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## CONTENTS

**FOREWORD** ............................................................................................................................................................... 7

**INTRODUCTION** ....................................................................................................................................................... 9

1. The Ibero-American system ........................................................................................................................................ 9
2. Rights and equity ..................................................................................................................................................... 11
3. The contents of the document ........................................................................................................................... 12

**SECTION I. THE PROGRESS MADE IN FAVOUR OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS DURING THE 1990s** ................................................................................................................................. 15

1.  Effects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children in mobilizing reforms ........................................................................................................................................ 16
2.  Increased life expectancy and reduction of mortality .......................................................................................... 17
3.  Greater access to drinking water and sanitation ............................................................................................ 21
4.  Achievements in maternal health, prenatal attention and childbirth .............................................................. 23
5.  Progress in the area of nutrition ....................................................................................................................... 23
6.  Achievements in terms of immunization and vaccination .............................................................................. 24
7.  Advances in education ..................................................................................................................................... 27
8.  Progress in the eradication of child labour .................................................................................................... 29
9.  Greater efforts in respect of public social expenditure .................................................................................... 30

**SECTION II. INEQUALITIES IN THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN IBERO-AMERICA** .............................................................................................................. 33

1.  Inequalities in life expectancy .......................................................................................................................... 34
2.  Children’s right to life and health ................................................................................................................... 35
3.  Nutritional risk and the right of children to proper nutrition and breast-feeding ........................................ 46
4.  Inequalities in access to drinking water and sanitation services .................................................................... 51
5.  Shortcomings and inequalities in the educational achievements of children and adolescents ................ 54
6.  Adult illiteracy .................................................................................................................................................. 58
SECTION III. NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE IBERO-AMERICAN SOCIAL AGENDA

1. The fundamental right to a name and nationality
2. Adoption
3. Priority challenges in the field of education: education in early childhood
4. Quality of education
5. Educational lag among adolescents
6. Some problems of adolescence
7. Sexual and reproductive health in adolescence
8. The AIDS problem
9. Early pregnancy and unwanted pregnancy
10. Child labour in Ibero-America: its magnitude and causes
11. Progress made in the field of child labour in the last decade
12. Main lines for the gradual elimination of the exploitation of child workers
13. Participation by children and adolescents
14. Violence and the right to coexistence in the family
15. The right to live in peace, and the violence caused by armed conflicts
16. Migration
17. The right to true juvenile penal justice

SECTION IV. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

1. The insufficiency of economic growth
2. The magnitude and recent evolution of poverty among children and adolescents
3. The intergenerational transmission of poverty and of opportunities for well-being

SECTION V. SOCIAL INVESTMENT AND THE COST OF LOST OPPORTUNITIES

1. The insufficiency of social expenditure in Ibero-America
2. Towards recovery of lost opportunities
3. The economic importance of early child development
4. The importance of investments in education
5. The economic importance of health
6. When ethics and efficiency coincide

SECTION VI. CONCLUSIONS AND MAIN AREAS OF ACTION

1. General conclusions
2. Main areas of action

BIBLIOGRAPHY

STATISTICAL APPENDIX
Foreword

The Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government, which met in Panama in November 2000, devoted a good part of its deliberations to the subject of children and youth. It recognized the importance of their rights, as clearly enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which all the Ibero-American countries have signed. It also identified the most urgent problems facing boys, girls and adolescents and, in the Panama Declaration 2000, set forth the strategies for resolving them.

As these priorities were established, it became clear that there was a need for a thorough, detailed evaluation of the living conditions of Ibero-American boys, girls and adolescents at the close of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the heads of State and government concluded that it was essential for a study to be produced to supply such an evaluation, complement the strategies they had decided on and, perhaps most importantly, set specific targets to provide a basis for solid progress towards the much looked-for implementation of the Rights of the Child.

In response to this call from the Tenth Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Secretariat for Iberoamerican Cooperation (SECIB), prepared the study Building Equity from the Beginning: the Children and Adolescents of Ibero-America. Generous and substantial assistance was provided by a number of international organizations, which are referred to in this work.

The study reveals a mixed picture. On the one hand, the last decade of the twentieth century saw substantial progress in overcoming some of the problems that have traditionally affected children and youth in Ibero-America. The greatest achievements were in the field of social rights, i.e., health, nutrition and education, largely as a result of the stimulus provided by the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 27 specific goals it laid down. Unfortunately, despite these achievements, there are still pronounced inequalities among countries and among social groups within them. Furthermore, the environment generated by current development models seems to be shaping twenty-first century economic and social events in a way that is limiting the scope for further progress in the short term and perhaps in the medium and long term as well, preventing the social investment carried out in recent years from yielding the return expected, and heightening the tendency towards inequity among and within countries. If this is to be avoided, it is vital that higher priority be given to enforcing the rights of boys, girls and adolescents and that greater resources be put into social investment that affects them, with a view to achieving substantial improvements in their living conditions and ensuring equality of opportunities.
It is clear, then, that the progress achieved can be consolidated only if renewed, persistent efforts are made. If this does not happen, not only will the basic living conditions with which economic rights are concerned improve more slowly, but the civil, political and cultural rights of boys, girls and adolescents in Ibero-America will increasingly be flouted.

