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## Latin America: a development pole for phenomics

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# Latin America: a development pole for phenomics

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## Abstract

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has long been associated with the production and export of a diverse range of agricultural commodities. Due to its strategic geographic location, which encompasses a wide range of climates, it is possible to produce almost any crop. The climate diversity in LAC is a major factor in its agricultural potential but this also means climate change represents a real threat to the region. Therefore, LAC farming must prepare and quickly adapt to a climate that is likely to feature long periods of drought, excessive rainfall and extreme temperatures. With the aim of moving towards a more resilient agriculture, LAC scientists have created the Latin American Plant Phenomics Network (LatPPN) which focuses on LAC's economically important crops. LatPPN's key strategies to achieve its main goal are: 1) training of LAC members on plant phenomics and phenotyping, 2) establish international and multidisciplinary collaborations, 3) develop standards for data exchange and research protocols, 4) share equipment and infrastructure, 5) disseminate data and research results, 6) identify funding opportunities and 7) develop strategies to guarantee LatPPN's relevance and sustainability across time. Despite the challenges ahead, LatPPN represents a big step forward towards the consolidation of a common **mind-set** in the field of plant phenotyping and phenomics in LAC.

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29 **Keywords:** LAC, Climate change, genomic, phenotyping, plant breeding, LatPPN

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31 **Why phenomics is key to face climate change and food security?**

32 In the past decades, climatic variations related to El Niño or La Niña phenomena have brought  
33 serious challenges to the agricultural sector in LAC. While drought is the main threat to food production  
34 associated to La Niña, El Niño can cause heavy rains, flooding or extremely hot or cold weather (Allen  
35 and Ingram, 2002). In the last 150 years, earth's temperature increased at a rate of 0.045 °C per decade,  
36 with almost four-fold (0.177 °C) in the last 25 years (IPCC, 2007), and will continue to raise by another  
37 1.1 to 6.4 °C over the next century (Jin et al., 2011). This increase in temperature can lead to several  
38 agricultural associated problems such as yield reduction as a results of droughts, and the emergence and  
39 spreading of plant diseases and pests (FAO, 2016). Therefore, a better use of plant genetic resources and  
40 plant breeding (Borrás and Slafer, 2008), are key to tackling the imminent impact of climate change in  
41 food security. Further, a multidisciplinary approach that includes disciplines such as omics technologies  
42 (e.g. genomics, phenomics, [proteomics](#) and metabolomics), plant physiology, eco-physiology, plant  
43 pathology and entomology, and soil science will be critical to increase crop resilience to climate change  
44 ([Reynolds et al., 2016](#)).

45 Undoubtedly, public and private breeding programs have the challenge of producing stress  
46 tolerant cultivars whose yield potential and quality are also high. In order to increase the chances of  
47 producing desirable cultivars, breeders make a high number of crosses ([e.g. Chilean wheat breeding  
48 programs generate ~800 crosses per year](#)) and screen them under a limited number of environmental  
49 conditions (Araus and Cairns, 2014). [Line crossing is a common experimental design for mapping  
50 quantitative trait loci \(QTLs\) in plant breeding. Crosses are initiated from at least two inbred lines, such  
51 as backcrosses \(BC\), F2, and more derived generations \(Xie et al., 1998\). To increase the statistical  
52 inference space of the estimated QTL variance and ensure that polymorphic alleles are present in the](#)

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54 [parental gene pool, a sufficient number of parents must be sampled \(Muranty, 1996\)](#). The number of traits  
55 measured per plot is normally limited to the size of the population. Increasing the number of traits to be  
56 measured requires additional time, resources and the use of skilled labor (Kipp et al., 2014). This  
57 represents a limitation towards the understanding of the interaction genotype  $\times$  environment ( $G \times E$ )  
58 (Furbank and Tester, 2011; [Yang et al., 2014](#); [Großkinsky et al., 2015](#); [Rahaman et al., 2015](#)).

59 Although, genome sequencing has become relatively fast, cheap and easy to produce, plant  
60 phenomics still lags behind. This unbalance has become a bottleneck in the understanding of  $G \times E$  and it  
61 also limits the possibility of carrying out tests under field conditions (Lobos and Hancock, 2015).  
62 Therefore, there is a need to incorporate the evaluation of multiple morpho-physiological and physico-  
63 chemical traits at the high-throughput level to be able to understand for example pleiotropy or genomic  
64 variants that gave rise to a particular phenotype (Houle et al., 2010, [Fahlgren et al., 2015](#)).

