that limited access to vaccination services and the availability of doses.

A further example given by the WHO entailed the loss of over one quarter of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine coverage achieved in 2019. This situation has serious consequences for the health of women and girls, as global coverage of the first dose of HPV vaccine is only 15 %, even though the first vaccines were licensed more than 15 years ago.

**“Despite having only 8,4 % of the population, this region accumulated about one-fifth of confirmed COVID cases, and about 30 % of deaths worldwide”**

## IMPACT ON LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

According to data for 2021 published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), despite having only 8.4% of the population, this region accumulated about one-fifth of confirmed COVID cases, and about 30% of deaths worldwide. Combined with the poor economic growth over the past several years, this will provoke the greatest economic and social crisis in the area in decades.

## PAHO ALERT CALL: IMPACT ON NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Just as the pandemic peaked in 2020, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) issued an alert in response to the evident decline in healthcare especially for patients with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease or cancer, which disproportionately affect people in low- and middle-income countries, where more than three-quarters of the world's NCD deaths occur: 31,4 millions.

The wake-up call highlighted the negative impact on the health of people living with this type of chronic disease, as it would put them at greater risk of becoming seriously ill. These developments arose after the release of data from a survey involving 158 countries globally and 28 countries in the Americas. Of the respondents in the region, 64 % of outpatient services were interrupted in 18 countries, which was alarming but understandable given the situation that forced health authorities to reallocate human resources and hospital units to attend and stop the spread of the virus.

Another factor influencing the decline in healthcare services was the initial recommendation by health authorities to minimize non-emergency care in healthcare centers and hospitals, precipitating in the postponement of public screening programmes (e.g. for breast and cervical cancers).

## CHILDREN... BEARING A HEAVY TOLL

According to ECLAC data, this global epidemic has had a profound impact on health in different ways for different age groups. Children, for example, less affected by the virus, have faced obstacles in protecting their health. The public health measures that most countries implemented to curb the spread of the coronavirus also made it difficult for children to access routine feeding and vaccination programs, health checks, nutritional monitoring, and also timely diagnosis and referrals.

## PATIENT GROUPS, DRUG ACCESS AND SHORTAGES

Problems regarding medicine access and shortages were widely documented by patient groups throughout the region. One such example occurred in a town in Chiapas (Mexico), where the Mexican Association of Pediatric Oncohematology reported a shortage of 37 oncology drugs, leading to modifications—and even the suspension of treatments—for 260 children and adolescents with cancer, rendering it impossible to admit new patients in the midst of a global pandemic crisis.

Despite the efforts of patient and family associations, the problem of shortages persists in much of Latin America. Patient groups have gone from being guiding organizations for the treatment and care of diseases, to active observers and agents of action to alert about situations such as these and immediately demand that health systems prioritize the bonds of cooperation and solidarity to care for the sick and vulnerable groups that need it most.



## IMPACT ON MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Healthcare personnel, in turn, bore the brunt of the precariousness and shortage of critical medicine and intensive care specialists, as retirees or doctors from other specialties were hired in countries such as Mexico, Colombia and Peru as an improvised stopgap. While the WHO recommends 23 health professionals per 10 000 inhabitants, on average, LAC has 19.1 physicians and 28.7 nurses per 10 000 inhabitants. In this regard, Cuba (81.90), Uruguay (50.5) and Argentina (39.6) lead the highest number of physicians, contrasting with Haiti (3.55), Honduras (3.14) and Guatemala (2.35), who have the lowest.

## MENTAL HEALTH, AN UNPRECEDENTED IMPACT

International health organizations and experts concur that mental health is another major impact of the pandemic. Depression, anxiety or insomnia have affected the health of an overwhelming number of the population, which is why promotional campaigns to prevent these types of problems have had to be promoted. Mental health has positioned itself as a global priority within the Sustainable Development Goals while prioritizing responsible media coverage, promoting social-emotional learning and favoring early intervention in all age groups.

