



2022

Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean

Transforming education as
a basis for sustainable development



UNITED NATIONS

ECLAC



Working for
a productive, inclusive
and sustainable future

Executive summary

Accessible format



2022

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a basis for sustainable development**



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Working for
a productive, inclusive
and sustainable future

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- Three dots indicate that data are not available or are not separately reported.
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Contents

A.	The region is facing a prolonged and aggravated social crisis in a context of uncertainty into the third year of the pandemic.....	7
B.	A silent crisis in education affecting new generations and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities.....	10
C.	Poverty and extreme poverty remain at pre-pandemic levels in the region	20
D.	Although the pandemic is expected to come to an end, the social crisis continues, and health-related challenges are intensifying	28
E.	The challenges of a highly informal labour market that generates and deepens inequalities	32
F.	Gender inequalities in educational and employment trajectories.....	36
G.	The crisis in education opens opportunities to address its structural problems.....	41
H.	The role of the social institutional framework in the face of a prolonged social crisis.....	45
I.	Social investment for advancing inclusive social development	47
J.	Investing in education is investing in people, in the inclusiveness of development and in the capacity to adapt to change.....	51
K.	Moving towards universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems	52
L.	Presentation and summary of the key messages of the chapters	55
	Bibliography	58

A. The region is facing a prolonged and aggravated social crisis in a context of uncertainty into the third year of the pandemic

The Latin American and Caribbean region is navigating a complex scenario of great uncertainty that is deepening the impacts of a prolonged social crisis, with a silent and devastating impact on education. This edition of the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean* focuses on education and its place in the policy discussion for recovery in the region.

Since 2015 the region had already been seeing a deterioration in well-being levels, a stagnation in educational attainment and a slight rise in poverty rates. But the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic created a major social crisis, which has now stretched into a third year. Although the pandemic is expected to come to an end, the region has not been able to make headway in recovering from its social impacts and regain the pre-pandemic levels of social indicators recorded in 2019. Meanwhile, the region is still exposed to an unstable global geopolitical and economic scenario marked

by a combination of successive crises, especially the conflict in Ukraine (ECLAC, [2022c](#), [2022g](#)). This scenario has led to a slowdown in economic growth with slow job creation, especially of quality jobs, together with strong inflationary pressures that have pushed up food and energy prices, together with large falls in investment. Thus, after the 6.5% expansion of GDP in the region in 2021, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates growth of 3.2% for 2022, and projects expansion of just 1.4% for 2023 ([ECLAC, 2022h](#)). The lowest income quintiles are more intensely affected by high inflation, especially in the food component of the consumption basket, and the most vulnerable middle-income strata are also suffering these impacts. These factors are in addition to other ongoing risks, such as the increased frequency of disasters and the impacts of the climate emergency ([ECLAC, 2021a](#)). This context may produce a new setback in the region's social development and a scenario of instability on the social, economic and political fronts. It is therefore urgent to consolidate inclusive social policies capable of protecting and ensuring population's well-being and exercise of rights. Of particular concern is the increase in food and nutritional insecurity amid rising food prices. According to data from [FAO and others \(2021\)](#), in 2021 hunger affected 56.5 million people in the region: 49.4 million in Latin America and 7.2 million in the Caribbean. Rising food prices are expected to increase malnutrition, with increases in undernutrition, overweight and obesity. In 2020, 21% of the population of Latin America (117.3 million) and over 50% of the population of the Caribbean (13.9 million) could not afford to maintain a healthy diet ([FAO and others, 2021](#)). This number may be expected to have increased in the current conditions, with particular effects on children and adolescents, given the serious impact that malnutrition has on their comprehensive development and exercise of rights. ECLAC estimates indicate that 45.4% of people under 18 years of age are living in poverty in Latin America in 2022: 13.3 percentage points above the average for the total population. In particular, 18.5% of this age group are estimated to be living in extreme poverty. These

young people are facing a higher risk of food insecurity because they live in households that cannot afford the basic food basket. The region urgently needs to address its ongoing debt to this age group in terms of providing universal social protection and the conditions for the full development of their capabilities, while preventing further well-being losses that would have lasting impacts.

This context demands a resolute response to the pressing needs of the population, while also strengthening human capacities over the medium term. This edition of the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean* makes some key warnings in relation to this objective. First, the social impacts of the pandemic have not waned, and the region has been unable to resume a path of growth and of reducing poverty and inequality, in a scenario marked by uncertainty, high inflation, growing labour informality and a precarious recovery in employment. Second, the pandemic has had a heavy impact on the education sector. It amounts to a silent crisis, given that face-to-face education was interrupted for a very lengthy period in the region and in view of the learning loss effects. This impact was not addressed by the immediate response to the crisis, meaning that pre-existing educational inequalities became more pronounced. This crisis, together with the critical deprivations faced by children and the risks of increased food insecurity, jeopardizes the development and well-being of an entire generation of children, adolescents and young people and leaves a scar that undermines development opportunities in the region. This scarring effect refers to the expected impacts on the educational and employment trajectories of the generations affected by the prolonged closure of schools and the economic effects of the pandemic. The repercussions include losses in terms of income, socioemotional well-being and learning opportunities, which require urgent action to remedy (see chapter II). In light of this, it is imperative to set educational processes back on track and transform the sector, in tune with the

processes of change under way in the world of work, and to increase investment in the education sector from early childhood, focusing on sustainable development with equality. The prolonged social crisis has made it all the more urgent to move forward with the construction of welfare states in the countries of the region, with stronger social institutions capable of providing basic welfare guarantees and addressing structural inequalities. This requires careful consideration of the financial sustainability challenges and discussion of the criteria that will shape progressivity, planning, political will and broad consensus for the construction of the social and fiscal compacts that the region needs in order to advance towards inclusive social development.

