

Latin America and the Caribbean, the SDGs and the pandemic

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In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly approved the declaration on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an ambitious work agenda that the signatory states committed to accomplishing by 2030. The selection of these goals came after an in-depth evaluation of the outcome of its direct predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), eight global initiatives that, at the turn of the century, states committed to achieving by 2015. The outcome of these objectives during their last years of validity was marked by the economic and social upheavals unleashed by the international financial crisis that began in 2008 and the way their regulatory agenda contrasted with the progress of other issues, such as climate change and the persistence of inequalities (UNDP, 2013).

It was a debate involving Member States, civil society sectors and almost every organ of the United Nations system, which allowed the incorporation of economic, social and environmental dimensions hitherto not taken into account by the paradigm of Human Development. The review resulted in a set of measures intended to promote social welfare, reduce poverty and inequality, and curb environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. These measures were summarised in 17 overarching goals, including “No Poverty” (1); “Zero Hunger” (2); “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (3);

“Gender Equality” (5); “Decent Work and Economic Growth” (8); Sustainable Production and Consumption” (12) and “Reduce Inequality in and among countries” (10) (UN, 2015).

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Today, a year and a half after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our progress towards almost all the SDGs has been interrupted, and we find ourselves in a scenario similar to the one that affected the Millennium Goals in the early 2010s. The coronavirus pandemic is having an unprecedented effect on societies’ economic and social dynamics and people’s daily lives, with particularly severe repercussions for lower-income countries and households. The health emergency caused by COVID-19 has disrupted the life models we were used to. The magnitude of the crisis has reopened debates about the role of the State, politics in general and public policies in particular, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, the region most affected by the virus.

Unprecedented fall in world GDP and rising inequalities

In its latest report on the outlook for the world economy, the International Monetary Fund estimated that gross global product fell by -3.3% in 2020, a contraction that, according to the IMF itself, “has no recent historical precedent in terms of its speed and synchronicity” (IMF, 2021). The global average conceals more severe impacts in regions with developing countries whose economies depend on tourism or the export of raw materials, or which, due to the weakness of their public finances, had limited room for manoeuvre to apply mitigation policies. Latin America and the Caribbean was one of the regions to be hardest hit, not only in terms of health but also economically. According to the same IMF report, the gross product in the region fell by -7.0%, the most significant contraction of its GDP since 1900.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global economic trends that had been emerging since the 2008 crisis: rising inequality, a concentration of wealth, meagre creation of quality jobs, declining wages, and higher government and private sector debt (UNCTAD, 2020). In the case of Latin America, pre-existing structural problems limited States’ capacities to devise health and social investment policies in response to the shock caused by the pandemic. In its latest report on the economic impact of COVID-19, the ECLAC pointed out that the average growth in Latin America during the six years prior to the pandemic had been 0.3%, one of the slowest growth periods since records began, “comparable only to those that include the First World War or the Great Depression” (ECLAC, 2021a).

The structural heterogeneity that characterises the Latin American and Caribbean economies translates into dual labour markets, with a high proportion of non-salaried, informal and/or low-productivity jobs, which were hit hard by the pandemic and consequent lockdowns. While in Europe and the United States, self-employment and non-salaried employment account for 14% and 6% of total employment, respectively, in Latin America it accounts for 40%, the majority of which (8 out of 10) are non-professional self-employed workers (Maurizio, 2021). Before the pandemic, in 2018, 57.5% of Latin American wage earners worked in micro-enterprises with between 1 to 5 workers; and 58.4% of employees worked informally, with very high numbers in countries such as Bolivia (80.5%), Peru (79.7%), Colombia (64.0%) and Mexico (62.1%) (IDB, 2021).

The pandemic had a devastating effect on work. The ILO estimated that in 2020, 114 million jobs were lost globally and working hours were reduced by around -8.9% compared to 2019. It also found that Latin America and the Caribbean suffered the biggest cut in working hours, at around 15.1%, which is equivalent to 36 million jobs (ILO, 2021). According to the ECLAC, in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2.7 million companies closed, and unemployment rose to 10.7%, an increase of 2.6% on the 2019 figures (ECLAC, 2021 b).

