

Social programmes, poverty eradication and labour inclusion. Lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean¹

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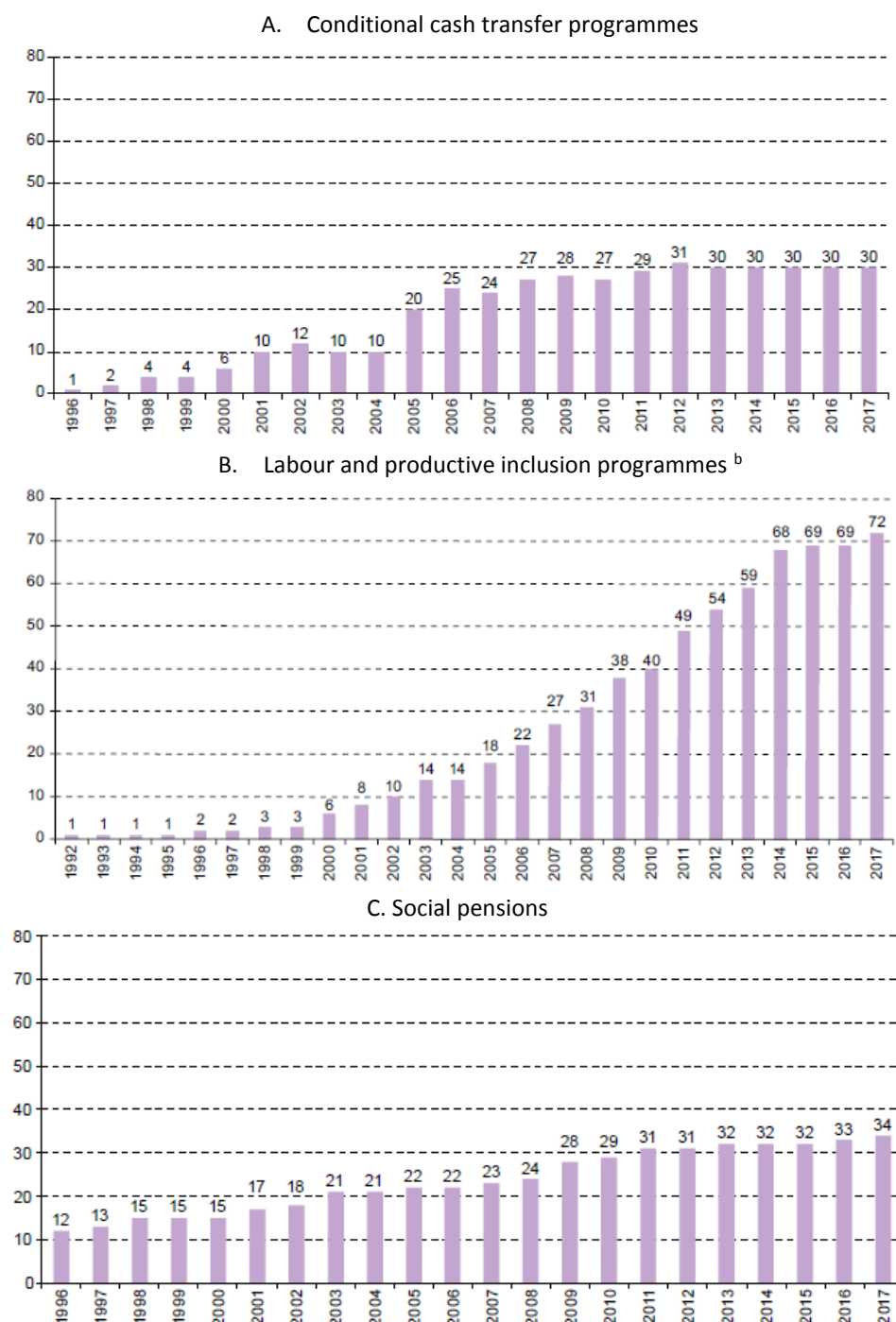
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Over the past two decades, Latin American and Caribbean countries have devised a range of strategies, public policies and social programmes geared towards eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities at all stages of the life cycle (ECLAC, 2016a). In particular, the region has increased the number of non-contributory social protection programmes, chief among them conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes, labour and productive inclusion programmes and social pensions (see figure 1), whose goal is not only to help boost the incomes of the participating households but also to provide greater access to social services and decent work. To receive allowances and services from these programmes, individuals do not need to have made contributions in the past in the form of deductions from wages (social security contributions) or to have participated in the formal labour market. Non-contributory social protection is financed through the general budget, on the basis of the principle of solidarity, with funds raised from direct or indirect taxes, public enterprises or—in the poorest countries— international cooperation.

