

**Strengthening social development in the contemporary context:  
Lessons from Latin American and the Caribbean <sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the changes undergone over the last decade by social policies in Latin America and Caribbean, highlighting the increased role of the State, greater consideration of the rights-based approach, and the adoption of solidarity-based social protection policies. These changes, together with factors such as economic growth and the demographic transition, have contributed to a significant reduction of poverty and inequality. However, the population’s region still faces high levels of vulnerability, rooted in productive heterogeneity –which causes the insertion by about half of workers into the informal sector, with low salaries and scarce social protection– as well as the frequent occurrence of economic crises and natural disasters. In the region, it is thus necessary to continue to strengthen social protection –especially in the face of a deteriorating economic context– and to sustain it with social and fiscal pacts. Social policies, in particular, should be encompassed in the sustainable development paradigm and strive to reach universal coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws mostly on section IV of Cecchini, Filgueira and Robles (2014) and on Cecchini and Vargas (2014). The author thanks Beatriz Morales and Luis Hernán Vargas for assistance.

## Introduction

Even though Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) still face enormous challenges to achieve the full realization of the economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) of their population, the social policies that are presently being implemented in the countries of the region testify a true epochal change. Current policies have left behind the structural adjustment policies adopted during the two decades that followed the debt crisis of 1982, which weakened social protection and contributed to maintain high levels of poverty and income inequality.

While structural adjustment policies saw a major downscaling of State social action –with the reduction or freezing of social investment, privatization and narrowly targeted financing of demand–, the new century has seen an expansion of State action in social areas. This has entailed broader population coverage, partial or full re-nationalization, increased social investment, and the combination of vectors of need, supply and demand to determine investment and fiscal effort (Cecchini, Filgueira and Robles, 2014).

Over the last decade, many Latin American governments have implemented solidarity-based social protection policies in the fields of poverty reduction, pensions and health coverage, underscored by recognition of the importance of reducing inequalities and greater visibility of the rights-based approach. Furthermore, social policies have left behind the “male breadwinner” model, and have begun considering different social groups, taking into account gender, age and ethnic inequalities. This, together with sustained economic growth –which averaged 3.4% between 2000 and 2013– and maintenance of macroeconomic balances, contributed to lower poverty and social inequalities (ECLAC, 2010).

In particular, attention should be paid to four trends: (i) the effort and increase in social protection coverage; (ii) an increase in the quality and variety of the social protection menu, both in terms of programmes and in the growing specificity of the population served; (iii) increasing regulatory-institutional support for provisions (laws, earmarked fiscal allocations, technocratic mechanisms for the identification of beneficiaries); and (iv) the pursuit of greater coordination and synergy between different sectors and programmes in the social areas. With respect to the last point, conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes are the clearest example of the adoption of integral poverty reduction policies, which explicitly make monetary transfers dependent on the participants’ effective use of education and health systems (Cecchini, Filgueira and Robles, 2014).

In the following sections, this paper –which refers to broad trends, varying substantially from country to country–<sup>2</sup> will analyze the shift from structural adjustment policies to the expansion of social protection, the emergence of the rights-based approach, and the results obtained in reducing poverty and inequality. It will then discuss the persistence of structural problems and the challenges to public policies, concluding with a call for more comprehensive and universal social policies.

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<sup>2</sup> Progress with respect to social development is not uniform in the region, as the greatest steps forward have been taken in countries whose welfare gaps are the smallest (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay). Poorer countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua have made less progress.

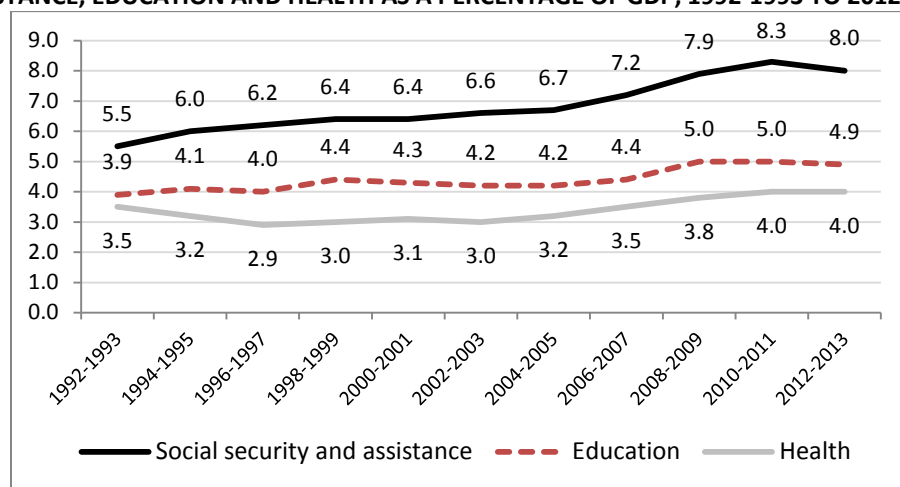
## 1. From residual social policies to the expansion of social protection