B. A silent crisis in education affecting new generations and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities

As is discussed in chapter II, face-to-face classes were suspended in Latin America and the Caribbean for the lengthiest periods of any world region. An entire generation of students experienced as much as two full academic years of disrupted studies or remote education. This, in turn, has led to gaps in skills development, loss of learning opportunities and a risk of increased school dropout. It has also contributed to weakening the protection of other essential rights of children and adolescents, including the right to a life free from violence ([ECLAC/UNICEF/OSRSG-VAC, 2020](#)).

This silent crisis has shown that education systems were unprepared to face these changes, exacerbating the educational inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic. The countries made major efforts to establish home-based forms of educational continuity using

remote means, but infrastructure and digital equipment suffered from weaknesses and inequalities and the skills were lacking to transform teaching methods and to maintain the educational link with the entire student population.

In the past 20 years, the region has made great progress in terms of the proportion of the population completing different levels of education. That progress has fostered inclusion of populations that were historically excluded from education and in closing the gap in access and coverage between different social strata. However, this progress slowed from 2015 onward. Indeed, progress has been uneven: for example, the gaps in the graduation rate were particularly evident from secondary school onward. Most of the countries in the region reached almost universal primary education completion around 2020. As shown in figure 1, just 3 of the 25 countries included had completion rates below 85% in 2020.

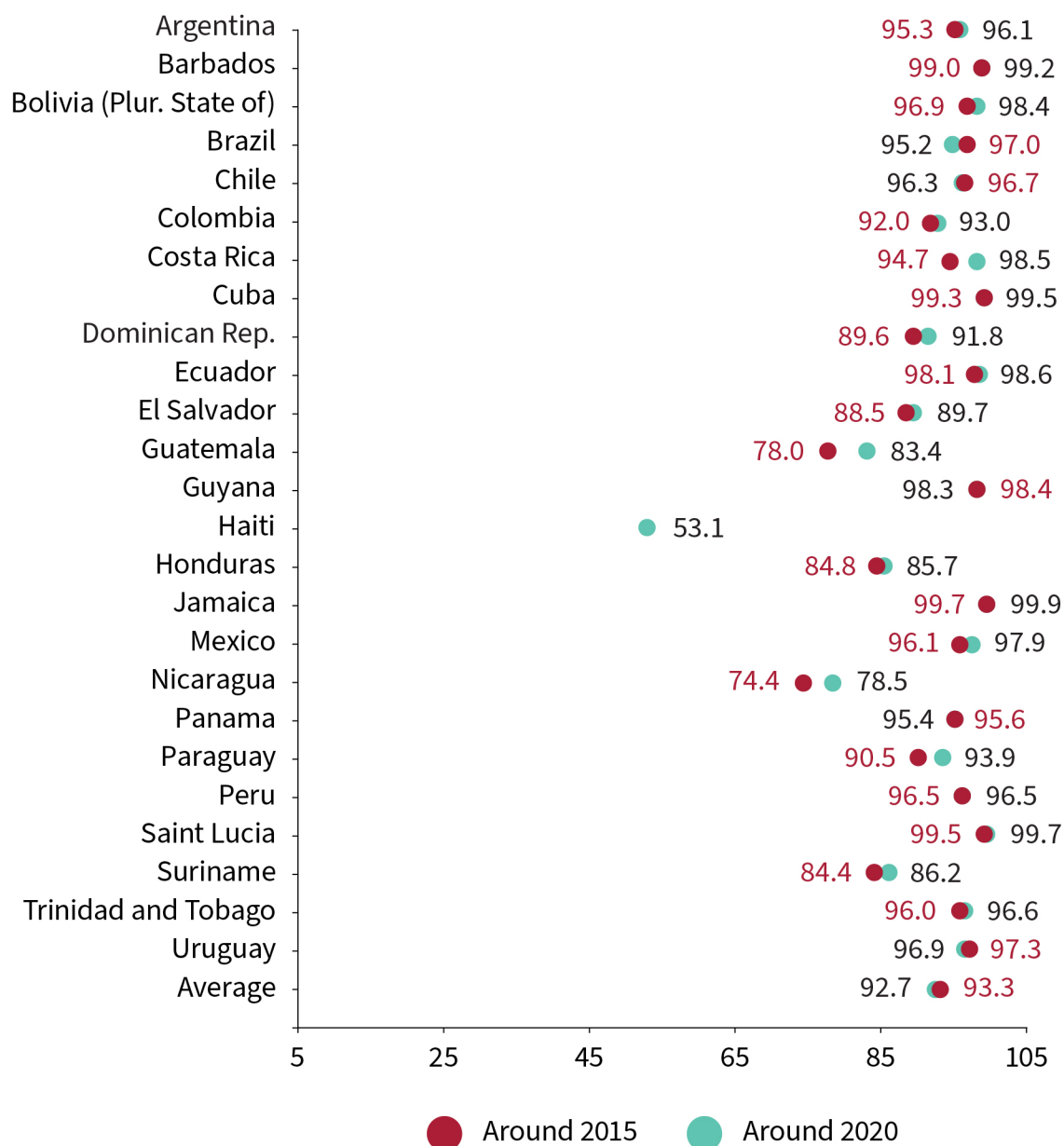
In secondary education, the trends are more varied and progress has been slow in recent years. Some of the countries are a long way from meeting target 4.1 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” and therefore also indicator 4.1.2 “Completion rate (primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education)”. Figure 2 shows that around half of the countries analysed have lower secondary completion rates of 85% or more, while, as shown in figure 3, only five countries have such levels for upper secondary completion.