Non-contributory programmes have reached out to large sectors of society (such as informal workers, poor women, rural population groups, indigenous peoples and Afrodescendants) that were historically excluded from social protection benefits. CCT programmes provide poor or extremely poor families who have one or more minor children with monetary and non-monetary resources on the condition that they comply with certain requirements (chiefly in the areas of health and education) that are designed to build human capacities. These programmes, of which there are now 30 in 20 different Latin American and Caribbean countries, were introduced in the mid-1990s: at the local level in 1995 in the cities of Campinas and Ribeirão Preto and in the Federal District of Brazil and at the national level in 1997 in Mexico with the launch of the Education, Health and Food Programme (Progresá) (Cecchini and Madariaga, 2011). Labour and productive inclusion programmes cater to young people and adults of working age who are living in conditions of poverty or vulnerability to poverty. They offer technical and vocational training, remedial education, direct and indirect job creation, support for self-employment and labour intermediation services (ECLAC, 2016a). Although some programmes of this sort began to be set up in the 1970s and 1980s, they came into their own in the 1990s and expanded rapidly throughout the 2000s. Social pension programmes are monetary transfers related to old-age and disability that the State provides to people who have not been employed in the formal labour market or who did not pay sufficient social security taxes during their working life. The first non-contributory pensions of this type in the region were introduced in Uruguay (1919) and Argentina (1948), but they did not become widespread until the 2000s.

¹ This text is based on Abramo, L, S. Cecchini and B. Morales (2019), Social programmes, poverty eradication and labour inclusion. Lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC Book No. 155, Santiago: United Nations.

Figure 1. Latin America and the Caribbean (30 countries): number of non-contributory social protection programmes in operation, per year ^a



Source: Prepared by the authors, on the basis of Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Non-contributory social protection programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean database [online] <https://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/home>.

^a The countries are: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.

^b Only those programmes that are still in operation are counted.

The regional experience with these social programmes allows to address the ongoing discussion regarding the possible incentives and disincentives of non-contributory social protection in connection with the inclusion and formalization of the poor population in the labour market and to set out some policy recommendations to improve policies for overcoming poverty, reducing inequalities, and promoting social and labour inclusion. One of the main objectives of this text is to question the opinion —unfortunately quite commonly held among analysts, public authorities and managers, and the general public— that people find themselves living in poverty because of personal or family failings. This opinion ignores the major structural inequalities (linked to sex, ethnic and racial origin, territory and other factors) that intersect and overlap, limiting access to services (such as education, care and health) and good quality jobs (ECLAC, 2016b). Considering that poverty is a structural problem of Latin American and Caribbean societies, attributing poverty to “laziness” is not only highly prejudicial and discriminatory towards people living in poverty and one of the most flagrant examples of the culture of privilege in the region (ECLAC, 2018), but also leads to bad public policy decisions.

Work is no guarantee of a way out of poverty

The vast majority of people of working age who are living in poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean do work or are actively looking for work. However, they do so without pay or they have jobs that not only do not pay enough to lift them out of poverty, but also reproduce it. Such working conditions may include low wages; informality; precariousness; absence of contracts and social protection; non-compliance with labour rights; discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity and race and against persons with disabilities; and other forms of unacceptable or degrading work, such as child labour or forced labour. In other words, people living in poverty have high deficits of decent work (Abramo, 2015).

A first step towards debunking the notion of “laziness” as a cause of poverty can be taken by analysing the activity and occupational status of Latin American women and men who fall into one of four categories (extremely poor, poor, at risk of poverty and all the rest) (see figure 2). First, such an analysis shows that a majority of extremely poor and poor men are employed (60.6% and 69.2%, respectively). The fact that a larger percentage of the poor are economically inactive than the rest of the population is largely because of the much higher rates of economic inactivity for women in that category. As shown by the results of time-use surveys, this does not mean that these women are not working but rather than they devote long hours to unpaid domestic work and taking care of children, older adults and persons with disabilities.² When the data are disaggregated by income quintile, it becomes clear that labour market entry barriers for poor and vulnerable women are much higher than for the rest of the population. Women in the highest income quintile spend, on average, nearly 32 hours per week performing unpaid work, whereas the corresponding figure for women in the lowest income quintile is around 46 hours. The size of the unpaid workload is also directly related to the presence of children, especially if they do not attend day-care centres. In Mexico, as of 2014, women living in