**“The difference in life expectancy is as much as 18 years between rich and poor countries”**

## ALL WE NEED: EMERGING THREATS

In recent months, especially in the United States, a particular outbreak of smallpox known as monkeypox has put health authorities on alert, since this virus, endemic to Africa and probably transmitted by rodents, has reported 1,600 confirmed cases as of June 2022 in 39 countries, seven where it usually spreads and 32 new ones. These figures have raised questions about whether it could possibly end up causing an epidemic, and some experts have questioned why health authorities are not issuing an alert so that health systems can be better prepared. This is a “very new situation; one in which there is surprise and concern,” as Peter Horby, director of the Pandemic Sciences Institute at Oxford University (UK), said.

## WHAT DO MULTILATERAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS RECOMMEND?

For the WHO, the pandemic is not an excuse for backtracking; it is necessary to make up for lost time for the millions of people who have not been vaccinated or, “otherwise, we will inevitably see an increase in outbreaks, sick children and pressure on already overburdened healthcare systems.”

In a paper entitled “The Prolongation of the Health Crisis and its Impact on Health, the Economy and Social Development”, the Pan American Health Organization urged governments in the region to accelerate vaccination processes, transform healthcare systems and buttress public investment to contain the health crisis in the short term while moving towards a recovery with equality and sustainability.

## MORE INVESTMENTS, THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS AND BETTER COMMUNICATION ARE URGENTLY NEEDED.

### 1. Greater Investments

Persistent and growing socioeconomic gaps result in large discrepancies in the quality of people’s health. One recent survey found life expectancy gaps as wide as 18 years between developed and less-developed countries. The WHO believes that one of the best ways to reduce such inequalities entails allocating 1% more of

the Gross Domestic Product to healthcare so that more people have access to the essential, quality services they need, close to home. The OECD's Health Spending report explains that investing in the healthcare system not only saves lives, but is also a crucial investment in the overall economy, since poor health and chronic diseases impair productivity, hinder employment prospects and negatively affect human capital development. Therefore, the key is to move from a supply- and demand-driven budgeting scheme to a funding approach focused on needs, patient value and quality of life.

## 2. Public-Private Partnerships

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are not a widespread reality in healthcare systems throughout the Americas. One reason for this is the lack of a mutually advantageous investment model, coupled with the financing gap and the lack of efficiency in investment by Latin American and Caribbean governments in a context of severe fiscal constraints, as indicated by the Inter-American Development Bank's Advisory and Blended Finance Facility.

For these reasons, there is a need to convey just how important the private sector's role is in technologies and tools that can help a region meet its healthcare challenges, as a complementary mechanism for implementing the strategy of governments in each country and so that both efforts can be used to anticipate risks and address long-term health problems, implementing the programs collaboratively and consensually.

This does not mean that the solution would be to 'privatize' healthcare. Instead, it is a matter of fostering cooperation among all actors so that healthcare systems can meet the new demands of patients and the challenges of our era, such as the creation of new plans for access to medicines, improving the capacity to respond to future pandemics or achieving global healthcare equity.



### 3. More and Better Communication

The pandemic radically affected the lives of people with noncommunicable diseases. These diseases are the leading cause of death, disability and chronic disease in the Americas. Every year, roughly 3,9 million lives are lost because of noncommunicable diseases, and approximately 200 million people have such diseases.

These types of diseases are caused, in part, by four modifiable risk factors: smoking, unhealthy diet, sedentary lifestyle and harmful alcohol consumption. According to PAHO, if risk factors are eliminated, up to 80% of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes and 40% of many cancer types can be prevented.

Investment in communication therefore occupies a critical role not only in promoting healthy lifestyles, but also in raising awareness of measures that can prevent the onset and development of diseases so that our people can improve their overall health. We must therefore grasp this urgent call to design and implement far-reaching campaigns entailing partnerships between governments, pharmaceutical companies, diagnostic and medical device companies, the medical community and also organized civil society. This is the only way to improve the health status of the population and to think of a sustainable health system that aims at prevention rather than cure.

