A. Equality viewed from a rights-based perspective

ECLAC regards equality as a normative principle and as a strategic development horizon (Bárcena and Prado, 2016). Viewed from a rights-based perspective, the emphasis is on understanding equality in terms of:

- **Means**: of attaining a more equitable distribution of income, productive and financial assets, and property.
- **Opportunities**: for ending all forms of discrimination in access to social, economic or political positions.
- **Capacities**: for each person to live their life in a way that they see as being valuable.
- **Mutual recognition**: for promoting autonomy and mitigating vulnerabilities, fostering equality in the cross-generational distribution of social, economic and political roles and in the affirmation of collective identities.
- **The importance of closing gaps should be the guiding principle of public action aimed at achieving substantive equality.** This principle should not be reduced to a search for equality of opportunity but should instead also encompass the equality of rights, means, capacities and outcomes.

ECLAC (2010, 2012, 2014, 2018a, 2018b) sees equality as a normative principle and as a strategic development horizon. It also calls for social policies, in general, and pro-equality policies, more specifically, to be designed and administered from a rights-based perspective. An understanding of equality that is grounded in a rights-based perspective necessarily draws inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), which establishes that:

- **Art. 22**: Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and

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Rights-based pro-equality policies and programmes should treat all persons as rights holders who are to be respected by the State.

in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

- Art. 25. 1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. 2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

A rights-based approach serves as a basis for linking the design and implementation of pro-equality policies with binding national and international agreements. Viewed in these terms, policies and programmes are not for “people with needs who require help”, but for those who “possess rights which are binding on the State” (Abramovich, 2006, p. 34). In other words, it places people, as subjects of rights, at the heart of public policy and seeks to guarantee the full enjoyment of their rights for all members of the population. The rights-based approach thus provides a normative framework along with guiding principles and directions for pro-equality policies. The proposition that human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals are indivisible and universal necessarily entails the promotion of comprehensive, interlinked and intersectoral social policies based on universal education and health systems and the expansion of social protection systems.

Economic, social and cultural rights are of pivotal importance in policies designed to reduce inequality. There are a range of criteria for determining whether States are meeting their obligations in upholding peoples rights. One of those criteria is whether a State is taking the necessary steps “to the maximum of its available resources” to ensure the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, to avert any deterioration of the existing system for the protection of those rights, to progressively achieve the realization of those rights, to ensure non-discrimination, to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of those rights and to meet the minimum essential requirements for the enjoyment of each such right (United Nations, 1966).

Based on this global rights-based framework, ECLAC places priority on understanding equality in terms of means, opportunities, capacities and recognition. In other words, in order to achieve equality, people must be regarded as rights holders rather than simply as beneficiaries of social policies, and they are therefore entitled to certain guarantees and have certain responsibilities. Equality of means is equated with a more equitable distribution of income, productive and financial assets, and property and with a structure in which wages account for a larger share of total income in the economy. Equality of opportunity entails the absence of any form of discrimination in access to social, economic or political positions. Equality of capacity refers to the skills, knowledge and proficiencies that people can acquire and can put to use in order to live their lives in a way that they deem to be valuable. Finally, equality in terms of mutual recognition translates into the participation of different people in providing care, working and exercising power, in the distribution of costs and benefits across present and future generations, and in the visibility and affirmation of collective identities.

Along these same lines, ECLAC (2018a and 2018b) reaffirms the need to transition from a culture of privilege to a culture of equal rights. A culture of privilege has three main hallmarks. The first has to do with the normalization of difference as inequality. In this case, ascriptive or semi-ascriptive characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, country or place of origin, culture, language and religion (Calderón, Hopenhayn and Ottone, 1994 and 1996), are used as a device for justifying inequalities in terms of power, living conditions and access to assets, influential

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2 The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted on 16 December 1966 by the United Nations General Assembly, is a treaty of particular importance for the Americas, as all the Latin American countries have become parties to it through either ratification or accession.
circles, citizenship and so forth. Its strength lies in the fact that it manages to make inequality appear to be a natural, immutable condition, thus concealing its existence as a historical construct. The second hallmark is that the persons capable of establishing these hierarchical differences are the ones who enjoy the resulting privileges. Finally, in order to maintain these privileges, the hierarchy is operationalized by social actors, institutions, rules and practices.

In the realm of social policy, the rights-based approach and the effort to attain substantive equality are cross-cutting features of all policies and initiatives aimed at furthering development with equality. Public action should be focused on narrowing existing gaps as a means of moving towards substantive equality, with equality being understood as not simply equality of opportunity but also equality of rights, means, capacities and outcomes.