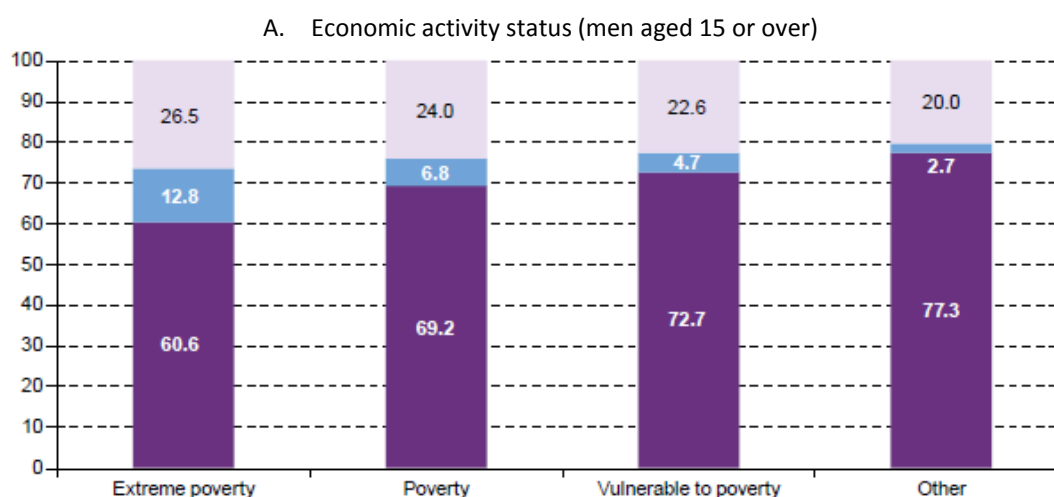
² Although the results of these surveys are not always comparable, they indicate that women aged 15 or older devote between 18.6 hours per week (in Brazil) and 48.4 hours per week (in Mexico) to unpaid work and that, on average, they spend three times as many hours as men performing such work.

households where there were no children under 5 years of age were devoting 22 hours per week to caring for other members of the household, whereas those in households with children under age 5 who attended a day-care centre spent 35.5 hours per week on such tasks and those with under-5s who did not go to day care spent 44.1 hours per week on care tasks (ECLAC, 2017b).

A second factor is that unemployment is higher among the poor than among the rest of the population: in 2016, the unemployment rates for men and women who were neither poor nor vulnerable were 2.7% and 2.5%, respectively, compared with 12.8% and 7.6%, respectively, for men and women in extreme poverty. The unemployment rates for extremely poor men and women are thus 4.7 times higher and 3.0 times higher, respectively, than the corresponding unemployment rates for men and women who are not poor or vulnerable (see figure 2).³

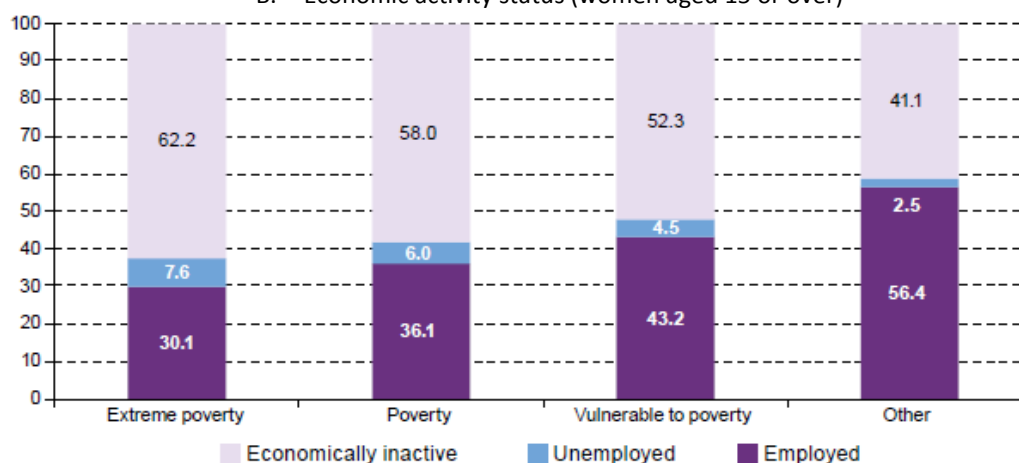
A third factor is that, once employed, a large percentage of poor and extremely poor persons are working in less desirable occupations that do not provide them with social protection. Among extremely poor women, 48% are self-employed, 25% are unpaid family workers and 11% work in domestic service, while just 17% are wage earners. In the case of poor women who do not fall into the category of extreme poverty, a little less than one third are wage earners, 14% of them are employed in domestic service, and the percentages who are unpaid family workers or self-employed are smaller than in the case of extremely poor women. In the case of men, more than half of the extremely poor are self-employed and a little less than a third are wage earners. A much larger percentage of men living in poverty (but not extreme poverty) are wage earners (almost 51% of the total) and fewer are self-employed. In both cases, the percentages of men who are unpaid family workers are much smaller and the number working in domestic service is negligible.