The debt crisis of the 1980s was characterized by profound fiscal deficits, which led governments to reduce public social investment. The regulatory and productive role of the State was diminished, given that it was understood that the market had to play a central role in allocating goods and services. Privatization and decentralization of social services were promoted. However, growingly precarious and flexible contracts in the labour market were making it difficult for the population to access social goods and services via the market; consequently, labour informality continued to weaken social protection.

At the same time, the State implemented limited emergency social investment destined to families which could not access social security and social services through the market as well as a great number of uncoordinated targeted programmes lacking a systemic vision and solid institutional backing (ECLAC, 2010). Furthermore, the execution of social policy continued to be characterized by clientelism.

With the democratization of the countries of the region, social investment increased and –at different times depending on the countries- new social development and protection policies were created. In particular, since the early 2000s, some governments in the region broke with the idea of a residual social policy, achieving greater financing for social investment through general revenues. The 2008-2009 economic crisis, in particular, represented a turning point, as many Latin American countries did not opt for austerity but rather used social investment to minimize the socio-economic consequences typical of a recession. Figure 1 shows the increasing trend in spending on social security and assistance, education and health, at least until 2011.

**FIGURE 1. LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: TREND OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURE ON SOCIAL SECURITY AND ASSISTANCE, EDUCATION AND HEALTH AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP, 1992-1993 TO 2012-2013<sup>a</sup>**



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Expenditure Database.

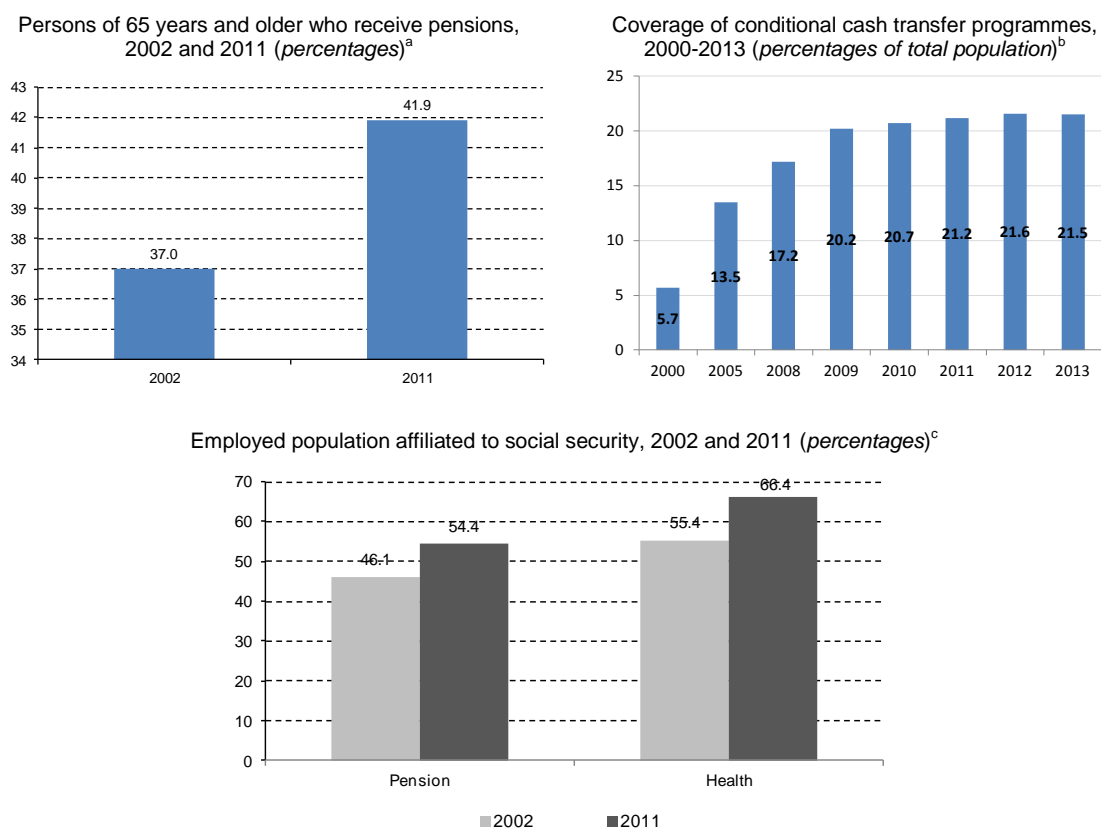
<sup>a</sup> Weighted average of 21 countries.