B. Inequality as an analytical framework: the matrix of inequality

ECLAC (2016) has proposed the use of the social inequality matrix as an analytical framework for studying inequality and gaining a fuller understanding of it.

- The matrix of inequality is founded upon theoretical approaches that underscore the structural heterogeneity of the production matrix, the culture of privilege and a broad concept of equality that includes equality of means, rights and capacities.

- Socioeconomic strata are the first and most basic determinant of inequality, with the main factors defining a person’s position within those strata being the ownership structure and the distribution of power, resources and productive assets.

- Other structural determinants include gender inequalities and the inequalities associated with different stages of the life cycle, ethnic/racial identity, disability status, migration status and territorial factors.

- These various factors intersect, overlap, augment one another and link up in different ways throughout people’s lives to generate a wide range of factors of inequality that are simultaneously subject to interactions and to accretion over time.

- The inequality matrix can be used as an analytical framework for examining the main areas of social development and ways in which people exercise their rights and for studying the stratification of access to such assets as productive resources, education, health, decent work and social protection.

ECLAC (2016a) is proposing the use of a social inequality matrix as an analytical framework for exploring some of the structural underpinnings of social inequality in the region (see table II.1). The social inequality matrix is heavily influenced by the production matrix, which is marked by a high degree of structural heterogeneity, i.e. by sharp inter- and intrasectoral productivity differentials and, along with them, an assemblage of high- and low-productivity forms of employment. This is why socioeconomic strata are the first and most basic determinant of inequality, with the main features of those strata being determined by the ownership structure and the distribution of power, resources and productive assets. One of the most evident manifestations of this is income inequality, which is both a cause and an effect of other inequalities in such areas as health, education and the labour market.
Although socioeconomic strata are the most basic determinant of the social inequality matrix, that matrix is also underpinned by such axes of inequality as gender, ethnic/racial identity, the different stages of the human life cycle and territorial factors. These different axes overlap, augment one another and link up in different ways throughout peoples lives to generate a wide range of types of inequality that are simultaneously subject to interactions and accretion over time.

The constitutive weight and decisive importance of these axes in production for the market and in the reproduction of human society are what endows them with the ability to shape these social inequalities. People’s individual experiences in terms of their development prospects and the possibility of exercising their rights are determined by such factors as their socioeconomic position in the social structure, their sex, ethnic or racial origin and/or the geographic area in which they live and work.

The ways and means by which the inequality matrix is reproduced and persists over time can be understood by examining the main areas of social development and the manner in which people avail themselves of their rights. The end result is a stratified form of access to such assets as productive resources, education, health, decent work and social protection (ECLAC, 2016a).

One of the manifestations of structural heterogeneity is a high concentration of jobs in low-productivity sectors. ECLAC has reported (2021) that, around 2019, 49.7% of all jobs were in low-productivity sectors. These jobs tend to be poorly paid and to provide little or no access to social protection coverage, and many of them are informal in nature. A disproportionate number of these jobs are held by women, young people, indigenous persons and persons of African descent. This gives rise to a stratified form of access to social security that more or less matches up with the axes of the social inequality matrix. Thus, for example, an indigenous campesina is more likely to have to overcome greater obstacles to fully develop her potential and to exercise her rights than a white man living in an urban area will.

An analysis of social inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean needs to take account of the different axes of this matrix. Each of these axes is dealt with individually for ease of analysis but, in terms of the situation in which each person finds himself or herself, they cannot actually be separated from one another; they overlap and reinforce each other. This approach makes it possible to visualize situations involving numerous kinds of inequality.

**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Towards a regional agenda for inclusive social development: bases and initial proposal (LC/MDS.21/2)*, Santiago, 2018.
and/or discrimination that often underlie the persistent hardcore poverty, vulnerability and inequality that continue to be reproduced in the region. Without it, the structural gaps that are the signposts of inequality would be illegible, and efforts to design and implement policies to help close these gaps would be futile.

In order to analyse existing inequalities thoroughly and then to develop the ability to design and implement policies to lessen those inequalities, the axes of social inequality must first be matched up with the types of rights that they impact (see table II.1). The analytical framework based on the inequality matrix is thus intended to do more than simply treat inequality as a measurable topic of research. Instead, it serves as the platform for an approach in which inequality is viewed through the lens of structural heterogeneity, the culture of privilege and various different concepts of equality and can thus be analysed on the basis of its different axes and matched up with the different kinds of rights that are influenced by it.