65 Due to the cost of high-throughput plant phenotyping, several international phenotyping networks  
66 have been established with the idea of joining efforts and produce research with impact, some of the most  
67 prominent networks are: the European Plant Phenotyping Network (EPPN), [Food and Agriculture COST](#)  
68 [Action FA1306](#), the International Plant Phenotyping Network (IPPN), [the Australian Phenomics Network](#)  
69 [\(APN\)](#), the German Plant Phenotyping Network (DPPN) and the U.K. Plant Phenomics Network  
70 (UKPPN). [In Asia, the 1<sup>st</sup> Asia-Pacific Plant Phenotyping will be held in Beijing, China in October 2016](#)  
71 [and the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Plant Phenotyping Symposium was held in Chennai, India in 2014. More](#)  
72 [recently](#) in North America, the United States of America recently [launched](#) the North American Plant  
73 Phenotyping Network (NAPPN),

### 75 Does Latin America and the Caribbean need to worry about phenomic development?

77 Latin America is a region that includes Mexico, the Spanish/[Portuguese](#) speaking countries in  
78 Central America and the whole of South America, as well as the Caribbean (Latin America and the

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## Latin America: a development pole for phenomics

83 Caribbean – LAC). The region is highly heterogeneous in terms of climate, ecosystems, human  
84 population distribution, politics, economy and incomes, and cultural traditions. Out of a total of 17  
85 megadiverse countries identified by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre ([http://www.unep-](http://www.unep-wcmc.org)  
86 [wcmc.org](http://www.unep-wcmc.org)), six are in Latin American, namely Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.  
87 Furthermore, from the eight primary centers of origin and diversity, numbers VII (South Mexican and  
88 Central American) and VIII (South America Andes region: Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador; VIIIa The Chilean  
89 Center, and VIIIb Brazilian-Paraguayan Center) are based in the region (Vavilov, 1992).

90 Due to LAC's diverse geography, climate change will impact the region severely. Compared to  
91 pre-industrial times, it is estimated that the mean temperature on the region will increase about 4.5°C by  
92 the end of the century (Reyer at al., 2015). Temperatures are expected to increase dramatically in the  
93 tropics and moderate at the subtropical regions in the north (Mexico) and south (southern Chile,  
94 Argentina and Uruguay) (Reyer at al., 2015). Annual precipitations are also likely to increase in  
95 Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia and decrease in the rest of the countries (Reyer  
96 at al., 2015). These changes have a direct impact on agricultural crop yields. It's expected that crops such  
97 as wheat, soybean and maize will reduce its yield potential, while others such as rice and sugar cane will  
98 increase it (Fernandes et al., 2012; Marin et al., 2012).

99 The economic development of the regions where plant phenotyping and phenomics have been  
100 developed in the last ten years (high-income countries) is completely different to that of LAC. According  
101 to the World Bank, around 37% of the LAC population lives under poverty or extreme poverty (World  
102 Bank, 2014), and near 60% of the people living in rural areas is under extreme poverty (RIMISP, 2011).  
103 Therefore, besides the climate change effects impacting LAC agriculture, there is also a significant  
104 knock-on the region economy, impacting particularly the lower socioeconomic strata (Ortiz, 2012).

105 Although, LAC countries are wealthier, government efforts are mainly focused on priority areas  
106 such as education, health, employability, and infrastructure. Research and innovation in areas such as  
107 agriculture has been given a low priority. As a result, most Latin American farmers do not have the

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108 resources or the support to effectively adapt to a changing climate that is already showing its negative  
109 impact in agriculture (Lobos and Hancock, 2015). Therefore, LAC scientists and private sector must work  
110 together to develop strategies aiming at moving towards a more resilient agriculture, one of them is the  
111 use of plant phenomics and phenotyping for breeding.

112 Phenomics has become a powerful research tool to help breeders to generate cultivars adaptable  
113 to more challenging environmental scenarios. In the past decade, phenomics has been focused mainly on  
114 breeding of grain crops, but their application in other species of relevance for LAC (e.g. fruit, vegetables,  
115 forage and others) is almost absent (Lobos and Hancock, 2015).