**“Every year, roughly 3,9 million lives are lost because of noncommunicable diseases, and approximately 200 million people have such diseases”**

## THE ESSENTIALS FOR RESTORING HEALTH... AND CONFIDENCE IN BUSINESSES

### A. GAINING CONFIDENCE

In today's ever-changing environment, pharmaceutical, diagnostic, device and healthcare technology companies have a commitment to work together with governments and other healthcare stakeholders to deliver better services and outcomes for patients. Proactive, upfront, transparent, and collaborative communication, can regain the trust of our civil society, when coupled together with the right conversational topics.

Companies should engage as co-stars of the public agenda and credibility generation; differentiation and positioning in public health issues, identification and response to patients' needs, opinion leadership, narrative creation and selection of appropriate channels will be critical in generating trust.

The value in the ability to respond to health threats through innovation has been demonstrated recently with the pandemic, and companies should use this value as a springboard.

### B. UNDERSTANDING DATA IN TERMS OF ITS ENVIRONMENT AND VALUE

Governments seek to solve health problems and help the population; physicians seek better solutions for their patients; and society seeks a better quality of life. It is essential, therefore, to understand the environment and the situation faced by each player in the sector.

The use of digital platforms to share experiences, better understand diseases and help manage their health is growing rapidly among patients. However, patients are sometimes confused and there is a great lack of guidance with effective communication in these channels.

While harnessing big data and artificial intelligence so that healthcare sector companies can identify and draw on the information generated by physicians and patients is still in its infancy, the potential is nevertheless very high, since they allow for understanding the context in which medications are prescribed and the impact of their adherence, and also for identifying unmet needs and behavioral patterns.

Companies can gain great competitive advantages by not only fully engaging new technologies to research, understand the environment and discover the challenges facing physicians, patients and healthcare systems, but also taking action on them.

### **C. STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP, COUNTERING MISINFORMATION AND MASTERING THE CONVERSATION**

Understanding the public, communities and conversations; defining objectives and understanding motivators and the journey of prescribers and patients; and also identifying territories of conversation and proactively activating effective communication actions will strengthen the leadership and differentiation of companies in the healthcare sector to better connect with their audiences and achieve a leadership that fosters a better environment for innovation.

A major challenge is to act against misinformation and unreliable sources that not only confuse patients, but can also generate health risks by not seeing a doctor, self-medicating or using home remedies for problems that seem simple, but may be a symptom of a more serious problem. Access to the Internet has put patients in control of self-diagnosis, so it is no longer enough to generate press releases for traditional media, but to use digital transformation and the creation of fresh, attractive and reliable content on conditions and the benefits of medical consultation and evidence-based medicine, so that patients can access truthful information through the appropriate channels and, in this way, counteract the gaps and risks generated by misinformation.

Understanding the conversational terrain and finding opportunities in those therapeutic areas with activation ideas that meet the objective will

achieve conversational dominance that positions and differentiates companies that care about health risks and are engaged in strengthening relationships and designing strategies to be effective allies of governments and the medical community to successfully address current health challenges and be better prepared to meet future challenges.

## **WE ARE BETTER PREPARED: WILL WE BE ABLE TO USE WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED TO ADDRESS THE NEXT HEALTH CRISIS?**

While experts hail that we can take what we have learned to identify and contain an outbreak of concern to place this pandemic as the last one in history, it is nevertheless difficult to predict how we will act in the face of another one, especially if they depend on local public health agencies, which operate unequally according to geography.

The reality of a future outbreak is inevitable, yet pandemics can be rendered optional if governments, businesses and citizens build a health system that responds to current needs and is prepared to face future threats.

It will then be the institutions that invest in and commit to ensuring continuity of access to reliable information, evidence-based medicine, screening tests and medical procedures to avoid exacerbating the health effects of an outbreak.