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These changes have had dire consequences for living conditions and erased recent progress in reducing poverty. The World Bank estimated that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, between 119 million and 124 million additional people fell below the extreme poverty line of USD 1.90 a day (WB, 2021). Furthermore, the ECLAC estimated that in 2020, the poverty rate in Latin America and the Caribbean expanded to 33.7% of the population, the highest figure seen in 20 years (ECLAC, 2021).

The impact of the pandemic on women

The crisis impacted key female employment sectors differently. In 2019, women held 61% of the jobs in tourism and 91% of those in paid domestic work. As a result of job losses and the additional family care burden, 90% of women who lost their jobs in 2020 left the labour force (ILO, 2021). This caused the rate of female participation in the labour market to fall from 52% to 45%, returning to levels last seen a decade ago (ECLAC, 2021c). Many women in the region stopped earning an income, widening the economic gap that separates men from women and undermining their autonomy. Before the pandemic, for every 100 men living in extreme poverty, there were 132 women (ECLAC, 2020c). Added to this profound vulnerability is the fact that few of them have access to social security, which means they are afforded considerably less protection when faced with a sustained employment crisis,

and 82.2% of women in the region were not contributing to a pension system (Vaca, I., 2019).

The current economic model has generated inequality with a vast concentration of wealth, and given the lack of a universal welfare state in the region, access to social benefits remains a privilege. If this posed a significant problem pre-coronavirus, today it has become a matter of survival, and in the medium-term, we must rethink economic and socio-labour policies to promote dignified employment, universal compliance with social rights and a reorientation of the development models in our region.

According to the ILO, at present, 55% of the world's population -more than four billion people- are not receiving any kind of social protection benefit. Before the pandemic, in Latin America and the Caribbean, public spending on social protection was around 9.7% of the region's GDP, which was enough to provide contributory social protection coverage to 46.5% of the employed population and non-contributory benefits to 39.2% of the vulnerable population. In 2018, only 11 countries in the region had unemployment insurance programmes (ILO 2020a).

The recent health challenge has shown that if we want to live in a world that puts life at the centre of everything, we must recognise that we are all interdependent. The pandemic has highlighted the vital role that care plays in sustaining life and exposed the low visibility of the sector in the societies and economies of Latin America and the Caribbean, which still regard it as an externality rather than a crucial component of development. The confinement of the population and the closure of educational and care settings concentrated the burden of care on families. It was a return to life "behind closed doors", where everyone had to rely on their own resources to find a solution. The ongoing crisis is highlighting the unjust social organisation of care in Latin America and the Caribbean. The way care is currently organised in society represents a significant imbalance between the four spheres of access to well-being: families, the State, the market and the community. This social organisation of care is predominantly sustained by the unpaid work carried out by women in the home and is highly stratified according to social and economic conditions.

Gender inequalities have been exacerbated in lower-income households. The demand for care is higher, and it's very difficult to observe social distancing and health measures in overcrowded conditions. The extra tasks generated by the school closures, the increase in demand for healthcare and, in the context of the pandemic, the need to raise domestic hygiene standards, are all responsibilities that, as we've seen, fall on the shoulders of women. The health crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 has made it more apparent than ever that the unpaid domestic work performed by women is subsidising both public services and private profit.

This crisis has exposed the consequences of commercialising the public and the common. The pandemic seems to be making it clear that far from being dead, states, in fact, have a key role to play in implementing policies that can effectively transform the reality. Public policies that can address the ever-postponed challenge of building universal protection systems, shifting the attention from the market to people, placing life and care at the centre

of everything. For this to happen, the State, and the Social State, in particular, must take on a central role, and there will be a need for increased regional and international collaboration and cooperation. The only comprehensive and effective response to the reproduction-of-life crisis must be provided by universal, public and free institutions, from a common space where State, market, community and family actively contribute to its development and management under a logic of co-responsibility.

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It's time to start thinking about new forms of social organisation in general. We are in a transition towards societies that will undergo reconfigurations in the short and medium-term. Ultimately, it's about building a new "social pact" within our societies based on recognising solidarity and interdependence as critical values for constructing a more just social system, resuming the global commitment set as a roadmap by the 2030 Agenda. To do this, we will need to contemplate the following aspects as a minimum:

1. Redesign the economic model, reduce debt and create a basic citizen income

It's time to articulate historical experiences with the new global challenges of building sovereign models of industrialisation with local added value, more job creation, less concentration, and greater redistribution while preserving resources and adopting a production system in balance with the environment. To do this, we will have to rethink the relationship between the different countries in the region and the external debt that aggravates the possibilities and conditions for economic and social recovery. Similarly, we have an opportunity to create a citizen income. The pandemic reactivated the debate on this right, which is based on the premise that access to essential goods is a pre-requisite for a democratic citizenship that guarantees the equality and dignity of all people.