Figure 1

Latin America and the Caribbean (25 countries): primary education completion rate, around 2015 and 2020

(Percentages)

Primary



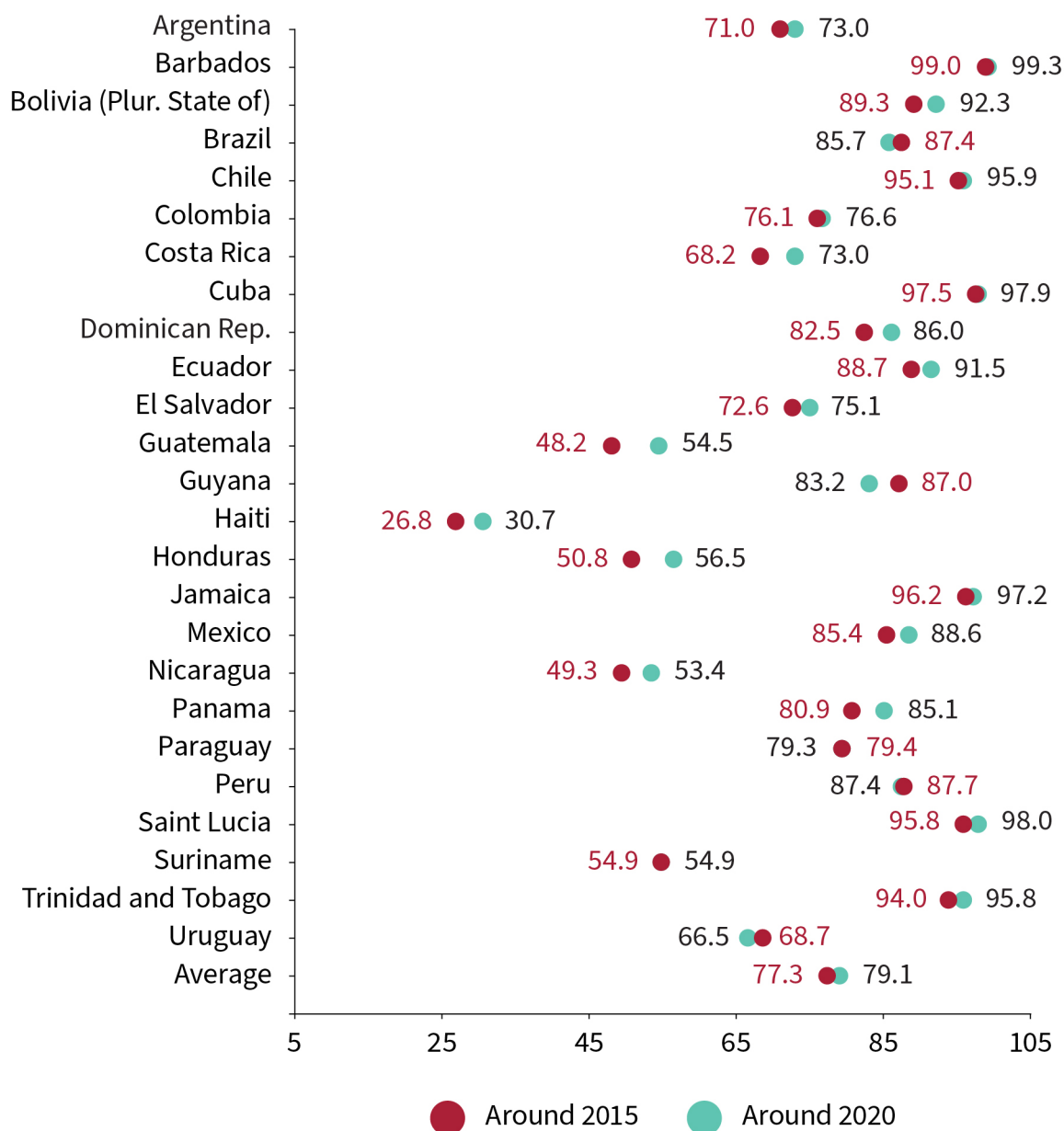
Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/United Nations Children's Fund/Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC), [Education in Latin America at a crossroads. Regional monitoring report SDG4 - Education 2030](#), Paris, 2022.

Figure 2

Latin America and the Caribbean (25 countries): lower secondary education completion rate, around 2015 and 2020

(Percentages)