Public-private partnerships that strive to reduce inequalities in access to health care and medicines, that promote an increase in the number of health professionals, and also organizations that establish population health as a priority, will be essential to achieve a shift towards a healthier society and better prepared health systems.



# AUTHORS



**Alejandro Romero.** Partner and CEO Americas at LLYC. Alejandro Romero. Partner and CEO Americas at LLYC. He has led the company’s expansion throughout the Americas since 1998, initiating operations in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Mexico and, for the past four years, Miami. Alejandro has also headed the communication processes of three of the ten most important M&A transactions in the region: the sale of BellSouths operations to the Telefónica Group, SABMiller’s acquisition of Grupo Empresarial Bavaria and the sale of Grupo Financiero Uno to Citibank. Over the course of two decades, he has positioned our firm as the leading communications network in Latin America.

[aromero@llorenteycuenca.com](mailto:aromero@llorenteycuenca.com)



**Georgina Rosell.** Partner and Senior Director Healthcare LLYC Europe. More than 15 years advising the pharmaceutical industry in its cultural transformation, reputation and innovation challenges, including 7 of the top 10 companies in the pharmaceutical industry in the MERCO 2020 Healthcare Reputation Monitor. The daughter of a doctor and a pharmacist, Gina Rosell is also an expert in the socio-health, hospital, residential and medical-scientific sectors, a field in which she has great relational capacity at institutional and third sector level. Her training as a Political Scientist specialized in international relations and Master in Communication and Sustainability Management gives her a broad dimension approach to the challenges of organizations with internationally awarded results for their wide impact, sensitivity and creativity.

[grosell@llorenteycuenca.com](mailto:grosell@llorenteycuenca.com)



**Javier Marín.** Senior Director, Healthcare Americas at LLYC. Javier Marín is a communications and public affairs professional with experience in the public and private sectors and more than 20 years of experience in pharmaceutical, biotechnology and life sciences companies. His career has included the development of social communication campaigns for prevention and healthcare for the Mexican government; corporate communication, governmental affairs, internal communication, marketing, digital and corporate social responsibility, including patient relations programs at the local level in Mexico, Latin America and globally in companies such as Merck&Co (MSD) and Johnson & Johnson.

[jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com](mailto:jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com)

## AUTHORS



**Ana Lluch.** Senior Healthcare Consultant at LLYC Americas. Ana is a journalism graduate specialized in corporate communications with well over 7 years of experience in the consulting industry, working with international clients in Spain, the United States and Latin America. She has worked in companies such as BBVA, Cohn & Wolfe and ATREVIA. At LLYC, she specializes in content creation and narrative development for multinational healthcare companies and in the regional coordination of multi-country projects for pharmaceutical or medical device companies in the Americas. Just a few of the many clients with whom she has collaborated: Astellas, AbbVie, Bayer, Roche, CureVac, Medtronic, etc.

[alluch@llorentycuenca.com](mailto:alluch@llorentycuenca.com)



**Alejandro González Mondragón.** Senior Consultant. Alejandro has 10 years of experience in the areas of public affairs, advocacy, access and communication for the pharmaceutical industry. Throughout his career, he has designed and implemented strategies for companies such as AstraZeneca, Biogen, Janssen, Merck, MSD, Pfizer and Roche specializing in the challenges of access and availability of innovative medicines, especially advanced therapies for rare diseases and oncology.

[dagonzalez@llorentycuenca.com](mailto:dagonzalez@llorentycuenca.com)