For more than a decade now, Latin America and the Caribbean have also been making a sustained effort to increase the coverage of social protection. While the privatizing reforms of the 1980s and 1990s sought to restrict access to social protection according to payment capacity and both fiscal and actuarial control, the reforms of this new century are aimed in the opposite direction and seek to expand

coverage of social protection beyond perfect contributory equivalences. This is reflected in at least four areas of social policy: pensions for older adults, income transfers to families with children, access to social services and health insurance and, lastly, worker protection (unemployment insurance, policies on maternal and family leave, active employment policies). In these domains, the frontiers between the contributory and the non-contributory, between targeting and universality, and between the contributor and the recipient of the benefit, are being redefined.

This has led to an increase in the coverage of pensions for the population aged 65 and above; increases in the number of families with children receiving an income transfer from the State; growth in the employed population that contributes to social security; and an increase in the population with some type of health service coverage (see figure 2). Three main causes for the increase in coverage can be identified: (i) expansion based on non-contributory policies, financed out of general revenues; (ii) changes in the design of the eligibility of the contributory base, which facilitate affiliation by making access more flexible, and subsidies to access various social security programmes; and (iii) improvements in the labour market (either as a result of improvements in the supply of decent jobs or an increase in the State's oversight and regulatory role) which, by increasing formality, expand the coverage of the contributory base.

**FIGURE 2. LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: INCREASES IN SOCIAL PROTECTION COVERAGE**



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), database on non-contributory social protection programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Social Panorama of Latin America 2013.

<sup>a</sup> Simple average of 14 countries. <sup>b</sup> Weighted average of 21 countries. <sup>c</sup> Simple average of 16 countries.

The dominant non-contributory modality in the region has been targeted policies, although universal alternatives also exist. Among targeted policies, it is important distinguish between those that target population groups living in poverty or extreme poverty, from those that pay benefits to anyone who lacks contributory coverage. Most countries in the region determine families' eligibility to receive monetary transfers through proxy means tests, such is the case of conditional cash transfer programmes. However, Argentina pays the Universal Child Allowance for Social Protection (AUH) to mothers and fathers who do not receive a contributory benefit –because they are unemployed or working in the informal sector– and the Plurinational State of Bolivia with its Renta Dignidad [Decent Income] programme offers a universal pension to persons aged 60 or above. In health care, Brazil is a pioneer in the region, having created the Unified Health System over two decades ago, to which all citizens have access free of charges.

Other important sources of innovations over the last decade relate to expanding education and care, and implementing labour-market protection policies. Nearly all countries in the region have extended the ages of education coverage towards preschool children (3-6 years), and many have created care facilities for children from birth to two years old.<sup>3</sup> This has translated into a significant increase in enrolment in early childhood services and early schooling in the vast majority of countries (UNESCO, 2010; Itzovich, 2013). In terms of integrated care, efforts have also been promoted to set up genuine systems or subsystems of social early childhood protection, which aim to consolidate integrated care and social protection mechanisms targeting early childhood.<sup>4</sup> Progress, however still needs to be made in a region heavily characterized by the infantilization of poverty as well as by population ageing. The establishment of a qualified public offer of care services targeted to early childhood and the elderly would mean that children and senior citizens would receive better services to attend their specific needs; it would also contribute to diminish the burden of non-remunerated work for women, enabling them to participate in the labour market and to increase their autonomous incomes.