Figure 2. Latin America (18 countries): economic activity status and occupational category, by sex and income level, around 2016 ^a (Percentages)

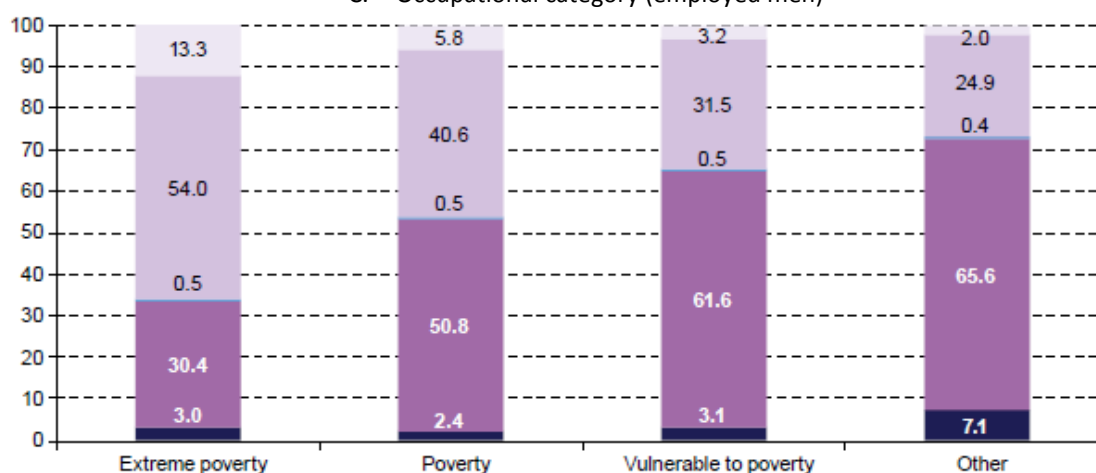


³ This does not imply the existence of a cause-effect or one-way relationship, since it is known that unemployed persons are more likely to be living in poverty.

B. Economic activity status (women aged 15 or over)



C. Occupational category (employed men)



D. Occupational category (employed women)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of special tabulations from household surveys conducted in the respective countries.

* Persons are classified into four categories: extreme poverty, poverty, vulnerable to poverty (household incomes between 1.0 and 1.8 times the poverty line) and other. Simple averages.

The inclusion of poor and extremely poor persons in the labour force is therefore not solely a problem of lack of employment or lack of sufficient hours of employment. In fact, many of them

hold down more than one job and have very long workdays. Men —and especially women— who live in poverty are unable to obtain decent work because they are often employed in low-productivity sectors, lack job stability, are unable to avail themselves of their basic rights and do not earn enough to attain even basic living conditions, much less secure a better future for themselves and their families. Clearly, then, work is no guarantee of escaping poverty (ECLAC, 2013).

Towards a virtuous circle of non-contributory social protection

Social protection is a key dimension of decent work. However, some members of academic and political circles maintain that the monetary transfers provided for under non-contributory social protection —like conditional cash transfers or social pensions— generate perverse incentives. These would include disincentives for job-seekers because of the “free” benefits they receive, on the one hand, and, on the other, incentives for remaining in the informal sector of the economy, on the assumption that people who work would rather sidestep the costs (but not the benefits) of formal employment. This, they argue, sets up a vicious circle that undermines economic growth, productivity and labour force participation. The deterrent effect on employment is seen as deriving from the fact that members of recipient households who have a guaranteed level of income would feel less of a need to find work. Viewed from this angle, monetary transfers are seen as a disincentive for efforts on the part of household members to lift themselves out of poverty on their own.

