

Stella Hartinger: exploring the intersection of climate change and human health



As a climate change researcher, director of the Lancet Countdown of Latin America on Health and Climate Change, and co-director of the Center for Latin-American Research on Climate Change and Health (CLIMA), Stella Hartinger is not just a biologist researcher. "I wanted to be a biologist. I went on a field trip to Manu, a national reserve in the Amazon, Peru. I loved the experience of being in the field ... But I really liked the people. That was the first push towards that.", she says. Hartinger's love for science and research started with the school field trip and was set into stone when Dolly, the sheep, was cloned in 1996: "I love the field, but I [also] liked the controversial and ethical things that started to go around being able to clone another living being." She also has a clear goal concerning her career: "My life is not really inside a lab, that's not me. I am a people person; I really like to be in the field with people to understand the relationship between the environment and human health."

Her passion for nature, conservationism and science made her mind to pursue a degree in Biology at Peru's top University in Medical Sciences, Cayetano Heredia University and later apply for a master's degree in environmental health at the same institution. After completing her master's degree, Hartinger became an environmental consultant for mining companies. "... I wanted to travel Peru and understand the problems within Peru." Despite her rewarding experience, Hartinger found that being involved in the business aspect was more complex than initially anticipated. "There is a tri-factor: the community, the business and the government. And they are not compatible at all. We think they are talking among each other, but they are not", she says.

After realising that being part of the business was not what she was looking for, Hartinger decided to pursue a PhD in 2008. "I decided to go back to research ... that I could provide evidence for policymakers, that they could actually create the policies to make a difference in the communities", she explains. Her focus on ambient and indoor air pollution during her PhD was pioneering at the time. "We wanted to improve childhood illness in children from the Andes in rural Peru, Cajamarca ... to create a safe environment throughout the household". At the same time, there was a national campaign called *Half a million improved cookstoves for a smokeless Peru*, since one-third of the population still cooks with open fires.

However as a woman and Latin American researcher, her research path was not fulfilled without some challenges. Shortly after Hartinger said yes to her PhD at the University of Basel, Switzerland, she found out she was pregnant. Fieldwork was a main part of her project, so she took her 3-month-old daughter to the field station in Cajamarca, Peru: "When I was going to the communities, to the houses, I took her. That opened so many doors with the moms, they were so happy that a woman researcher with her daughter was coming to the community and talking to them". Though Hartinger was fully supported by her husband who accompanied her in the field during her PhD, there was still some prejudice from others. "One of the biggest limitations in science for women is the support from family members. I got some backlash when people in your social circle realised that you are pregnant and you are not living in a conventional way." Being a Latin American researcher is not always easy, especially for young women. Hartinger passionately states "First of all you need to see that other people shine sometimes, with the research that they are doing, and you need to allow this. That they must shine and they must create their careers and must stand alone while being part of the team." Now, as a professor at the University of Cayetano Heredia, providing such a level of encouragement to young female researchers makes Hartinger a model for other scientists who wish to support their peers, "We are few at the moment. But I think if we start creating this culture we will be more soon and that will change the panorama of research".

Her work during her PhD influenced her to start a collaboration with *The Lancet* and work with energy transitions, clean fuels and reducing indoor house emissions. In 2020 Hartinger and colleagues wrote a proposal to create CLIMA at the University of Cayetano Heredia. "That centre is one of the firsts to think about climate change and health together. We saw that this was a space that we could do a lot of good." During the same year, Hartinger was also invited to become the director of The Lancet Countdown Latin American on Health and Climate Change. Despite their extensive work in the Latin American region, representation is still a challenge "Only 4% of the literature is coming from Latin America ... how are we going to be represented? How are we going to be heard? What do we need, what do we want as a region?" Under Hartinger's leadership, the Latin American chapter of the Countdown has recently released its second yearly report, providing policymakers, researchers and climate advocates with the most comprehensive collection of data on the intersection of climate change and health available for the



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region. "You want the data to be out there, you want it to be visible ... you can't fill the gap but you can actually provide light to what you have."

Hartinger's future goals will still focus on climate change and health, as she states "I will continue with the work in climate change and health ... I will continue to push in several fronts, and one of the fronts is energy transitions in my country". She has different set of goals in terms of policy and research levels, by, understanding the need to advance the climate change

agenda with a central focus on vulnerable populations and better engagement with the community: "We tend to work disease-based but I think it is the system that needs to change, so we will also work for the systems." She also concludes, "Climate change can't be solved by one individual or by one group of individuals. It is a societal problem, it needs to involve every person in the society."

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