In turn, protection and promotion policies for workers have generated a significant increase in the population covered by unemployment insurance, illness and accident insurance, entitlements to subsidies, leave periods and dismissal rights. Also important are changes in the protection of workers of both sexes in relation to pregnancy and childbirth leave.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. The rights-based approach: from programmes to policies, from emergency to entitlements**

As highlighted by Hardy (2014), the shift from needs-based social policies to policies based on social rights has been a key turning point in Latin America and the Caribbean. From a regional perspective,

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<sup>3</sup> The cases of Uruguay (Early Childhood and Family Care Centres, CAIF), Argentina (preschool services in provincial and municipal programmes), Chile (preschool), Mexico (with its strategy of subsidies for community-based early childhood care), Brazil (with an expansion of child-care centres), Peru (with the Non-school Early Education Programme, PRONEI) and Panama with a combination of initial education to the rural population and Home-Based Indigenous Education (EIH), Family and Community Education Centres for Vulnerable Population Groups (CEFACI) and the Community Initial Education Centres (CEIC) are among the key examples.

<sup>4</sup> Key examples are those of Brazil (Brasil Carinhoso), Chile (Chile Crece Contigo), Colombia (De cero a siempre) and, more recently, Uruguay (Uruguay Crece Contigo).

<sup>5</sup> Uruguay has incorporated rural and domestic-service workers. Chile and Uruguay have expanded the coverage, duration and quality of childbirth leave provisions for women and men.

there is no doubt that the rights-based approach and its universal logic is dominating the social policy discourse and represents an ethical and normative horizon in most countries.

Even though there are other providers of welfare and social protection -such as the market, families and social and community organizations-, the primary responsibility to promote ESCR lies on the State, which must guarantee living conditions that include a minimum income, access to quality social services -health and education- and labor market regulation to promote decent employment for all their citizens (Cecchini and Martínez, 2012). In fact, Latin American and Caribbean States have adopted various international legal instruments to promote and guarantee social rights, among which stand out the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966), the American Convention on Human Rights (1969) and the Protocol of San Salvador (1988).

Although from a normative view, much progress is still necessary to move from discourse to the implementation of a universal social protection rights-based approach (Sepulveda, 2014), there are several examples of policies and programmes that put into practice one or more of its principles. The rights-based approach to social policy is contributing to making public policies more robust, shifting from specific programmes based on emergency situations with temporary financing, to stable policies based on entitlements with stable financing. Examples of this shift from hand-outs and programmes, to entitlements and policy include: the transition from the National Social Emergency Response Plan (PANES) in Uruguay to a new regulation of Family Allowances; the use of citizen's income as the underlying criterion for the monetary transfer system in Brazil, along with the constitutional definition of rights and guaranteed budgetary appropriation of the pension for elderly and disabled persons (Continuous Benefit Programme, BPC); the explicit guarantees in health and the Basic Solidarity Pension in Chile; or the Universal Pension in the Federal District of Mexico. These changes are accompanied, albeit in varying ways, by legally defined mechanisms for indexing provisions, to prevent the benefits from being used as adjustment variables in difficult fiscal situations. Nonetheless, weaknesses persist in many of these innovations, in terms of guarantees. This can be clearly seen in the case of the AUH in Argentina, which, despite its ambitious coverage and adequate benefit level, lacks budgetary guarantees and legally pre-determined indexation criteria.

The regional context is thus quite heterogeneous with respect to the normative level that countries give to social protection, as well as the implementation of policies designed under a rights-based approach (Cecchini and Martínez, 2012). Several countries have constitutional recognition of social rights. Exemplary cases are Brazil, whose 1988 Constitution guarantees universal coverage and access to social services through public financing, and Colombia, whose 1991 Constitution promotes and ensures the right to security and social assistance and adopt a rights-based approach in the design and execution of national social protection systems. However, few countries incorporate explicit guarantees of rights in their social policies and programmes (see table 1). Besides, there are still large gaps in access and coverage for different population groups (Mesa-Lago, 2009; Cecchini and Martínez, 2012).

**Table 1. RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH AND SOCIAL GUARANTEES IN LATIN AMERICA**

Country	Constitutional recognition of social rights	Rights-based approach in social protection	Explicit guarantees
Argentina	Yes	Yes	
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brazil	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chile		Yes	Yes
Colombia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes	
Cuba	Yes	Yes	
Ecuador	Yes	Yes	
El Salvador	Yes	Yes	
Guatemala		Yes	Yes
Honduras	Yes		
Mexico	Yes	Yes	
Nicaragua	Yes		
Panama			
Paraguay	Yes	Yes	
Peru	Yes	Yes	
Dominican Republic	Yes		
Uruguay	Yes	Yes	
Venezuela (Bolivarian Rep. of)	Yes	Yes	

Source: Cecchini and Martínez (2011) and Cecchini and Vargas (2014).