Lower secondary



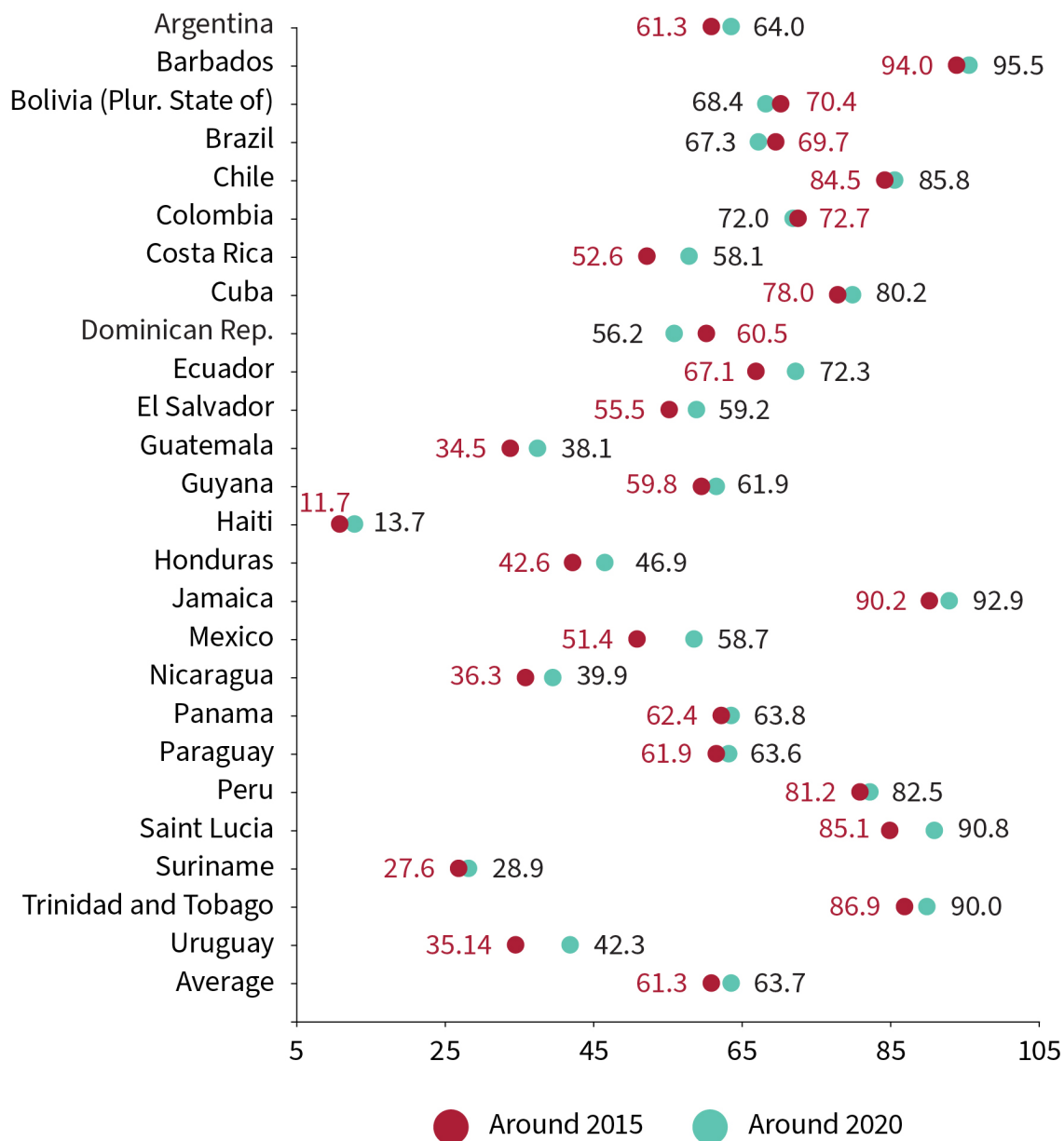
Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/United Nations Children's Fund/Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC), *Education in Latin America at a crossroads. Regional monitoring report SDG4 - Education 2030*, Paris, 2022.

Figure 3

Latin America and the Caribbean (25 countries): upper secondary education completion rate, around 2015 and 2020

(Percentages)

Upper secondary



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/United Nations Children's Fund/Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC), [Education in Latin America at a crossroads. Regional monitoring report SDG4 - Education 2030](#), Paris, 2022.

The expansion achieved in recent decades in education access, coverage and progression, thanks to opening and diversification of the educational supply (particularly in secondary education), has also led to greater segmentation in outcomes and quality. This segmentation is reflected in different dimensions, but all traversed by the axes of what ECLAC has termed the matrix of social inequality in the region, such as the student socioeconomic level, their territory, meaning either urban or rural residence, and their race and ethnic origin ([ECLAC, 2016](#)). The highest levels of access and coverage in recent years have occurred at the pre-primary and higher education levels, but significant inclusion challenges remain.

Even before the pandemic, there were troubling gaps in the quality of education and student learning outcomes. The comparison of the results of the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) (2013) and the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Studies (ERCE) (2019) in [Education in Latin America at a crossroads. Regional monitoring report SDG4 - Education 2030](#) (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022) shows that learning outcomes at the primary level were practically stable or underwent very slight changes. In some cases, there were even setbacks.

This contrasts with trend of improvement in the previous period, as shown by a comparison of the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE) (2006) and TERCE (2013). In that case, student outcomes improved in all areas and years of study evaluated. The percentage of students reaching the minimum proficiency level, as called for in SDG indicator 4.1.1, reveals low learning outcomes in the region. In 2019, in the countries evaluated, an average of 54.6% of third-grade students reached this level in reading and 50.9% in mathematics, and 31.3% of sixth-grade students in reading and 17.2% in mathematics.

In 2018, around half of 15-year-old students from the 10 Latin American countries that participated in the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) achieved the minimum levels of reading proficiency. This proportion was slightly lower in science and was just one third of students in mathematics. The results also show that the regional average did not change significantly in the three areas between 2015 and 2018.

In addition to the slowdown in the progress achieved, there are access and completion gaps in different levels of education to the detriment of Indigenous Peoples and Afrodescendent populations. This is related to different factors. First, the lack of cultural relevance of educational content and methodologies. Second, with shortfalls in both teacher training and intercultural approaches in education policy, particularly in relation to the use of Indigenous languages. Third, with insufficient provision of inputs and infrastructure, including basic water, sanitation and electricity services, and the lack of digital connectivity and equipment.

Those most affected in the short term by the shortfalls in access and quality of distance education were attending early childhood and pre-primary education. Comparative data from pre-pandemic measurements suggests that large learning losses occurred in basic cognitive skills in Latin American countries in this period. The Caribbean countries are seeing outcomes that show a fall in the proportion of secondary school students achieving grades that qualify them for higher education, as examined in chapter II. These impacts must be understood in light of the inequalities that, even before the pandemic, coexisted with risks to the comprehensive development of children and adolescents and their exercise of rights.

Children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean experience profound inequalities and deprivations according to income levels; this was already in evidence before the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in chapter I, children and adolescents living in income poverty are the worst affected for several reasons. First, because of a lack of adequate services and overcrowded housing. Secondly, because of the low educational attainment of the adults that look after them, and lastly because of a lack of Internet access and devices to connect online at home. This does not mean that children and adolescents who are not living in poverty are not affected. On the contrary, there are significant levels of deprivation in access to goods and services that are important for learning among the non-poor low-income and lower-middle-income strata.

Deprivations in housing services and materials affect educational outcomes. Children need healthy and safe environments for learning ([Cunningham and MacDonald, 2012](#)). Around 2021, an average of 52% of children and adolescents in the region living in income poverty experienced critical deprivations in material housing conditions and basic services. In addition, overcrowding in this group averaged 55% in the region. The adults responsible for 53% of children and adolescents living in poverty also had low educational attainment and 62% lived in households without Internet connections. Overcrowding and lack of Internet access affected 40% and 44%, respectively, of children and adolescents in non-poor, but low-income households, and 26% and 29% in the lower-middle-income stratum.