Looking past the neoclassic economic theory according to which income transfers result in a marginal decrease in the supply of labour (ILO, 2010), this argument is often associated with the view that poverty is the result of “laziness” and that poor people are therefore responsible for their situation. The fact of the matter is, however, that working-age adults in poor households receiving non-contributory cash transfers are highly unlikely to just “do nothing” because the amounts of such transfers in the region are quite small and generally compensate for only a small part of these households’ income shortfalls. Even when households receive such transfers, they still have to rely on their own efforts in order to escape poverty and remain out of poverty once they have done so (ECLAC/ILO, 2014). In fact, the results of impact assessments conducted at the global (Banerjee and others, 2017; Bastagli and others, 2016) and regional levels (Alzúa, Cruces and Ripani, 2010), show that conditional cash transfer programmes do not act as disincentives for their recipients’ entry into the workforce. However, men and women recipients do react differently depending on the existence and design of conditionalities, the characteristics of the labour market and the availability of care services.

The incentive for working in the informal sector (on the case of Mexico, see Levy, 2010) would presumably take the form of a desire on the part of workers belonging to households that are receiving non-contributory transfers to avoid the obligatory deductions for health insurance and pension plans made in formal sector jobs. Therefore, so the argument goes, they look for low-productivity jobs in the informal sector instead. This could happen if the programmes in question target unemployed working-age adults who, if they were to enter the formal sector, would become ineligible. Non-contributory social protection programmes in which households’ per capita income is an important factor in determining eligibility could also create such

disincentives, just as social pension schemes could discourage workers from joining the formal sector of the economy because they can expect to receive an old-age pension without having had to pay into an established social security system.

However, the majority of the region’s non-contributory transfer programmes do not target working-age adults but rather children or older adults; nor do they base eligibility on occupational status. If labour earnings have no impact on the transfer payments made to households participating in the programme, then there would be no reason for them to act as an incentive for informal employment (ECLAC, 2017a). In addition, social pensions are so small that they could hardly be regarded as a sufficient source of income during old age.

On formalization, while a number of studies do point to disincentives (Garganta and Gasparini, 2012; Farné, Rodríguez and Ríos, 2016), the risks of providing social benefits to informal sector workers appear to have been overestimated. In the region, self-employment and informal employment are not simply a result of personal, rational decisions; they are, instead, the outcome of the nature of the production structure and the labour market. In most cases, poor workers do not choose, nor do they prefer, to work in the informal sector; that is simply the only option open to them (ECLAC, 2012a), and this is especially the case for poor women with small children who have no access to day-care services. To a large extent, the heterogeneity of the production structure is what creates and sustains the informal sector, given the higher-productivity sectors’ weak labour force absorption capacity. The degree of informality in the region’s economies also has to do with the weakness of the institutions that are supposed to enforce labour regulations and laws, including labour inspectorates (ECLAC, 2017a).

Thus, rather than embracing the idea of a vicious circle of perverse incentives whereby non-contributory social protection would hurt productivity, growth and employment, the argument being made here is that positive synergies can be created among non-contributory social protection programmes, employment and decent work (ECLAC, 2012a; ECLAC/ILO, 2014). Non-contributory social protection can be particularly effective in helping to create a virtuous circle of autonomous income generation that will have significant multiplier effects (ECLAC, 2017a; Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme, 2010; Samson, 2009). When social programmes are well established, and their continuity is assured and when the transfers that they provide are of a sufficient amount, they can be effective in ensuring a basic level of wellbeing that will then enable people to take better employment decisions. This, in turn, can speed poverty reduction and spur local and general economic activity (see diagram 1).⁴