It should be noted before proceeding any further that, while it is true that the various dimensions of inequality intersect and reinforce one another throughout the human life cycle, there are policies that are capable of addressing a number of these different dimensions at one and the same time. For example, a care policy that focuses on preschool education can help to reduce gender inequality and inequality among children, which will have an impact on those children for the rest of their lives. This toolkit obviously cannot cover all the possible policy options and their impacts on all the relevant factors, which is why a limited number of noteworthy policies that focus on each axis and are based on successful experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean have been singled out.

Another cautionary note is called for regarding the linkage of different aspects of equality with the narrowing of gaps along each of these axes. Along the same lines as the point made in the preceding paragraph, a specific policy may lead to greater substantive equality by addressing various forms of equality (of opportunity, of means, of outcomes, etc.) simultaneously. For example, a care policy may promote progress towards greater substantive equality for women by connecting up greater equality of opportunity with greater equality of outcomes and mutual recognition. For this reason, the baseline assessment of inequalities associated with each axis and the identification of policy and programmatic priorities will not, in most cases, make reference to a specific type of equality as being the objective of a given policy, as it is understood that policies tend to be interconnected and to build on one another in seeking to achieve greater substantive equality. Table II.2 provides an overview of the different axes of inequality and policy directions.

### TABLE II.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AXES OF INEQUALITY</th>
<th>PUBLIC POLICY DIRECTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic inequality</td>
<td>Reduce income and labour-market disparities in a context of structural heterogeneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ensure women’s economic, physical and decision-making autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood and adolescence</td>
<td>Guarantee people’s rights and well-being throughout their lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ageing and old age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous people</td>
<td>Guarantee the rights, recognition and well-being of groups that have historically been discriminated against because of their ethnic/racial identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons of African descent</td>
<td>Provide orientation for an individual’s interaction and relationship with his/her physical and social environment, differentiated by type and degree of disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons with disabilities</td>
<td>Recognize migrants as rights holders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td>Mitigate territorial disparities that have an impact on people’s enjoyment of their rights and their well-being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. The benefits of equality and the inefficiency of inequality

The empirical evidence shows that more egalitarian societies tend to:

- Be more efficient and be able to sustain more and faster economic growth.
- Be happier.
- Be healthier and more cohesive.
- Be more environmentally resilient.
- Have more robust and more democratic institutions.

In recent years, more and more empirical studies have been published that provide scientific arguments in support of aspirations for greater equality. This evidence furnishes at least five main reasons why societies should seek to become more egalitarian. The first has to do with the relationship between inequality and economic efficiency. One of the most common arguments that people use to defend the existence of inequality is that it is necessary in order to achieve more growth. In recent years, however, researchers have gathered a growing body of evidence that refutes that line of reasoning based on Okun’s equality-efficiency trade-off (1975). Quite early on, Kuttner (1987) had already shown that equality and economic growth are not mutually exclusive pursuits and that public policies on such matters as capital formation and investment, protectionism in international trade, wages and labour, taxes and the welfare State can have good or bad outcomes in terms of both efficiency and equity. The same empirical emphasis on the effects of redistribution on growth is to be seen in studies by Bénabou (2000 and 2002) and Bleaney, Gemmell and Kneller (2001), which also contend that this kind of trade-off is not inevitable.

Recent studies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Berg and Ostry, 2011; Ostry, Bird and Tsangarides, 2014) have offered evidence that more egalitarian countries can sustain more and faster growth and that, except in extreme cases, the impact of redistribution on levels of inequality actually spurs growth. Finally, ECLAC (2018b) has furnished additional evidence that inequality is negatively related to productivity. ECLAC is therefore arguing that greater equality can act as a driver of economic efficiency, which will in turn support the expansion of effective demand.

A second argument has to do with the relationship between greater equality and greater happiness. Lifting people out of extreme poverty surely results in greater happiness, but additional increases in income do not necessarily equate with additional happiness. Once extreme poverty has been eliminated, investing in more egalitarian societies could constitute...

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3 This argument has been championed at least since the mid-1970s in the more advanced countries during times of economic stagnation and high unemployment — conditions that were being experienced during that period, which some economists blamed on social policies and the welfare State. This view was backed up by the theory espoused by Okun (1975), who contended that there was a “big trade-off” between equality and efficiency. He reasoned that an egalitarian, universal distribution of social and political rights carried costs in terms of economic efficiency. In other words, societies could not aspire to both at the same time and would therefore have to place priority on one while sacrificing the other. The economic policy proposals that grew out of this position call for cutting investment in social policies on the grounds that they will push up the fiscal deficit and lower savings and will consequently dampen long-term growth rates. The proponents of these policies therefore assert that the best course of action is to curb government spending, cut back on redistributive policies and lower taxes, especially on the rich, because the resulting higher growth rates will benefit everyone.

