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La Isla Network Launches New Initiatives to Protect Workers from Extreme Heat in Latin America

- ***With support from The Rockefeller Foundation, two new initiatives to benefit thousands of sugarcane workers in El Salvador and low-income women workers in Brazil's informal economy***

WASHINGTON, DC / BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA | MARCH 12, 2026 — La Isla Network (LIN), with support from The Rockefeller Foundation, today announced two new initiatives in Central and South America which aim to protect thousands of vulnerable workers and to advance research on how shielding workers from the deadly impacts of heat is good for both people and businesses. In El Salvador, LIN will collaborate with a sugarcane mill to extend rest, shade, and hydration protocols to benefit 1,300 sugarcane workers and their 5,850 family members and to scale its PREP model, which successfully reduced acute kidney injury by more than 94 percent and generated a 60 percent return on investment in Nicaragua. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, LIN will launch a first-of-its-kind field study measuring real-time heat strain among the city's women informal workers, which will generate the evidence needed to drive new municipal heat-health protections, while identifying practical solutions to combat this growing crisis.

“Extreme heat is rapidly becoming one of the defining occupational health and economic challenges of this decade and even this century,” said Ilana Weiss, Chief Program Officer at La Isla Network. “What we have learned through our formative work in Nicaragua is that evidence-based protections are not merely feasible; they are effective, scalable, and economically sound. By expanding on our previous work in Central America and generating critical data on urban heat impacts in Brazil, we are helping governments, industry leaders, and multilateral partners translate research into durable policy solutions. In a warming world, protecting workers from heat is essential to strengthening labor systems, creating robust legal and human rights frameworks, safeguarding public health, and sustaining economic productivity.”

Heat exposure has become a global challenge. Each year, [2.4 billion workers](#) — 70 percent of the global working population — are exposed to dangerous temperatures, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). That exposure can trigger a range of preventable health effects ranging from heat exhaustion and heat stroke to chronic kidney disease and cardiovascular complications. Conservative estimates already link roughly 23 million injuries and 19,000 deaths directly to heat exposure at work, and more than 26 million people are living with chronic kidney disease attributable to heat stress. Studies supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) show approximately [489,000 heat-related deaths](#) have occurred each year between 2000–2019. Without urgent action, [\\$2.4 trillion](#) in financial losses are expected from heat-related injuries by 2030, the ILO has warned.

“Across Latin America and the Caribbean, rising temperatures are deepening existing inequalities and putting vulnerable people under even more strain,” said Lyana Latorre, Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean at The Rockefeller Foundation. “Our work with LIN will directly support two communities already facing risks to their lives and livelihoods—agricultural workers in El Salvador and female workers in Brazil's informal economy. By applying proven solutions in new contexts and

generating data to inform new policy approaches, these initiatives will help make economies in the region more resilient to the intensifying effects of climate change.”

In order to protect thousands of vulnerable workers from the deadly impacts of heat and to advance research demonstrating that doing so is good for both people and businesses, LIN and The Rockefeller Foundation are collaborating on two initiatives in rural El Salvador and the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil:

1. Shielding Workers in El Salvador’s Sugarcane Sector

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, rising temperatures and more frequent heatwaves are increasing risks for millions of workers, particularly those in agriculture, construction, and other outdoor sectors. According to the ILO, [heat exposure](#) already contributes to roughly 6.7 percent of occupational injuries in the Americas, a figure that has increased significantly since 2000.

The Dry Corridor of Central America, which is a tract of land across El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, is home to more than [10 million people](#). From 1998–2017, all four were among the top 20 countries globally [most affected by extreme weather events](#) such as flooding, extreme heat, prolonged drought, and crop failure.

At the same time across the region: (1) Sugarcane remains a backbone of the agro-export economy, which contributes approximately [\\$5 billion annually](#) and supports more than 2 million jobs directly and indirectly; and (2) Sugarcane cutters – agricultural workers who engage in highly repetitive and strenuous labor and who are exposed to high temperatures – face some of the world’s highest rates of heat-related kidney disease.

As part of its collaboration with The Rockefeller Foundation, LIN is advancing a dual-pronged effort in El Salvador, where [raw sugar](#) was the country’s third largest export in 2024. The project will examine how climate-driven heat stress, unsafe labor conditions, and economic precarity shape migration decisions in the region and work directly with the partner sugarcane mill to implement LIN’s Prevention, Resilience, Efficiency, and Protection program, or PREP model — a comprehensive system designed to reduce heat-related illness while maintaining productivity.