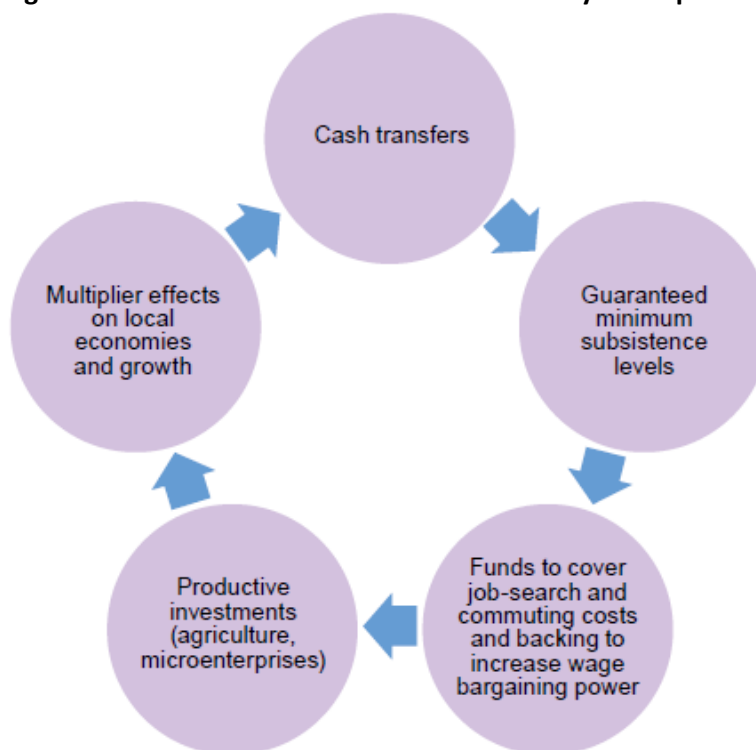
Providing people with the assurance that they can count on, at the least, a minimum subsistence level of income, will avert the misuse and waste of human capacities occasioned by the use of survival strategies (such as in the case of child labour) (ECLAC, 2017a). Non-contributory cash transfers can also have virtuous-circle effects by covering households’ opportunity costs when members seek work (including the costs of job searches and

⁴ In addition to the amount of these transfers, their continuity over time enables households to cross over certain thresholds in terms of basic needs which puts them into a better position to invest in their children’s education, find more decent forms of employment, invest in small start-ups or farming activities and thus improve their economic position (ECLAC, 2012a; Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme, 2010).

commuting costs). These transfers can, in addition, promote income generation by furnishing the funds needed for microenterprise start-ups or investments in production capacity in rural or urban settings and can provide their recipients with greater bargaining power when they are offered very low wages or very poor working conditions (ECLAC/ILO, 2014; ILO, 2010).

Programmes should also be accompanied by broader policies for promoting decent forms of employment and access to social services in order to reinforce their effectiveness as tools for increasing people’s and households’ well-being. Decent work is needed in order to ensure that, rather than seeing their employment options confined to informal, substandard and insecure forms of work that will not provide them with social security coverage, poor people in general and the participants in non-contributory social protection programmes specifically, will have greater opportunities for securing good-quality jobs in the formal sector of the economy (ECLAC, 2017b).

Diagram 1. The virtuous circle of non-contributory social protection



Source: S. Cecchini and L. Vargas, “Los desafíos de las nuevas políticas de desarrollo social en América Latina”, Revista de Economía Crítica, No. 18, Valladolid, Association of Critical Economics (AEC), 2014.

Strengthening social policies and programmes

As proposed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2010, 2012b and 2014), countries must move towards establishing public policies with a rights-based approach, rooted in the principles of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity. Public policies based on this approach have a better chance of helping to reduce poverty and improve levels of well-being and equality in society, as they recognize that the excluded are citizens who have rights and are not just vulnerable or needy people. Therefore, instead of passive

beneficiaries, recipients of social programmes become bearers of rights and responsibilities, which are legally binding and enforceable as guarantees (Cecchini and Rico, 2015). In order to move towards greater levels of inclusion and participation in the benefits of development and the exercise of rights, basic levels of well-being must be achieved, as a minimum, by guaranteeing a basic income, universal access to good quality social services and decent work opportunities (ECLAC, 2017a and 2019).