Addressing the poverty and deprivation experienced by children and adolescents in the region requires a firm, high-level political commitment to achieve substantive improvements in their well-being, as indicated by the United Nations Secretary-General at the Transforming Education Summit held in September 2022. An important example of this is the action by the European Union described in box 1.

Box 1**European Union Recommendation 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee**

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, which is aimed at building a fair and inclusive Europe, includes the objective of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, at least 5 million of them children, by 2030 ([European Commission, 2021](#)). With a view to this, in addition to the European Union strategy on the Rights of the Child ([European Commission, 2022](#)), the Council of the European Union adopted the European Child Guarantee in June 2021. This represents unprecedented progress at the European level in terms of public policies aimed at combating child poverty and social exclusion ([European Union, 2021](#)).

The European Child Guarantee provides guidance and tools for European Union countries to ensure that all children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe are protected and have access to essential services to promote equal opportunities. In a context in which almost 20% (18 million) of children in the European Union are at risk of poverty, with inequalities that have been exacerbated by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this guarantee seeks to break the vicious circle that forms at an early age and widens inequalities throughout the life cycle.

Based on its specific context, each member State must determine the public policy framework and the services to be offered. The recommendation is to ensure “effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day

and healthcare”, as well as “effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing” ([European Union, 2021](#)). It is also recommended that member States establish an integrated framework for action to address child social exclusion, in order to break intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality, and that they assess economic and other barriers and consider structural and cross-sectoral reforms to materialize those guarantees. Special attention is afforded to children with disabilities or mental health problems, migrants, ethnic minorities and children in alternative care arrangements.

Member countries can draw on financing sources for national action plans for the implementation of this guarantee, in addition to domestic funds. To ensure that no child is left behind, countries will have access to the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and to the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) and InvestEU initiatives, and to the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The most affected countries must set aside at least 5% of the European Social Fund Plus budget for combating child poverty and social exclusion.

The European Child Guarantee offers an example of progress in concerted efforts to ensure universal and comprehensive social protection, combat social exclusion and resolutely address inequalities from early childhood.

Source: European Commission, “[The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee](#)”, 2022; “[The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#)”, 2021; and European Union, “[Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee](#)”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, Luxembourg, 14 June 2021.

C. Poverty and extreme poverty remain at pre-pandemic levels in the region

In aggregate terms, the steady reduction in inequality in the region since 2002 came to a halt in 2017 and it has remained virtually unchanged since. The rapid decline from 2002, when the average Gini inequality index for the region was 0.532, slowed in the early 2010s, and was followed by stability from 2017, when the regional average was 0.461. There was a slight worsening in 2020, when the index rose to 0.464, that was reversed in 2021, when it stood at 0.452. In short, almost two years after the onset of the pandemic, in 2021 regional inequality may be said to have returned to the situation seen in 2019, when the Gini inequality index for the region stood at 0.456, as shown in figure 4.

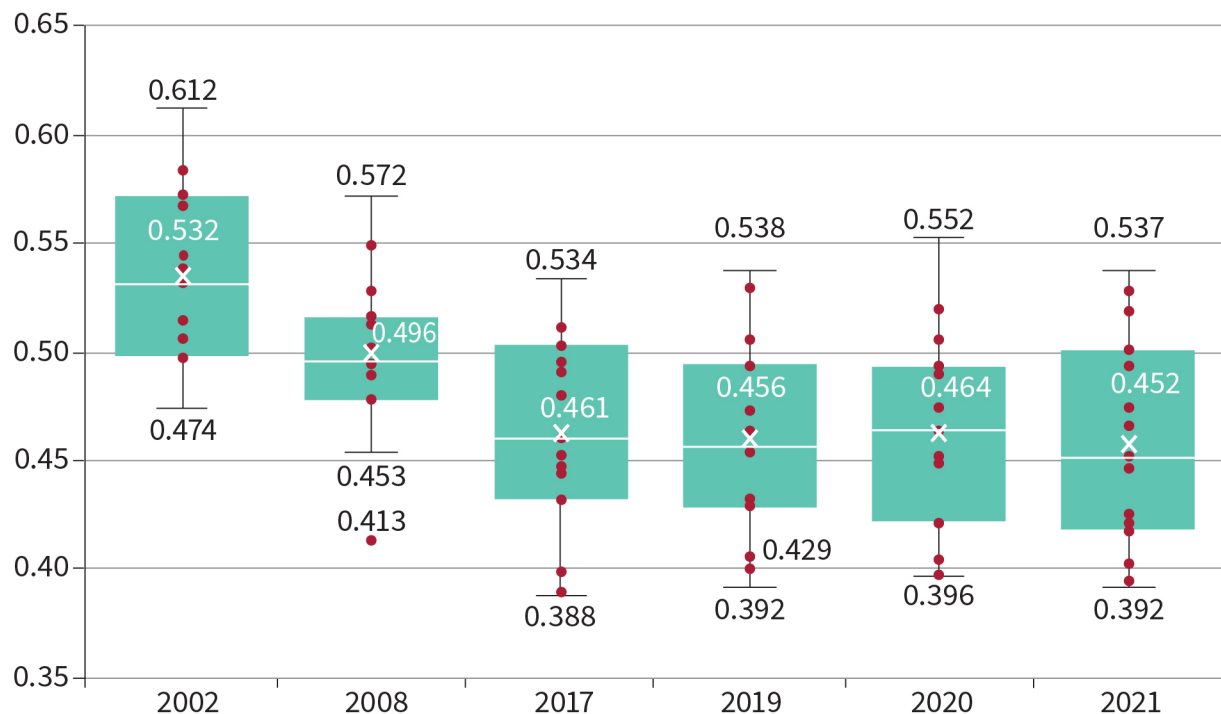
However, the regional average masks variations in the countries that deviate from this apparent stability. Analysis of trends in nine countries where inequality can be compared as measured by the Gini and Atkinson indices finds three groups of countries: those where inequality decreased in 2020 and in 2021 (Argentina, the Dominican Republic and Paraguay); a second group in which the Gini index for 2021 is similar to that for 2019 (Brazil, Colombia and Peru); and three other countries in which inequality increased during that period (Costa Rica, Ecuador and Uruguay). In almost all the countries mentioned, with the exception of the Dominican Republic, the variations in inequality reflected rising or falling household income in the lower distribution quintiles.