4 Defined as the 25% of the countries in the sample where the degree of redistribution is very high (more than about 13 points on the Gini inequality index).
a higher policy objective. This argument is backed up by evidence that levels of happiness in different countries are more closely correlated with greater income equality than with average income levels (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). As indicated by one study conducted in the United States, this inverse relationship between income inequality and happiness may be accounted for by an increased perception of unfairness and a lack of trust (Oishi, Kesebir and Diener, 2011). This reaffirms the recurrent argument that increases in per capita income do not necessarily translate into greater happiness.

A third argument in favour of greater equality is supported by a growing body of evidence that more egalitarian societies tend to be healthier and more cohesive. International studies have shown that greater degrees of economic inequality are associated with a greater number of social problems, including higher rates of violence, murders and drug abuse, higher incarceration rates, higher teenage pregnancy rates, and more psychological and mental problems. More egalitarian societies tend to exhibit better health indicators and longer life expectancies (Marmot, 2015; Patel and others, 2018, Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010 and 2018).

A fourth argument stems from the growing evidence that inequality is a contributing factor in environmental deterioration, both on the part of those who damage the environment and on the part of those who are impacted by that damage, and that it impairs the ability to respond to the challenges posed by natural disasters and environmental degradation. Climate change, for example, is closely interlinked with inequality. The poorest half of the world’s population accounts for around 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions but lives in the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change. By contrast, the richest 10% of the world’s population accounts for 50% of global emissions (Gore, 2015). Evidence gathered in the most affluent countries indicates that countries where inequality is the greatest produce more garbage, tend to consume more meat, consume more water for personal use and drive more motor vehicles (Dorling, 2017). The impact of inequality within individual countries has also been measured. A study on the United States has turned up evidence that levels of inequality will rise as a result of the unequally distributed economic effects of climate change (Hsiang and others, 2017). It has also been estimated that the economic losses sustained by poor sectors of the population will be two to three times greater than the losses of the non-poor (Cecchini, Sunkel and Barrantes, 2017), both because of the vulnerability of their assets (Hallegatte and others, 2017) and because of their limited access to disaster risk management tools (Vakis, 2006).

A fifth and final argument focuses on the positive impacts on political institutions in more egalitarian societies. This line of reasoning underscores the tension that exists between economies that are organized around the market, where each person’s degree of influence depends on the size of his or her “monetary vote”, and the political system, where each person has one (electoral) vote. Inequality then fuels rent-seeking behaviour whereby the richest members of society use their power to ward off competitive market forces in order to reap higher profits. Economic inequality will therefore have a corrosive effect on political institutions (Stiglitz, 2012). A supporting argument emphasizes the weakness of the State in unequal societies, which is partly attributable to the power wielded by economic elites over State institutions. This kind of power is manifested, for example, in the continued existence of regressive tax systems with very limited redistributive potential (Blofield, 2011; Savoia, Easaw and Mckay, 2010).

5 Foodstuffs account for 25% of the planets total emissions. More than half of that amount is generated by animal products, and half of the livestock-generated emissions come from cattle and sheep herds. Beef consumption is a large source of emissions because of the methane that is released and the deforestation caused by the clearing of land for pasturage (Poore and Nemecek, 2018).

6 Mention should be made in this connection of the Escacu Agreement, which has been open for signature by the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean since September 2018. This is the regions first environmental treaty and the only one of its type in the world, as it contains specific provisions on environmental human rights defenders. It is also the first legal instrument to emerge from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and, as of the end of July 2020, had been signed by 24 countries. For further information, see [online] https://www.cepal.org/en/escacuagreement.


E. Questions

- In your area of work, can you think of a social policy that reduces more than one type of inequality (e.g. inequalities of opportunity, capacity, outcomes, rights or other) at the same time? Please explain.
- Drawing on your work experience, do you know of a social policy that acts upon more than one axis of inequality (e.g. gender, different stages of the life cycle, persons of African descent, indigenous peoples)? How could the impact of this policy be improved?
- Based on your experience, which do you think is the best way to increase equality: a universal social policy or a policy targeting the most underprivileged groups? Explain why. Can you give an example of a targeted policy in your field of work that could be expanded to include the rest of the population? What obstacles would have to be overcome in order to do so?
- Provide an example of a social policy in your field of work that has been specifically designed to reduce inequalities. Has it achieved its objective? Why or why not?
- Name a policy in your field of work that is explicitly founded upon a rights-based approach.

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