The study *Building Equity from the Beginning: the Children and Adolescents of Ibero-America* has thus been produced in response to the request made by the Tenth Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government, headed by the President of Panama, Mireya Moscoso, and its purpose is to underpin the strategies set forth in the Panama Declaration. It is now essential for these strategies to be implemented in the different countries so that genuine respect can be secured for the rights of boys, girls and adolescents in Ibero-America. They are our future.
Introduction

1. The Ibero-American system

In recent years, the world system of nations has witnessed the emergence of various “blocs” or groups of nations, reflecting a growing process of innovative organization of the relations between communities and countries. This process has tended to replace the “nationalist” view of societies which prevailed during the 19th century and much of the 20th with an outlook marked by greater political, economic and cultural integration.

A more recent development is the establishment of groups of countries based mainly on common values, cultural patterns and language, among which the Ibero-American system is probably one of the best known. This system was formally organized in 1992, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas and hence also of the appearance of the Americas’ indigenous image on the European scene -that is to say, a totally different form of culture. Its maximum organizational expression is the Annual Summit of Heads of State and Government. At its tenth session, in November 2000, on the initiative of the President of Panama, Ms Mireya Moscoco, the IB grouping adopted the question of children and adolescents as its central theme, and a dozen ministerial meetings of the various sectors were held to discuss its specific relations with this subject. The final conclusions, summed up in the Panama Declaration (see box I.2), express the views of the Ibero-American Heads of State and Government at the outset of the 21st century and form the basis for a long-term strategy and plan.
In the context of this explicit and integral concern with children and young people and their importance for the development of any society, the Heads of State and Government of the Ibero-American countries requested the cooperation of the various agencies of the United Nations, under the coordination of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and in collaboration with the Ibero-American Cooperation Secretariat (SECIB), in the preparation of the present document, which presents an evaluation of the present situation of children in those countries, as a contribution to the formulation of an IB strategy and the design and fulfillment of specific goals designed to improve the situation of children and of societies as a whole.

The Heads of State and Government of the 21 Ibero-American countries, meeting in Panama City on the occasion of the Tenth Ibero-American Summit Meeting, agree to request the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in coordination with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Ibero-American Cooperation Secretariat (SECIB), to make an evaluation of the present situation of children in Ibero-America in order to identify specific goals that will improve the present tendencies in such fields as education, health, sanitation and the eradication of child labour.

This evaluation will aid in the determination of the commitments to be assumed by the countries of our region at the Twenty-fifth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly to be held next year in order to evaluate progress and follow up the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action adopted at the 1990 World Summit for Children and to define an agenda in this field in the United Nations for the coming years.

Panama City, 18 November 2000
2. Rights and equity

Children are the most important variable for the future of human societies, because their welfare and progress are the only guarantee for individual and collective development. A large part of the lifetime opportunities of a person are determined by the way that person’s life begins. In Ibero-America, the main concern of citizens of all socioeconomic levels is to ensure the present welfare of their children and achieve conditions which will ensure that they have a better future than their parents had. It is their hope that the society in which they live -governments in particular, but also society at large- will give increasing attention to the education, health and protection of children while also giving their parents access to better incomes and possibilities of caring for them.

When mankind reached agreement on the basic rights of all persons, it also turned its attention to specifying the ways in which those rights extended to children. Thus, once the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had been approved and its scope not only in terms of civil and political but also economic, social and cultural rights had been agreed, the nations assumed two priority tasks: on the one hand, to condemn extreme forms of discrimination and violation of human rights, and on the other, to establish the basic normative framework on the rights of children and adolescents, as the basis for the guaranteed fulfilment and sustainability of human rights. This was the genesis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, which is the international legal instrument of the most universal scope, ratified by all the Ibero-American nations.

On the basis of this Convention, growing prospects are opening up for the progressive implementation of the rights of all children and adolescents, with the aim of providing integral and universal protection involving the whole of society. In Ibero-America, this change of attitude has led to the adoption of new normative frameworks in favour of children and adolescents, in keeping with an approach that recognizes their rights. The legal and institutional changes made have led to the rejection of situations of violation or non-fulfilment of rights by society, whose legal systems are beginning to punish such situations, thus showing that the fulfillment of those rights can be demanded by law. This has resulted in the redefinition, albeit still only in part, of public policies in order to secure the effective fulfillment of rights.