Policies to reduce poverty and inequalities must address a twofold challenge, that of social and labour inclusion. The concept of social inclusion is a multidimensional one that encompasses the realization of rights, participation in social affairs, access to education, health and care services, basic infrastructure services and housing, and disposable income (ECLAC, 2019). It thus refers to a process of improving economic, social, cultural and political conditions in order to enable people to participate fully in society (ECLAC, 2008 and 2009; United Nations, 2016; Levitas and others, 2007). The concept of labour inclusion, for its part, refers to access to the labour market and the ability to be a part of the labour force while enjoying decent working conditions.⁵

As a consequence, integrated strategies for overcoming poverty and extending the scope of social protection to cover the entire life cycle should be composed of three pillars: (i) guaranteed incomes; (ii) access to education, health care and care services along with basic infrastructure services and housing; and (iii) economic (labour and productive) inclusion.⁶ In addition to cash transfers, public policies must provide quality services for all that are sensitive to differences to suit people’s differing needs in the areas of health care and education. Inclusive labour and production programmes are also needed in order to provide more opportunities for autonomous income generation to young people and adults of working age who are poor or vulnerable to poverty. Anti-poverty strategies should also be linked to strategies for promoting decent work and the development of the production sector (ECLAC, 2016c).

In relation to the first pillar (a guaranteed income), ECLAC (2016c) has advocated expanding the coverage of transfers to reach all poor members of the population and increasing the amounts of those transfers so that they will at least be enough to lift all the members of recipient households out of extreme poverty. More and more people in the region and around the world are talking about the idea of a basic minimum income, i.e. a regular, nonconditional cash payment made by the State to all its citizens (ECLAC, 2018). As observed by ECLAC (2018, p. 235): “By freeing people from the most serious consequences of material dependency, a basic income could lead to a rearrangement of social hierarchies, increase the bargaining power of women, young people and other groups in situations of discrimination and subordination, and

⁵ This concept of decent work has been developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and is the basis for Sustainable Development Goal 8 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”).

⁶ One example is the intersectoral *Brasil sem Miséria* (Brazil without poverty) strategy, which focused on: (i) a guaranteed minimum income under the Bolsa Família and the BPC programmes; (ii) access to public services; and (iii) inclusion in the rural and urban production sectors through programmes for promoting access to labour income and job creation (Robles and Mirosevic, 2013).

open up spaces of greater autonomy and freedom for all people.” Since the provision of such a minimum income would require the mobilization of a prodigious amount of resources, however, it would have to be phased in gradually in the Latin American and Caribbean countries (e.g. by age groups, geographic areas, by income level) over the long term. Also, this basic income would not be a replacement for the welfare State, which would continue to provide the other services and benefits to which people are entitled, but would instead be an additional pillar (ECLAC, 2018).

In terms of the second pillar, progress has to be made towards providing universal, quality education and health care, care services, and access to housing and to drinking water, sanitation, electricity and the Internet. To do this, a universalist, difference-sensitive approach is called for that will use affirmative action policies to “break down access barriers to social services and well-being that are faced by individuals living in conditions of poverty or vulnerability, women, Afrodescendants, indigenous peoples, persons living in deprived areas, persons with disabilities and migrants, as well as children, young people and older persons” (ECLAC, 2016b, p. 79). While government social services are primarily aimed at upholding people’s economic, social and cultural rights, they also represent a lifelong investment in human capacity. Raising the level of education and improving the health of the population will spur innovation, growth and sustainable development (ECLAC, 2018).

As regards the third pillar, although shortcomings in relation to productive inclusion are structural in nature —given the scant workforce-absorption capacity of modern, high-productivity sectors of the economy—, the supply of labour also suffers from certain shortcomings, and an improvement in the skill levels and expertise of the labour force would increase its members’ ability to take advantage of existing opportunities (ECLAC, 2012a). In order to enhance the chances of poor or vulnerable people of entering the workforce, it is important both to bolster the demand for labour through direct and indirect job creation and support for self-employment and to strengthen the labour supply by offering technical and vocational training and remedial studies programmes and by providing job placement services that can help to match up supply with demand (ECLAC, 2016a). If these efforts are to meet with success, they must be based on the concept of decent work and be supported by stronger care systems, since the absence of public support services for families with small children, older adults and persons with disabilities who cannot care for themselves is blocking many women, especially poor women, from entering the labour force (ECLAC/ILO, 2014).

Finally, if social policies and programmes are to be sustained and reinforced, social public investment must be protected from budget cuts, especially at a time when the poverty reduction process has stalled (ECLAC, 2019). As pointed out by ECLAC (2017a), insufficient tax revenues and social spending impede the creation of a virtuous circle of development, leaving Latin America and the Caribbean far removed from the standards attained by developed countries and falling short of having the desired redistributive effects. Protecting social expenditure from cuts and promoting the formation of a solid institutional structure and the effective management of social programmes are crucial for the achievement of a sustainable development process (ECLAC, 2018).

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