A major setback occurred in 2020, with extreme poverty rising to 13.1% of the population, a level not seen for two decades. As shown in figure 5, in 2021, with the recovery of economic activity, more households were able to generate sufficient income to lift themselves out of poverty. The poverty rate in Latin America reached 32.3% of the population in 2021, down 0.5 percentage points from 2020. There was no appreciable improvement in extreme poverty: the 12.9% recorded in 2021 was only 0.2 percentage points below the 2020 level (13.1%).

Figure 4

Latin America (15 countries):^a Gini inequality index, 2002–2021

(Values from 0 to 1, where 0 = no inequality and 1 = maximum inequality)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

Note: Incomes equal to 0 were taken into account in calculating the Gini index. The data are for the year shown or the closest earlier year available.

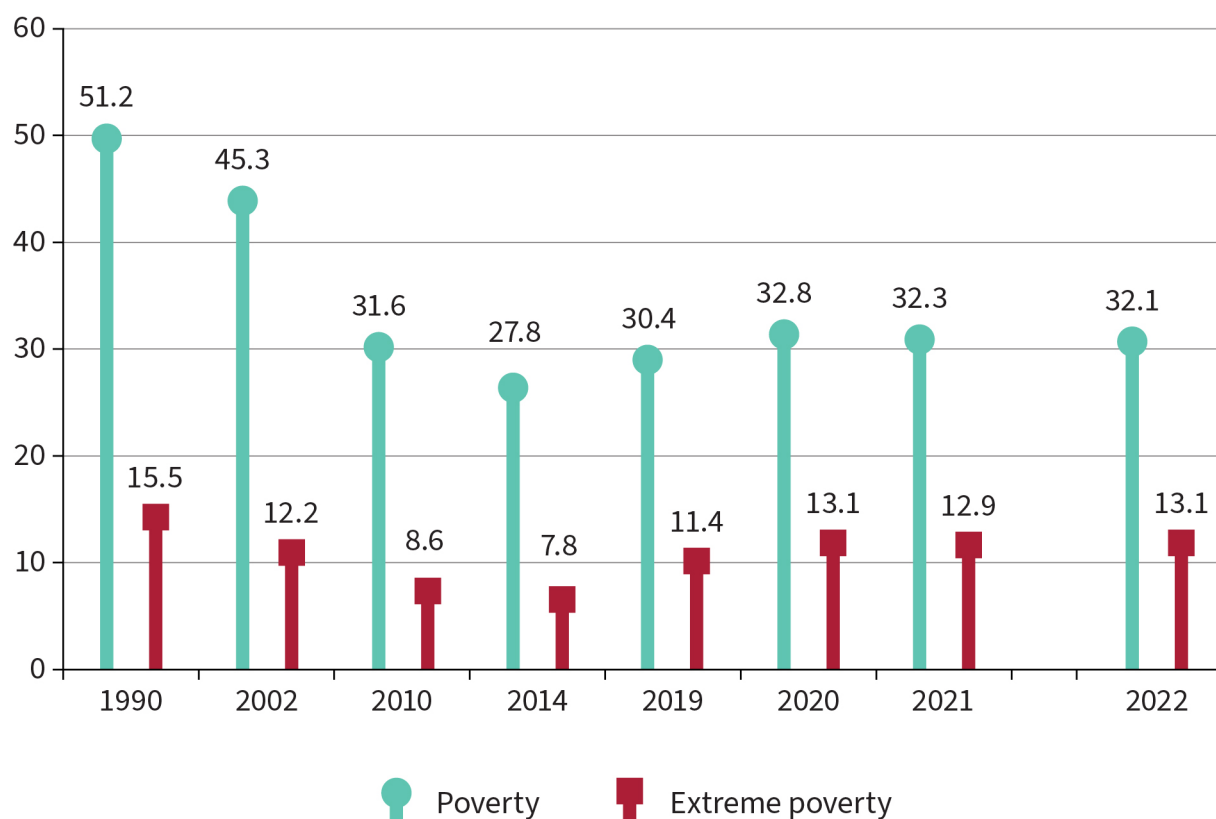
The horizontal line within each box shows the median of the data, X marks the mean and the circles represent country values. The upper and lower edges of each box represent the Gini index values for the top 25% and the bottom 25% of the countries ranked by this indicator.

^a The 15 countries included are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

Figure 5

Latin America (18 countries):^a poverty and extreme poverty rates, 1990–2021
and projections for 2022

(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

Note: The figures for 2022 are projections.

^a Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

The countries showing the largest decreases in poverty in 2021, such as Argentina, Colombia and Peru, are also those that experienced the largest increases in 2020. Brazil was the only country to see an appreciable increase in extreme poverty and poverty in 2021, after being the only one where both indicators fell in 2020. Despite declining in the region, poverty and extreme poverty remain higher than before the pandemic.

The drop in income that occurred in 2020 in practically all countries reflected a sharp fall in labour income, which was partially offset by an increase in public cash transfers. In 2021, the reverse occurred, with a recovery in labour income as the main factor underpinning the rise in income for lower-income households. Government transfers to households tended to decline as emergency programmes implemented to cope with the loss of income during the pandemic began to be withdrawn.