First implemented in Nicaragua’s sugarcane sector, LIN’s PREP model demonstrated that protecting workers and sustaining business performance are not mutually exclusive. Its data-driven rest–shade–hydration protocols reduced hospital-treated acute kidney injury by more than 94 percent and cut incident kidney injury among cane cutters from 21 percent to 1 percent over a single harvest. Productivity also increased by 9–19 percent across working groups, generating a 60 percent return on investment by year three.

Building on the evidence from Nicaragua, the El Salvador project, which will directly benefit 1,300 workers and their 5,850 family members, will focus on implementation in today’s more complex supply chain environment — identifying what enables meaningful change, what barriers persist, and what steps are needed to strengthen adaptability and scale. Through real-time monitoring of worker engagement and organizational assessment, the project will also generate actionable insights into how heat stress prevention systems can succeed under evolving trade, legal, and regulatory conditions — and lay the groundwork for broader adoption across the region.

2. Protecting Women Workers in Brazil's Informal Economy

In Brazil, informality remains a [defining feature of the labor market](#) affecting roughly 38 percent of the workforce. According to [national survey data](#) (PNAD Contínua), domestic workers, market traders, street vendors, home-based workers, and waste pickers account for nearly 14 million workers — approximately 15 percent of total national employment. These occupations often lack enforceable safety protections, formal employer oversight, or access to occupational health safeguards. Caregiving responsibilities and limited access to formal employment opportunities, overall, mean that [women are disproportionately](#) concentrated in many of these roles.

While women participate in the labor force at lower overall rates than men, they are more likely to be concentrated in informal and precarious employment in major cities such as Rio de Janeiro. Extreme heat poses distinct risks to women in these environments. Physiologically, women generally have lower sweat rates and different thermoregulatory responses than men. Pregnancy, perimenopause, and other life-stage factors can further heighten vulnerability. Social factors compound these risks: limited access to cooling, water, rest space, and healthcare — particularly in low-income neighborhoods where nighttime cooling is limited — can prevent adequate recovery from daily heat exposure.

To better understand and address these risks, The Rockefeller Foundation is supporting LIN's "Hot Days, Hot Nights" research initiative in Rio de Janeiro. The study will recruit up to 200 women informal workers across different occupations and life stages, combining wearable physiological monitoring with environmental heat sensors to measure real-time heat strain during work and at home. The initiative is led by Dr. Fabiano Amorim of the University of New Mexico in partnership with Dr. Danielli Mello of the Escola de Educação Física do Exército in Brazil, bringing together international and local expertise.

By linking personal heat exposure data with [Rio's C40 community heat-monitoring network](#), this project will help determine how accurately city-level sensors reflect the lived realities of women working in high-exposure urban microclimates. The findings will inform improvements to Rio's municipal heat-health response framework, including strengthening the city's Protocolo de Calor (heat protocol) with gender- and occupation-specific evidence.

Data collected from both projects will be supported by VigiLife's SafeGuard® platform, an award-winning connected-worker platform designed to minimize job-related risks through early detection and practical intervention. By integrating wearable monitoring with job-site context, SafeGuard provides real-time visibility into rising physiological strain, including alerts and reporting that enable workers and supervisors to respond proactively before conditions escalate. Designed for field adoption, the system supports consistent monitoring across crews and projects while reducing administrative burden.

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About La Isla Network

La Isla Network (LIN) develops and scales evidence-based, data-driven worker protection interventions that prevent heat-related injury, illness, and death. We combine rigorous health research with management-of-change procedures and occupational safety protocols to improve workforce resilience and business continuity. LIN provides, as appropriate, technical advice to governmental and non-governmental partners to support them in their efforts to translate research into policy, occupational

health-related laws, and regulations. LIN also partners with multilateral institutions, universities, foundations, and civil society organizations to create practical, scalable protections for heat-exposed industries.

About The Rockefeller Foundation

The Rockefeller Foundation is a pioneering philanthropy built on collaborative partnerships at the frontiers of science, technology, and innovation that enable individuals, families, and communities to flourish. We make big bets to promote the well-being of humanity in food, health, energy, and finance, including through our public charity, RF Catalytic Capital (RFCC).

For more information, sign up for our newsletter at www.rockefellerfoundation.org/subscribe and follow us on X @RockefellerFdn and LinkedIn @the-rockefeller-foundation.

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