## MANAGEMENT TEAM

**José Antonio Llorente**  
Founding Partner and Chairman  
jallorente@llorenteycuenca.com

**Alejandro Romero**  
Partner and CEO Americas  
aromero@llorenteycuenca.com

**Adolfo Corujo**  
Partner and Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer  
acorujjo@llorenteycuenca.com

**Luis Miguel Peña**  
Partner and Chief Talent Officer  
lmpena@llorenteycuenca.com

**Juan Carlos Gozzer**  
Partner and Regional Managing Director  
jcgozzer@llorenteycuenca.com

**Marta Guisasola**  
Partner and Chief Financial Officer  
mguisasola@llorenteycuenca.com

**Albert Medrán**  
Corporate Director  
amedran@llorenteycuenca.com

**Juan Pablo Ocaña**  
Director, Legal & Compliance  
jpocana@llorenteycuenca.com

**Daniel Fernández Trejo**  
Chief Technology Officer  
dfernandez@llorenteycuenca.com

**José Luis Di Girolamo**  
Partner and Global Controller  
jldigirolamo@llorenteycuenca.com

**Antonietta Mendoza de López**  
Vice President, Advocacy LatAm  
amendoza@llorenteycuenca.com

## SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

**Luisa García**  
Partner and CEO  
lgarcia@llorenteycuenca.com

**Arturo Pinedo**  
Partner and Chief Client Officer  
apinedo@llorenteycuenca.com

### Barcelona

**María Cura**  
Partner and Managing Director  
mcura@llorenteycuenca.com

**Óscar Iniesta**  
Partner and Senior Director  
oiniesta@llorenteycuenca.com

**Gina Rosell**  
Partner and Senior Director  
grosell@llorenteycuenca.com

Muntaner, 240-242, 1<sup>o</sup>-1<sup>a</sup>  
08021 Barcelona  
Tel. +34 93 217 22 17

## Madrid

**Jorge López Zafrá**  
Partner and Managing Director  
jlopez@llorenteycuenca.com

**Joan Navarro**  
Partner and Vicepresident, Public Affairs  
jnavarro@llorenteycuenca.com

**Amalio Moratalla**  
Partner and Senior Director, Sport and Business Strategy  
amoratalla@llorenteycuenca.com

**Iván Pino**  
Partner and Senior Director Crisis and Risks  
ipino@llorenteycuenca.com

Lasgas, 88 - planta 3  
28001 Madrid  
Tel. +34 91 563 77 22

## Lisbon

**Tiago Vidal**  
Partner and Managing Director  
tvidal@llorenteycuenca.com

Avenida da Liberdade nº225, 5<sup>o</sup> Esq.  
1250-142 Lisboa  
Tel. + 351 21 923 97 00



## Madrid

**Jesús Moradillo**  
CEO  
jesus@apachedigital.io

**Luis Manuel Núñez**  
Managing Director U.S.  
luis@apachedigital.io

**David Martín**  
Managing Director LATAM  
david@apachedigital.io

Arturo Soria 97A, Planta 1  
28027 Madrid  
Tel. +34 911 37 57 92



## Madrid

**Marta Aguirrezabal**  
Founding Partner & Executive Director  
marta.aguirrezabal@chinamadrid.com

**Pedro Calderón**  
Founding Partner & Executive Director  
pedro.calderon@chinamadrid.com

**Rafa Antón**  
Founding Partner & Creative and Strategy Director  
rafa.anton@chinamadrid.com

Velázquez, 94  
28006 Madrid  
Tel. +34 913 506 508

## UNITED STATES

**Alejandro Romero**  
Partner and CEO Americas  
aromero@llorenteycuenca.com

**Juan Felipe Muñoz**  
U.S. CEO  
fmunoz@llorenteycuenca.com

**Erich de la Fuente**  
Chairman  
edelafuente@llorenteycuenca.com

**Javier Marín**  
Senior Director, Healthcare Americas  
jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com

## Miami

**Dario Alvarez**  
Executive Director  
dalvarez@llorenteycuenca.com

600 Brickell Avenue  
Suite 2125  
Miami, FL 33131  
Tel. +1 786 590 1000

## New York City

**Juan Felipe Muñoz**  
U.S. CEO  
fmunoz@llorenteycuenca.com

3 Columbus Circle  
9th Floor  
New York, NY 10019  
United States  
Tel. +1 646 805 2000

## Washington DC

**Francisco Márquez Lara**  
Office Director  
fmarquez@llorenteycuenca.com

1025 F st NW 9th Floor  
Washington DC 20004  
United States  
Tel. +1 202 295 0178

## NORTH REGION

**David G. Natal**  
Partner and Regional Managing Director  
dgonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com

