

# Editorial note

As the first year of the third decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, it is certain to go down in the annals of world history as the year of the health emergency caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. During these past 12 months, the world has faced moments of tremendous uncertainty and pain as a result of the lethal disease caused by this virus, which, after emerging in the Chinese city of Wuhan in January, quickly developed into a global pandemic. At the time of writing, world health agencies estimate the number of cases of coronavirus infection to be in excess of 60 million people worldwide, and that nearly 1.4 million human beings have died from the disease. As a result of the human progress achieved over the past century, thanks to scientific advances and the steady, albeit unequal, progress in humankind's material conditions, together with the improvement and universalization of health systems, the world had become unaccustomed to pandemic crises of such huge proportions as it faces today. The most recent forebear of the coronavirus crisis occurred a century ago, in 1918, when "Spanish flu" engulfed the world, claiming between 20 million and 40 million lives, according to historical estimates.

Predictably, the COVID-19 pandemic soon triggered a global economic and social crisis. Owing to health lockdown measures of varying degrees of stringency, such as physical distancing, the closure of production units, the collapse of world trade and the lack of a safe and effective vaccine to neutralize the infections (notwithstanding strenuous efforts by the scientific communities and global pharmaceutical industries), the world's economies are experiencing a brutal contraction in output, surging unemployment, lost incomes and, hence, rising poverty levels and major setbacks in terms of income distribution. In this regard, the pandemic has merely deepened the recessionary gaps that have persisted in the global economy since the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009. Set against the cyclical economic crises that have afflicted capitalism throughout its history, this one is the most severe since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In this sombre scenario, international health statistics show Latin America and the Caribbean to be the region of the world hardest hit by the scourge of coronavirus. Over 11 million people infected and close to half a million deaths are the sad figures that we have to lament thus far. Our region has also been the hardest hit in economic and social terms. Various studies by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) show that, by the year's end, the crisis will have caused a GDP contraction on the order of 9.1%, the closure of 2.7 million firms, 44.1 million people unemployed and 231 million in poverty, of whom 96 million in extreme poverty. The fact that it will also have fuelled significant increases in the Gini coefficient reflects how the scourge of coronavirus is aggravating regional inequality, which was already structurally high before the crisis. The greater virulence with which the pandemic and the economic crisis have affected Latin America and the Caribbean is explained by our region's lacklustre growth since 2014, and the structural features of production and distribution that have historically characterized its dysfunctional pattern of economic, social, political and environmental development.

As a contribution to broadening and deepening discussions on the global crisis and its effects and on the prospects for recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean, this special edition of *CEPAL Review* presents a special issue on the COVID-19 pandemic — guest edited by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, and Mario Cimoli, Deputy Executive Secretary of ECLAC. Our guest

editors have prepared an introduction, which analyses and reviews the 15 articles written for this special issue by regionally and internationally renowned personalities from the field of social sciences. With this edition, *CEPAL Review* adds to the intellectual output that this United Nations regional commission has produced since the onset of the health emergency in early 2020. It seeks to contribute, from the domain of ideas, to overcoming the crisis and to making real and effective progress towards a new development model, based on production transformation, social inclusion and environmental sustainability — the permanent guiding themes of ECLAC thinking.

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