2. Strengthen the quality of our democracies

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has opened a historic window of opportunity to imagine and design solutions based on participatory democracy with a leading role for the State. This is why we must push for dialogue between organisations, states, and other actors to jointly develop solutions based on participatory democracy at neighbourhood and community levels alongside civic education aimed at solidarity and cooperation. Cooperation between the State and civil society organisations can ensure the scale of action required to consistently protect life, meet needs and guarantee security with effort from the entire population.

3. Consolidate universal access to healthcare

The collapse of the region's health systems in different countries, even those whose capacities were considered to be "good", highlights the need to consolidate a universal health system that guarantees quality services, has the necessary resources to deal with crises and takes an integral approach to health. One that considers the socioeconomic situation of people and their quality of life.

4. Decrease and eliminate gender gaps

It's time to broaden the public agenda and think about new forms of social organisation in which care (as a critical factor in gender inequality) occupies a central role, thereby transforming relationships that are currently inequitable and deadly. Because inequality kills. Valuing care involves thinking in relational terms, recognising and respecting one another, reflecting on interdependence, reciprocity and complementarity. We must prioritise the vindication of historically undervalued daily tasks such as care and domestic work because they allow us to sustain and reproduce life.

5. Build a new relationship with the environment

The crisis caused by the spread of the coronavirus proves that now is the time to rethink humanity's relationship with nature, to question the notion of autonomy, to replace the anthropocentric and instrumental views of the earth and return to the idea that we are one with nature. Human life represents just 0.01% of the life on our planet. If humanity is to survive, we must protect all life on Earth. Immediate progress in this area is imperative. We need to create new economic models based on forms of production, consumption, organisation and technological development that ration the use of natural resources and reduce environmental pollution to a minimum.

6. Rethink human mobility

The region of Latin America and the Caribbean was already suffering from a severe migration crisis, but the pandemic has made it worse. The closure of borders, the increase in their securitisation and the effects of these policies on the migrant population challenge us to reflect on human mobility. It's imperative we take urgent steps to protect migrants. Rethinking the migration phenomenon in the long-term will require at least two approaches. Firstly, we will have to move away from the traditional stigmatisation of migrants and focus on the systemic economic, political and social causes that force people to migrate, whether to seek job opportunities, improve their quality of life, or because they happen to live in an area affected by military, ethnic or religious conflicts. Secondly, we must recognise migration and human mobility as a basic human right.

7. Reformulate the link between the social sciences and politics

We need to think about the link between research, knowledge and politics in order to make the best decisions when faced with the challenges posed by different social situations. We must be alert to unilateral scientific discourse, which, while it may sometimes guide good political decisions, can also lead to “epistemic blindness” if we fail to consider alternative views and knowledge. It’s time to analyse the interdependence, reciprocity and complementarity of politics and the State with the production of a Social Science sphere that is challenging the reproduction of a unique and universal knowledge, that contributes to critical reflection, that is capable of self-focusing and, based on that introspection, develop categories, concepts and ideas that are rooted in history and local problems and contribute to the production of knowledge with a national and regional vocation.

8. Strengthen regional and international cooperation

The dynamics of current international and regional relations show that the conventional world order is going through a phase of profound transformation and generating a high degree of uncertainty. However, the challenges and opportunities created by this process could facilitate progress towards the construction of a more democratic globalisation with more horizontal forms of cooperation.

Conclusions

These aspects outlined allow, in turn, to approach international cooperation from new perspectives, analysing the global frameworks in which the cooperation system is immersed. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents for all countries a window of opportunity to improve the living conditions of their inhabitants and rethink the current international cooperation system, based on an inclusive approach that takes into account the challenges and capacities of all the countries. Advancing in the definition of inclusive criteria for access to international cooperation, based on multidimensional criteria compatible with the principle of “leaving no one behind” seems to be the challenge.

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