This rights-based approach gives each area of human activity a systemic dimension. According to this paradigm, each of those dimensions consists of an indivisible set of social, economic, political, cultural and civil subdimensions. Within the context of social policy, the adoption of this approach entails the replacement of traditional, and incompletely formulated, public policy guidelines —especially in connection with the provision of basic social services— which have often overlooked important areas or aspects, such as the use of the mass media to instill certain values.

As will be seen throughout this document, the Ibero-American countries have been advancing in these fields through processes designed to guarantee full respect for the rights of children and adolescents. These advances are still insufficient, however, and above all they are very unequal. Generally speaking, inequalities and lags in the fulfillment of the rights of children and adolescents are due to the self-reproduction of the great disparities and inequalities which mark the social, economic and political life of our countries.

As ECLAC has pointed out, this inequality is not peculiar to the present stage of development, but has marked most of the various development models that have prevailed in the Ibero-american countries in the course of their history. It is a reflection of highly segmented economic, social, gender and ethnic structures which are reproduced from one generation to the next through multiple channels. Consequently, the main thrust of the effort to be made should be to break the channels of intergenerational reproduction of poverty and inequality, including the barriers raised by gender-based and ethnic discrimination, which further aggravate their effects.

Defining the achievement of more equitable and democratic societies as the essential aim of development means giving a leading place to the full enjoyment of civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights which are in keeping with the values of equality, solidarity and non-discrimination. It also means placing emphasis on the values of universality, indivisibility and
interdependence of this set of rights, whose effective exercise must be compatible with the degree of development of each society. It also calls for the establishment of a “fiscal covenant” which guarantees the financing required for the fulfillment of those rights without giving rise to unbalancing pressures on the macroeconomic aggregates which could possibly endanger the sustainability of those very rights. In this sense, equity must be understood in relation to the establishment of goals that the society in question is effectively capable of attaining, yet always as part of that critical route leading to full and universal fulfillment of those rights.

It will not be possible to reach higher levels of well-being for the population as a whole, together with growing levels of distributional equity, unless significant progress is made in the consolidation of dynamic and competitive economies, but this dynamism and competitiveness must not be based on extensive and poorly-paid use of the labour force nor on the plundering of natural resources and the environment. On the contrary, genuine competitiveness must be based on increasingly sophisticated and well-paid use of the production resources possessed by the Ibero-American countries, so as to lay the bases for a form of growth which depends on, and yet at the same time supports, an effective process of socially equitable, politically democratic and environmentally sustainable development. In this sense, equity and sustainable economic development are parts of a single integral strategy. Social development does not depend exclusively on social policy, so growth and economic policy cannot ignore social development objectives and the conditions in which social policy operates. The exercise of citizenship, for its part, is not only a right in itself which contributes as such to well-being, but also the most effective channel for ensuring that the social objectives of development are represented in public decisions.

The importance of this integral quality of development and of public policies in particular becomes even clearer when the concern is for the children and adolescents who form the present and will shape the future of these societies. In the satisfaction of rights, especially of the new generations, there can be no artificial segmentation between economic and social aspects, between institutional or planning sectors, or between the short, medium and long term. Such segmentation runs counter to the aim of advancing resolutely in the fulfillment of children’s and adolescents’ rights.

3. The contents of the document

In accordance with the mandate given in the Panama Declaration, this document gives priority to the fulfillment of rights and the achievement of equity as strategic elements for securing the well-being of children and the integral development of Ibero-American societies. This guiding thread is reflected in the various sections of the document, as follows:

Section I shows how, in spite of the difficult conditions prevailing, substantial progress was made during the past decade in improving the well-being of Ibero-American children and adolescents as well as in fostering a fuller respect for their rights. These achievements show that it is indeed possible to make systematic and significant progress in this direction.

As noted in section II, however, there are still serious shortcomings and in many cases the progress achieved conceals considerable disparities both between the situations of the different countries and within them.

Section III presents the advances and continuing shortcomings noted in respect of both emerging problems affecting the children and adolescents of Ibero-America and others which have surged up strongly again, after having been less visible in the past because of the urgent attention devoted to other priorities, such as adolescent health, the quality of education, vulnerability before the law, or problems of violence and sexual abuse.

The problems that exist and the advances that have been made in the living conditions of children cannot be understood, however, without explicitly considering their relation with the social and economic evolution of Ibero-American societies. This is dealt with in section IV, with special emphasis on the elements which explain the intergenerational reproduction of existing disparities and poverty.
Section V analyses social investment aimed at taking care of the needs and rights of children and adolescents, with strong emphasis on the importance of these investments from the economic point of view, so as to bring home the costs -and the often extremely serious consequences- that a society can suffer when it does not satisfy these needs and rights properly.

Finally, section VI sums up the main conclusions and reflections emerging from the previous five sections.