### **3. Reduction of poverty and inequality**

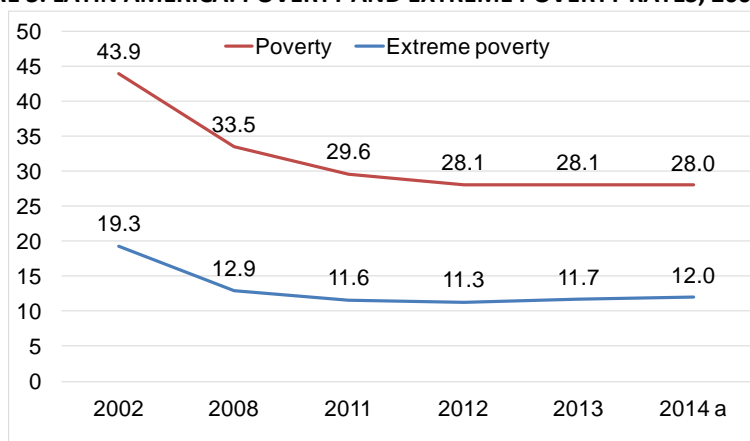
The debt crisis led to great increases in poverty and extreme poverty in LAC, which were reduced only marginally during the 1990s. However, according to ECLAC's data, the region experimented a great reduction of poverty and extreme poverty during the 2002-2008 period. Since then, while poverty continued to decrease very modestly, extreme poverty did otherwise due to the increase in food prices. As a result of these trends, in 2013 28.1% of Latin Americans lived in poverty and 11.7% in extreme poverty. Thus 165 million people cannot meet at least their basic needs and -of those- 69 million people do not have enough income to meet their basic food needs. The projections for 2014 indicate that poverty has decreased to 28.0%, but extreme poverty has increased by 0.3 percentage points (see figure 3) (ECLAC, 2014a).<sup>6</sup>

In the last ten years, Latin America has also succeeded reducing its high levels of income inequality. In particular, ECLAC (2012a) states that 2002 was a turning point that broke the trend of increasing inequality; the 2008-2009 economic crisis was not an obstacle to keep reducing inequality. Between 2002 and 2013, Gini coefficients increased only in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Nevertheless, Latin

<sup>6</sup> Despite its reduction, poverty continues affecting more severely some groups, particularly indigenous people, women and children under 14 years. For instance, poverty rates among children are 1.7 times larger than poverty rates among people aged 14 years and above (ECLAC, 2011).

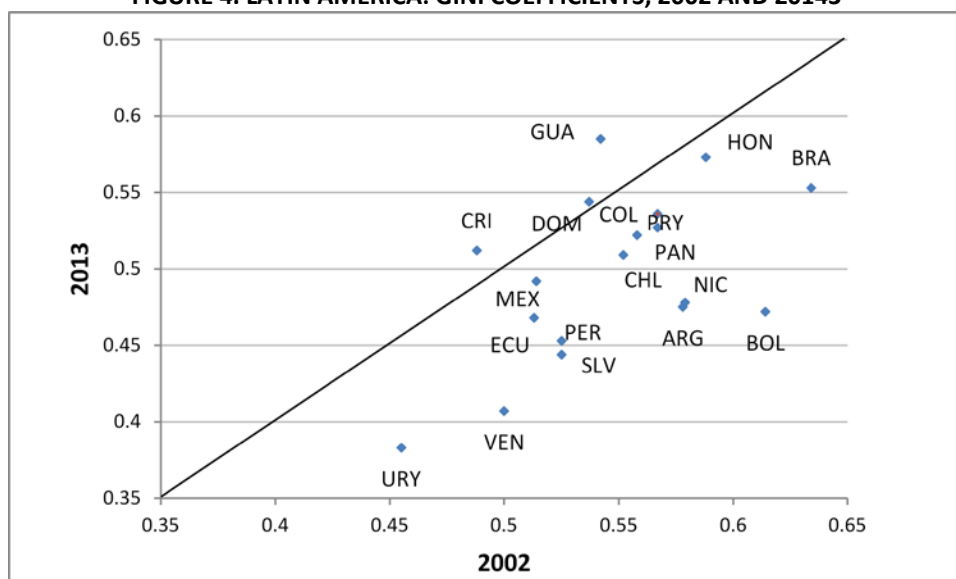
America remains the most unequal region in the world: the simple average of the Gini coefficients is 0.49, with national values ranging from 0.38 (Uruguay) to 0.57 (Honduras) (see figure 4).