116 The potential of recent advances in phenomics encouraged the Plant Breeding and Phenomic  
117 Center (Dr. Gustavo A. Lobos, Universidad de Talca, Talca, Chile) and the National Plant Phenomics  
118 Centre (Dr. Anyela Camargo, IBERS, Aberystwyth University, U.K.) to organize the **First Latin**  
119 **American Conference on Plant Phenotyping and Phenomics for Plant Breeding** (November 30<sup>st</sup> to  
120 December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, Talca, Chile). This event had three main goals: (1) bring to Latin American  
121 researchers and students, international keynote speakers and plant breeding companies from around the  
122 world, to present their ongoing work on plant phenomics and phenotyping for plant breeding; (2) perform  
123 a workshop to train Latin American scientists and postgraduate students in the use of key plant  
124 phenotyping tools, the analysis of data and the mapping of traits to the genome; and (3) set up the **Latin**  
125 **American Plant Phenomics Network (LatPPN)**, conceived to facilitate the training on high-throughput  
126 phenotyping and pre-breeding methodologies, scientific exchange of young/senior researchers and  
127 students, and to improve access to resources and research facilities.

128 The conference covered a broad range of topics such as pre-breeding and breeding strategies,  
129 methods to measure and analyse trait data for plant breeding and the strategies to translate research from  
130 the bench to the field. International keynote speakers gave seminal talks and chaired the track of their  
131 expertise. Challenges and opportunities were also explored such as the handling of the high amount of  
132 data generated through high-throughput phenotyping. Multiple ideas were discussed to deal with every

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141 particular challenge. Participants also had the opportunity to attend five workshops that covered aspects  
142 such as the use of software and equipment for plant phenotyping (mainly by remote sensing), and data  
143 handling and manipulation.

144 The LatPPN, which is chaired for two years by Chile (Dr. Gustavo A. Lobos) and Colombia (Dr.  
145 Anyela Camargo), had its first reunion during the third day of the conference. Representatives from LAC  
146 (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay) and from other countries (Australia,  
147 Germany, Saudi Arabia, Spain, U.K., and U.S.A.) got together to discuss what LAC's breeding programs  
148 needed to do to become more efficiency in terms of plant phenotyping and phenomics. They also  
149 discussed the differences between phenotyping and the more complex concept of phenomics. This  
150 discussion helped to define where LAC currently stands (more focused on the phenotyping of few traits  
151 and low number of genotypes) and where it needs to be in the future (mostly oriented to the  
152 multidimensional approach of phenomics, considering a high number of genotypes assessed). For  
153 example, the wheat breeding program of INIA Chile, used to consider a classical approximation where  
154 the numbers of traits evaluated increases insofar the number of generation progresses: ~9 traits at F2 – F5:  
155 susceptibility to *Puccinia triticina*, *P. graminis*, and *P. striiformis*, plant height, tillering capacity, type of  
156 spike, grain color, type of grain, and black point or other grain defects; ~16 at F6 – F8: previous ones plus  
157 heading date, grain yield, and some grain characteristics such as test weight, protein and gluten content,  
158 sedimentation, and seed hardness; and ~19 at F9 – F10 where less than 5% of the original crosses are  
159 evaluated: previous ones plus some other required by millers such as W flour value, falling number, and  
160 some bakery aptitudes. Today, using spectrometry and thermography, this breeding program is aimed to  
161 predict some of these traits but also to consider other 30 morpho-physiological and physico-chemical  
162 characters (some examples covered in next section), screening ~800 genotypes per day.

164 **Is LAC oriented to phenomics or plant phenotyping?**

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## Latin America: a development pole for phenomics

180 Due to resources' availability such as equipment, skills and infrastructure, LAC has mainly  
181 focused on plant phenotyping. Although phenomics in LAC has not yet had a proper expansion, there are  
182 some good examples of institutions focusing on it: (i) The International Maize and Wheat Improvement  
183 Center (CIMMYT – Mexico) routinely uses remote sensing and high spec sensor technologies to screen  
184 for wheat and maize's responses to biotic and abiotic stresses, among them yield and its components,  
185 biomass, senescence (stay-green), water stress and water use efficiency, canopy cover, photosynthetic  
186 capacity and activity (Zaman-Allah et al., 2015). Special emphasis is also put on 3D reconstruction for  
187 plant height, spike number and biomass determination; (ii) The Plant Breeding and Phenomic Center  
188 (University of Talca – Chile) have focused its efforts on the prediction of physiological traits by  
189 spectrometry and thermography (e.g. gas exchange, modulated chlorophyll fluorescence, pigments  
190 concentration, stem water potential, hydric and osmotic cell potential, cell membrane stability, lipid  
191 peroxidation, proline content, C and O isotopic composition) on several breeding programs (wheat,  
192 blueberries, alfalfa, strawberries, and quinoa) oriented to abiotic stresses (salt, water deficit and high  
193 temperature) (Garriga et al., 2014; Lobos et al., 2014; Estrada et al., 2015; Hernandez et al., 2015;  
194 Escobar et al., 2016), developing also a software for exploratory analysis of high-resolution spectral  
195 reflectance data on plant breeding (Lobos and Poblete-Echeverría, 2016).