The outlook for 2022 combines two opposing trends. Although the projected economic growth is considerably lower than in 2021, it should translate into an increase in employment and household income. However, the accelerating inflation seen in the course of the year has eroded the purchasing power of incomes, especially in the lower strata. The data available at the time of writing shows that real wages have fallen in several countries, but that the number of employed has also grown. Considering both factors, in 2022 poverty may be expected to reach 32.1% and extreme poverty 13.1%, meaning a slight decrease in poverty and a slight increase in extreme poverty compared to 2021. These trends should be tracked with special attention, as they will come in a context marked by economic instability, high informality and a weak recovery in quality jobs, which together result in widespread household vulnerability, especially for those living in poverty and extreme poverty in the region. The social protection policies that countries are able to adopt in response to the current situation, within the framework of universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient systems, will be key to addressing these challenges. As discussed in chapter I, in October 2022 several measures were in the process of implementation, although it was still too early to assess their potential to mitigate future increases in poverty and extreme poverty.

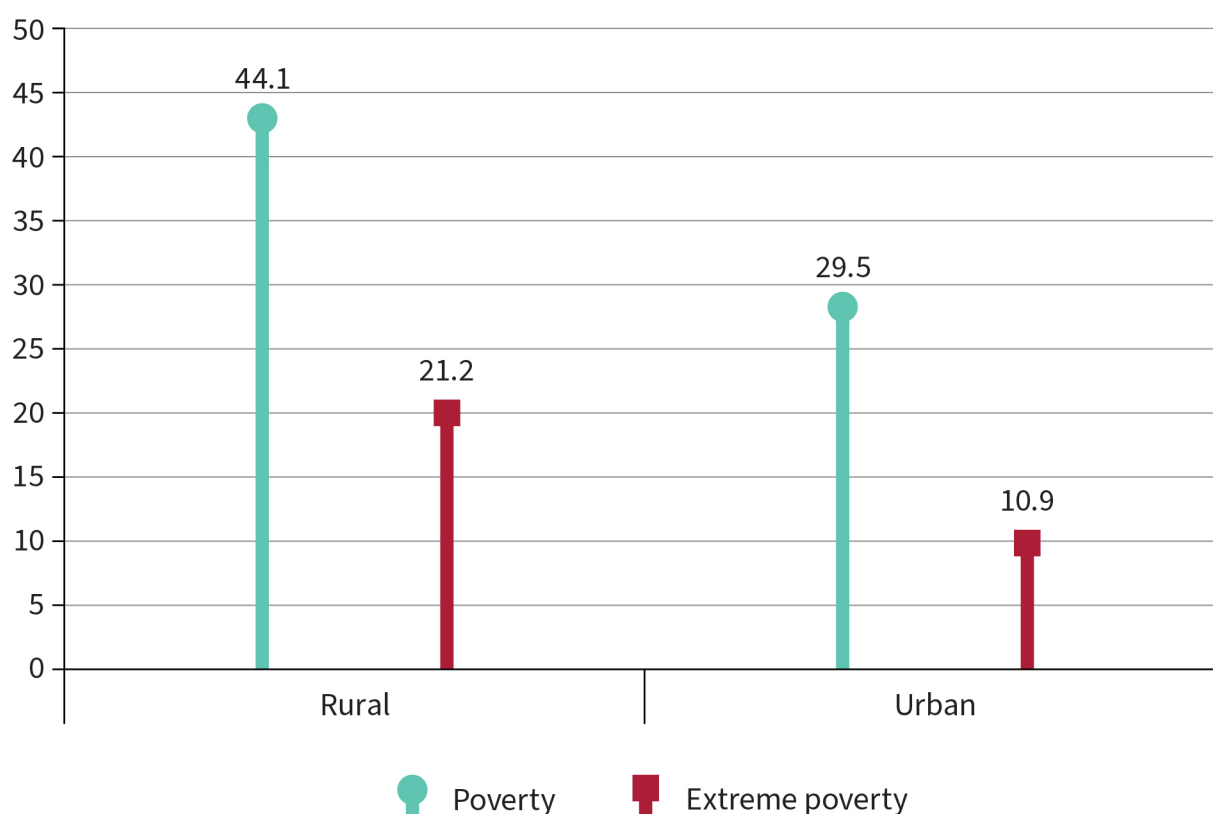
Likewise, attention must be drawn to the significant inequalities seen in Latin America with respect to the way in which poverty and extreme poverty affect different population groups in relation to the axes of social inequality, as shown in figures 6 to 9. In 2021, poverty and extreme poverty disproportionately affected children and adolescents, and the rates for the population aged 65 and over were almost triple those for the general population. Both rates were considerably higher among Indigenous, Afrodescendent or

rural populations than among non-Indigenous, non-Afrodescendent or urban populations. The incidence of poverty and extreme poverty is significantly higher among those living in households whose main income earner and his or her spouse have only incomplete primary education: among this population, poverty is 46.8% and extreme poverty 20.4%; among those living in households whose main income earner and his or her spouse has completed tertiary education, poverty is 9% and extreme poverty, 4.9%.

Figure 6

Latin America (18 countries):^a people living in poverty and extreme poverty, by area of residence (rural or urban), 2021

(Percentages)