**Javier Rosado**  
Partner and Chief Client Officer Americas  
jrosado@llorenteycuenca.com

## Mexico City

**Mauricio Carrandi**  
Managing Director  
mcarrandi@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Paseo de la Reforma 412  
Piso 14, Colonia Juárez  
Alcaldía Cuauhtémoc  
CP 06600, Ciudad de México  
Tel. +52 55 5257 1084

**Javier Marín**  
Senior Director, Healthcare Americas  
jmarin@llorenteycuenca.com

## Panama City

**Manuel Domínguez**  
Managing Director  
mdominguez@llorenteycuenca.com

Sortis Business Tower  
Piso 9, Calle 57  
Obarrio - Panamá  
Tel. +507 206 5200

## Santo Domingo

**Iban Campo**  
Managing Director  
icampo@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Abraham Lincoln 1069  
Torre Ejecutiva Sonora, planta 7  
Suite 702  
Tel. +1 809 6161975

## San Jose

**Pablo Duncan - Linch**  
Partner and Director  
CLC Comunicación | Afiliada LLYC  
pduncan@clcglobal.cr

Del Banco General 350 metros oeste  
Trejós Montealegre, Escazú  
San José  
Tel. +506 228 93240



## Mexico City

**Federico Isuani**  
Co Founder  
federico.isuani@beso.agency

**José Beker**  
Co Founder  
jose.beker@beso.agency

Av. Santa Fe 505, Piso 15,  
Lomas de Santa Fe  
CDMX 01219  
Tel. +52 55 4000 8100

## ANDEAN REGION

**María Esteve**  
Partner and Regional Managing Director  
mesteve@llorenteycuenca.com

## Bogota

**Marcela Arango**  
Managing Director  
marango@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Calle 82 # 9-65 Piso 4  
Bogotá D.C. - Colombia  
Tel. +57 1 7438000

## Lima

**Gonzalo Carranza**  
Partner and Managing Director  
gcarranza@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Andrés Reyes 420, piso 7  
San Isidro  
Tel. +51 1 2229491

## Quito

**Carlos Llanos**  
Partner and Managing Director  
cllanos@llorenteycuenca.com

Avda. 12 de Octubre N24-528 y  
Cordero - Edificio World Trade  
Center - Torre B - piso 11  
Tel. +593 2 2565820

## SOUTH REGION

**Mariano Vila**  
Partner and Regional Managing Director  
mvila@llorenteycuenca.com

## Sao Paulo

**Thyago Mathias**  
Managing Director  
tmathias@llorenteycuenca.com

Rua Oscar Freire, 379, Cj 111  
Cerqueira César SP - 01426-001  
Tel. +55 11 3060 3390

## Rio de Janeiro

**Thyago Mathias**  
Managing Director  
tmathias@llorenteycuenca.com

Rua Almirante Barroso, 81  
34<sup>o</sup> andar, CEP 20031-916  
Rio de Janeiro  
Tel. +55 21 3797 6400

## Buenos Aires

**María Eugenia Vargas**  
Managing Director  
mevargas@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Corrientes 222, piso 8  
C1043AAP  
Tel. +54 11 5556 0700

## Santiago de Chile

**Marcos Sepúlveda**  
Managing Director  
msepulveda@llorenteycuenca.com

Avda. Pdte. Kennedy 4.700 Piso 5,  
Vitacura  
Santiago  
Tel. +56 22 207 32 00  
Tel. +562 2 245 0924



## Buenos Aires

**Rodrigo Gorosterrazú**  
Creative General Director  
rodrigo.gorosterrazu@beso.agency

El Salvador 5635, Buenos Aires  
CP. 1414 BQE, Argentina



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