Equality in the 2030 Agenda and in the human rights-based approach
The 2030 Agenda, the persistence of social inequality and the commitment of ECLAC

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) reflects a consensus around the need for a sustainable, inclusive development model in which well-being is the central focus. It is a transformative agenda in which the core element is the reduction of all aspects of inequality. Its call to “leave no one behind” and to “reach the furthest behind first” articulates the priority embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 10, which is to reduce inequality within and among countries. However, the aim of attaining greater equality is interwoven throughout the 2030 Agenda. It is inherent in the search for greater gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (Goal 5). The quest for greater equality is also reflected in the search for a life free of extreme deprivation, for a way to end poverty in all its forms (Goal 1), to end hunger (Goal 2), to gain equal access to basic living conditions for all by ensuring healthy lives (Goal 3), to achieve inclusive and quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities (Goal 4), to ensure access to clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), to affordable, clean energy (Goal 7) and to decent work (goal 8) and to access to justice for all (Goal 16). The 2030 Agenda thus recognizes equality as a fundamental element that can only be achieved by means of a clear recognition of the gaps that exist between levels of social development in different countries and communities and the effective elimination of those gaps (United Nations, 2015).

The world’s predominant development model has generated sharp economic, social and environmental
imbalances that have led to a striking degree of inequality. Although the extent of that inequality has diminished over the past decade, the Latin American and Caribbean region is still the most unequal of all the world regions in terms of income levels. These imbalances have historically been paired with a structurally heterogeneous production matrix which, in large part, underlies the region’s extreme social inequality.

In order to address these problems, for at least as far back as 2010, ECLAC has been focusing on equality as a core value and an overriding ethical principle to guide the search for a way to further a development process that is grounded in a rights-based approach. This has been reflected in successive ECLAC documents, including Time for Equality: Closing Gaps, Opening Trails (ECLAC, 2010); Structural Change for Equality: an Integrated Approach to Development (ECLAC, 2012); Compacts for Equality: Towards a Sustainable Future (ECLAC, 2014); Horizons 2030: Equality at the Centre of Sustainable Development (ECLAC, 2016a); The Social Inequality Matrix in Latin America (ECLAC, 2016b); The Inefficiency of Inequality (ECLAC, 2018); and Building a New Future: Transformative Recovery with Equality and Sustainability (ECLAC, 2020b). Attaining greater equality is also one of the chief objectives of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development (ECLAC, 2020c), a technical policy paper adopted by the countries of the region when they gathered at the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean in their search for ways to support the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda in the region.

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

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1 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.
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