196 In terms of phenotyping, most research institutes across the region have done some form of low  
197 to medium throughput phenotyping, for example: (i) The International Centre for Tropical Agriculture  
198 (CIAT - Colombia) is screening root architecture to identify markers associated to drought stress  
199 tolerance in beans and grasses (Villordo-Pineda et al., 2015; Rao et al., 2016); (ii) Embrapa (Brazil) uses  
200 traditional phenotyping to screen for root morphology in wheat (Richard et al., 2015); (iii) Universidade  
201 Federal de Mato Grosso, Brazil, uses traditional phenotyping tools (e.g. gas exchange measurements) to  
202 look for photosynthetic responses of tree species to seasonal variations in hydrology in the Brazilian  
203 Cerrado and Pantanal (Dalmagro et al., 2016); (iv) Researchers from Argentina uses conventional  
204 phenotyping equipment to investigate the response of seed weight and composition to changes in

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205 assimilate supply from leaves, to the incident solar radiation reaching the pods and to the combination of  
206 both, changes in assimilate supply from the leaves and incident solar radiation on pods of soybean plants  
207 (Bianculli et al., 2016), they are also trying to develop low cost tools in order to make that technology  
208 accessible to researches from LAC; (v) The International Potato Center (Peru) have improved the  
209 screening of potato breeding lines by spectroscopy (Ayvaz et al., 2016); and (vi) INIA (Uruguay) in  
210 collaboration with INIA (Chile) and the Plant Breeding and Phenomic Center (University of Talca –  
211 Chile), applied genotyping-by-sequencing to identify single-nucleotide polymorphisms, in the genomes of  
212 384 wheat genotypes that were field tested in Chile under three different water regimes (Lado et al.,  
213 2013).

214

### 215 How will LAC benefit from LatPPN?

216

217 The conference served as a platform to showcase LAC capabilities, investigate strengths and  
218 weaknesses, and thereby identify where the challenges lie and what the knowledge and the technological  
219 gaps between the region and the rest of the world are.

220 Given LAC's high heterogeneity in terms of climate, ecosystems and genetic diversity, as well as  
221 the differences of each country vulnerability to climate change, it was agreed how important it is for  
222 LAC's agri-food chain to take a more proactive role in the development of strategies leading to the  
223 selection of crops capable to withstand the impact of climate change.

224 With the aim of identifying what LatPPN needed to do to strength LAC's plant phenotyping and  
225 phenomics research, the panel of participants identified the following key challenges: (i) develop  
226 LatPPN's own tailored identity: there is not a common crop but rather a wide diversity of them, from  
227 grasses to forest species. As previously mentioned, plant phenotyping and phenomics has been developed  
228 almost exclusively on cereal improvement, however LatPPN needs to focus on other breeding programs  
229 that are important for particular countries. For example: blueberries for Chile (Chile is the biggest

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245 exporter of fresh blueberries in the world, ~90,000 ton during 2015/16), potato for Peru (production was  
246 estimated to be 4.5 million tons for 2015), tangerines for Uruguay (production was ~6,000 tons in 2014),  
247 pineapple for Costa Rica (since 2000, pineapple production has increased by nearly 300%, however  
248 production is very inefficient, each plant only produces two fruit over a period of 18–24 months, and  
249 requires significant amount fertilizer to do so) and Coffee for Colombia (exports account for ~810,000 ton  
250 in 2015) and Brazil (exports account for ~2.6 million tons in 2014). The production of these cash crops  
251 will face serious challenges (e.g. post-harvest life, or the incidence of physiological disorders, pests and  
252 diseases) in the coming decades due to the sensitivity of them to water shortages and heat stress. In this  
253 meeting, it was also highlighted: (ii) training on plant phenomics and phenotyping using strategies that  
254 allow the participation of several countries at the same time. We are aiming at finding resources to  
255 implement distance-training courses using currently available technologies such as webinars and  
256 teleconferences; (iii) learn from experienced researchers and current plant phenotyping and phenomics  
257 initiatives. In order to facilitate the interaction between researchers and institution, senior researchers on  
258 plant phenotyping and phenomics were invited to participate in the first meeting; (iv) since high-  
259 throughput phenotyping requires a broad range of capabilities (e.g. programmers, bioinformaticians,  
260 statisticians, biologists, agronomists, geneticists, physiologists), is important to promote interdisciplinary  
261 work between researchers; (v) identify the state of art of plant phenotyping and phenomics in LAC. In  
262 order to identify strengths, opportunities and weaknesses and develop targeted strategies, key information  
263 such as breeding programs, researchers, equipment and infrastructure, regional and local financial  
264 sources, and capabilities should be surveyed. All this information should be included on the future  
265 LatPPN webpage; (vi) distribute efforts on common goals (e.g. researchers from different countries  
266 working on the same species or problem), it will be necessary to standardize measurements and protocols;  
267 (vii) Sharing of equipment and infrastructure; and (viii) LatPPN visibility and presence. To avoid early  
268 disenchantment, LatPPN needs to carry out activities to promote the network (e.g. events, postgraduate  
269 grants or proposal calls).