**FIGURE 3. LATIN AMERICA: POVERTY AND EXTREME POVERTY RATES, 2002-2014**



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Panorama of Latin America 2014.

**FIGURE 4. LATIN AMERICA: GINI COEFFICIENTS, 2002 AND 2014**



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Panorama of Latin America 2014.

The decrease in poverty and inequality that has occurred since 2002 is explained by several factors. First, economic growth was sustained and allowed to reduce open urban unemployment -from 11.2% in 2002 to 6.0% in 2014- and significantly increased labour earnings. Second –while it is true that historically social investment has had a strong pro-cyclical role-, during the 2008-2009 crisis most of the countries in the region decided to increase social investment (ECLAC, 2012a). In several countries, this was sustained by increased taxation. Thirdly, there are demographic factors influencing the decline in poverty and inequality in the region. The total fertility rate shows a downward trend, and it is projected that in a few years the region will not exceed the replacement rate (2.1 children per woman). As a result of fewer



children per woman, there has been a reduction in dependency rates, which means that there are more people of working age with earning capacity per each inactive person. Fourth, the female participation rate has increased, and this has also happened in lower-income households (Cecchini and Uthoff, 2008). Fifth, social programmes and non-contributory social protection transfers have increased in importance and have had a positive impact on poverty reduction. Finally, the reduction of poverty and inequality has also been rooted in the historical trend of decline of unsatisfied basic needs in education, health, nutrition, housing and access to basic water and sanitation. According to ECLAC, all countries in the region -though with a huge heterogeneity among them- presented improvements in living conditions, as measured by multidimensional poverty indicators (ECLAC, 2011).

#### **4. Persistence of structural development problems and challenges to public policies**

The region is clearly in a stage of construction of social citizenship, but progress has not fully resolved some of the historical deficits of social policy: absence of guaranteed universal basic protection floors, fragmented efforts, and lack of full progressiveness. In some cases, policies represent patches in a time of abundance, rather than strategic reforms. Furthermore, there are structural problems affecting the socio-economic development of the region.

As highlighted by ECLAC (2012a), Latin American economies are characterized by the heterogeneity of their productive structure, which is reproduced in labour markets and transmitted to the entire society via the distribution of profits and the stratified access to contributory social protection for workers. The heterogeneity of the productive structure relates to the coexistence of three highly differentiated productive sectors in the region's economies: i) high-productivity sector, formed by large enterprises (with more than 200 workers), which are fully integrated in the global economy and make an intensive use of capital and new technologies. Around 2009, these companies produced 66.9% of regional GDP, but employed only 19.8% of the workforce, mostly under formal labour relations; ii) medium-productivity sector, composed by small and medium firms with scarce links with the highly productive sectors. This sector is responsible for 22.6% of the region's GDP and employs 30% of the workforce; iii) low-productivity sector, composed by very small enterprises (with less than five workers) which make scarce or no use of new technologies. This sector includes self-employed workers with low education, family workers and domestic service. It represents half of the regional workforce, but contributes only to 10.6% of the regional GDP. Workers employed in low-productivity companies, known as "informal" workers, have both low salaries and scarce access to social protection benefits to face unemployment, illness and old age (ECLAC, 2012a).

In the medium- and high-productivity sectors, workers' coverage of social security is almost four times higher than in low-productivity ones. As a result, in 2011, only 55% of salaried workers in Latin America were affiliated to a pensions system and 66% to a health system. Also, there are gender-based and intergenerational inequalities, which materialize in the higher proportion of female workers in low-productivity employment and in low female and youth labor force participation rates (ECLAC, 2012b). This situation explains how over the last decade, because of the high rates of informality and incapacity to provide social protection to all occupied people, countries have begun to strengthen non-contributory pillars (Cecchini and Martínez, 2012; ECLAC, 2012b).

However, in order to converge towards equality –besides strengthening the non-contributory pillar– it is also necessary to implement adequate labour-market regulations, which are crucial because they contribute to improve workers' salaries, as well as access to other monetary and non-monetary benefits (ECLAC, 2012b). Although it is difficult for micro and small enterprises to fulfill all the commitments related to labour rights, companies that belong to the medium and high-productivity sectors should be able to fulfill such regulations. Thus, progress should be made both on tax and administrative simplification, as well as on a higher compliance of labour regulation on the part of formal enterprises.

Another important priority for Latin American and Caribbean countries is to implement policies that seek to improve the quality of social services (i.e. health and education), where the performance of public services is generally substantially lower than in the private sector –which is accessible only by the better-off-. This goal goes together with the promotion of universal health systems, the increase of the coverage of public education and the promotion of the improvement of teaching, as well as with the construction of a system of guaranteed basic incomes whose objectives are to fight inequality and growing childhood poverty, to decrease old-age insecurity and to achieve a less vulnerable workforce (ECLAC, 2010).

More attention should also be placed to setting up policies and programmes that help prevent and adequately respond to natural disasters,<sup>7</sup> which have a clear potential for destabilizing welfare and undermining the rights of families and their members. LAC countries have only recently begun to implement some social protection tools to face disasters provoked by natural phenomena (i.e. earthquakes, floods, etc.). These include monetary transfers to families with children and older adults, public employment programmes, as well as micro insurances for vulnerable agricultural producers who are not insured by private companies (Vargas, forthcoming).

## **Conclusions**

Given their clear linkages with countries' productive structure –and taking into account the vulnerability of the population to natural disasters– it is clear that for social policies to be effective they should be encompassed in the sustainable development paradigm. Such paradigm promotes a comprehensive view of development and thus shares this common trait with the rights-based approach, which is based on universally accepted values and is premised on the indivisibility and interdependence of all rights, and therefore on comprehensiveness.

A comprehensive and rights-based view of social policies, in turn, leads to a preference for universal coverage and solidarity-based financing. Even if LAC face today a context of low economic growth – which is forecasted to be only 1.0% in 2015 (ECLAC, 2014b)–, it is possible to continue to strengthen social policies, improving their quality and expanding their coverage through the collection of higher fiscal resources.

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<sup>7</sup> The occurrence of disasters has increased significantly: in the 1960s LAC faced 19 disasters per year, while the last decade has seen an average of 68 disasters per year (source: EM-DAT International Disaster Database).

To this end, it is crucial to develop agreements by means of fiscal and social protection compacts, encompassed within the concept of entitlement to rights (ECLAC, 2014d). Fiscal and social protection covenants between different political forces are needed in the countries of the region to reach agreement on how to finance more universal social policies, with benefits and coverage sufficient to realize the population's economic and social rights.

Achieving long-term and sustainable funding to advance towards the universalization of social policies can be complex in the poorest LAC countries –which face scarcity of funds and the decrease of assistance from international donors– as well as for those that are highly dependent on primary exports –which are highly sensible to the volatility of international prices–. However, all countries can strive to establish fiscal and social protection pacts aimed at reducing inequality and giving the State a higher capacity to redistribute resources via a more adequate fiscal burden and a more progressive tax structure.

In the region, States are in a condition to collect greater amounts of fiscal resources. The tax base can be broadened by fostering the inclusion of informal workers into the formal labour market, as well as by raising personal income tax for the rich, with significant redistributive results. According to Gómez Sabaini and Morán (2013), the region collects little and badly, because the bulk of taxes is on consumption and other indirect sources. The collection of personal income tax is equivalent to 1.4% of the GDP of Latin American and the Caribbean, compared to 8.4% of GDP in the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Also, while in LAC income taxation is distributed between 28.7% on individuals and 71.3% on corporations, in OECD countries it is composed, approximately, by 70% on individual earnings and 30% on the profits of companies.

While the existence of elites with veto power is at the roots of the design of highly regressive tax systems (Gómez Sabaini and Martner, 2008), it is possible to establish fiscal and social protection compacts which are based on the reciprocity between citizens and the State. Citizens may be favorable to the removal of tax exemptions and special treatments, and willing to pay higher taxes, if it entails an improvement of the quality of public health and education, as well as less corruption and higher control of tax evasion. This, together with a universal coverage of social services, would promote stronger ties between the State and citizens.

However, achieving a fiscal and social protection compact is not an easy task, because it is necessary to ensure a long-term political vision shared by the majority of citizens, together with a gradual implementation of reforms, subjected to bargains but without losing their original strategic and inclusive sense (ECLAC, 2013).

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