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## Latin America: a development pole for phenomics

275 In relation to weaknesses, the lack of a permanent budget to run network activities is one of  
276 LatPPN's main concerns. Currently, the Director and Co-Director, the executive committee (Dr. Paulo  
277 Hermann from EMBRAPA – Brazil and Dr. Gustavo Pereyra from INTA-CONICET – Argentina), and  
278 the representative members (three per country in charge of meet the local demands, thematic promotion,  
279 and economic resources leveraging) devote part of their time and resources to consolidate the network.  
280 However, they are looking into sources of support within LAC and worldwide. At the country level, there  
281 are a number of countries that have access to grants provided by their own governments. At regional  
282 level, there are a number of organizations such as PROCISUR and PROCITROPICOS, which provide  
283 regular grant support for agricultural research initiatives. At international level, there are several  
284 organizations such as FAO (the Food and Agricultural Organization), EU (the European Union) and IBS  
285 (the Inter-American Development Bank) who support agricultural research in LAC.

286 Another weakness is LAC's low publication rate and the lack of accessibility of LAC institutions  
287 to main bibliographic databases. According to the World Bank, the number of publications produced by  
288 the most important economies in LAC in 2012 was 48,622 from Brazil, 13,112 from Mexico, 8,053 from  
289 Argentina, 5,158 from Chile and 4,456 from Colombia. Brazil is the only country whose output can be  
290 compared against high-income countries where phenomics have been developing in the last ten years.  
291 These are number of publications for some countries: U.S.A. (412,542), Germany (101,074), U.K.  
292 (97,332), France (72,555), Spain (53,342), and Australia (47,806) (World Bank, 2012). In term of access  
293 to bibliographic databases, most of the institutions in the region have limited or no access to main  
294 bibliographic databases such as Scopus and Web of Knowledge. This is serious limitation to the  
295 dissemination of the work developed in LAC especially if we are aiming at improving plant breeding  
296 programs through the use of plant phenotyping and phenomics.

297 Despite the weaknesses, currently there are several international research institutes who are  
298 already formally collaborating with LAC on plant phenotyping and phenomics. Some of them are,

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299 Lemnatec (Germany), CSIRO (Australia), IBERS (U.K.), Universidad de Barcelona (Spain), the Julich  
300 Plant Phenomics Centre (German), and the James Hutton Institute (U.K.)

301 The establishment of LatPPN represented a big step forward towards the consolidation of a  
302 common mindset in the field of plant phenotyping and phenomics across LAC. Clearly there are more  
303 opportunities than disadvantages, and each weakness needs to be addressed having in mind a regional  
304 approach.

305

### 306 **Conclusions and future work**

307

308 Phenomics can complement the potential of new molecular/genotyping technologies and together with  
309 agronomy and plant breeding make a real contribution to develop new strategies to help mitigate the  
310 impact of climate change in agriculture. There are major opportunities for phenomics in LAC, not only  
311 because it has been adopted in isolated initiatives, but also as worldwide development has focused mainly  
312 on grain breeding programs. LAC researchers have identified the need to collaborate to exploit the  
313 opportunities and gathered together to organise the Latin American Plant Phenomics Network (LatPPN).

314 Currently, LatPPN **has prioritized the work** on several fronts to consolidate the network (e.g. grant  
315 application to CYTED and Procisur); LatPPN's second meeting in April 2016 (Balcarce, Argentina) and  
316 planning a second regional conference organized by EMBRAPA during 2017; drafting of LatPPN's  
317 survey; drafting of LatPPN's white paper; and construction of LatPPN's webpage). What follows next is  
318 the development of strategies leading to the sustainability of the network. We are aware of the work ahead  
319 of us and know that the collaboration within LatPPN members and with other networks will be crucial to  
320 build on the foundations laid.

321

### 322 **Acknowledgments**

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335

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