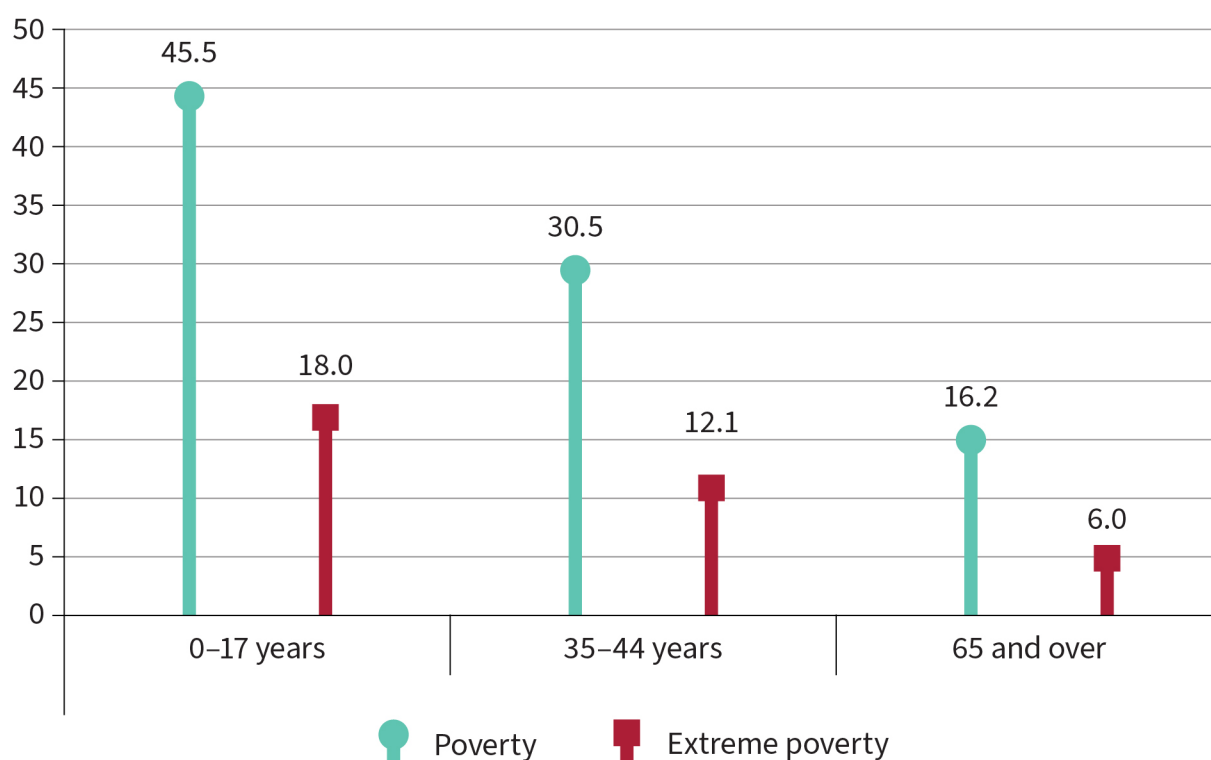
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

^a Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

Figure 7

Latin America (18 countries):^a people living in poverty and extreme poverty, by age, 2021

(Percentages)



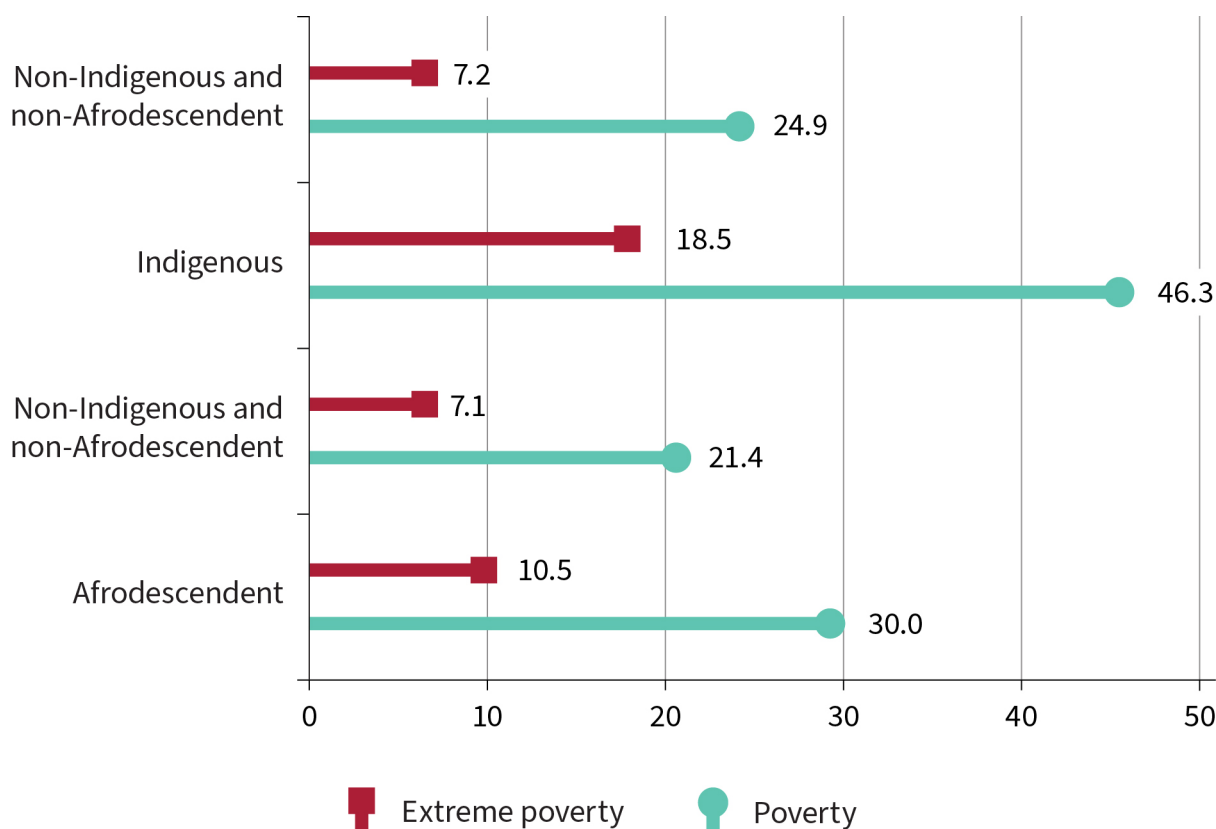
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

^a Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

Figure 8

Latin America (18 countries):^{a b} people living in poverty and extreme poverty, by ethnicity and race, 2021

(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

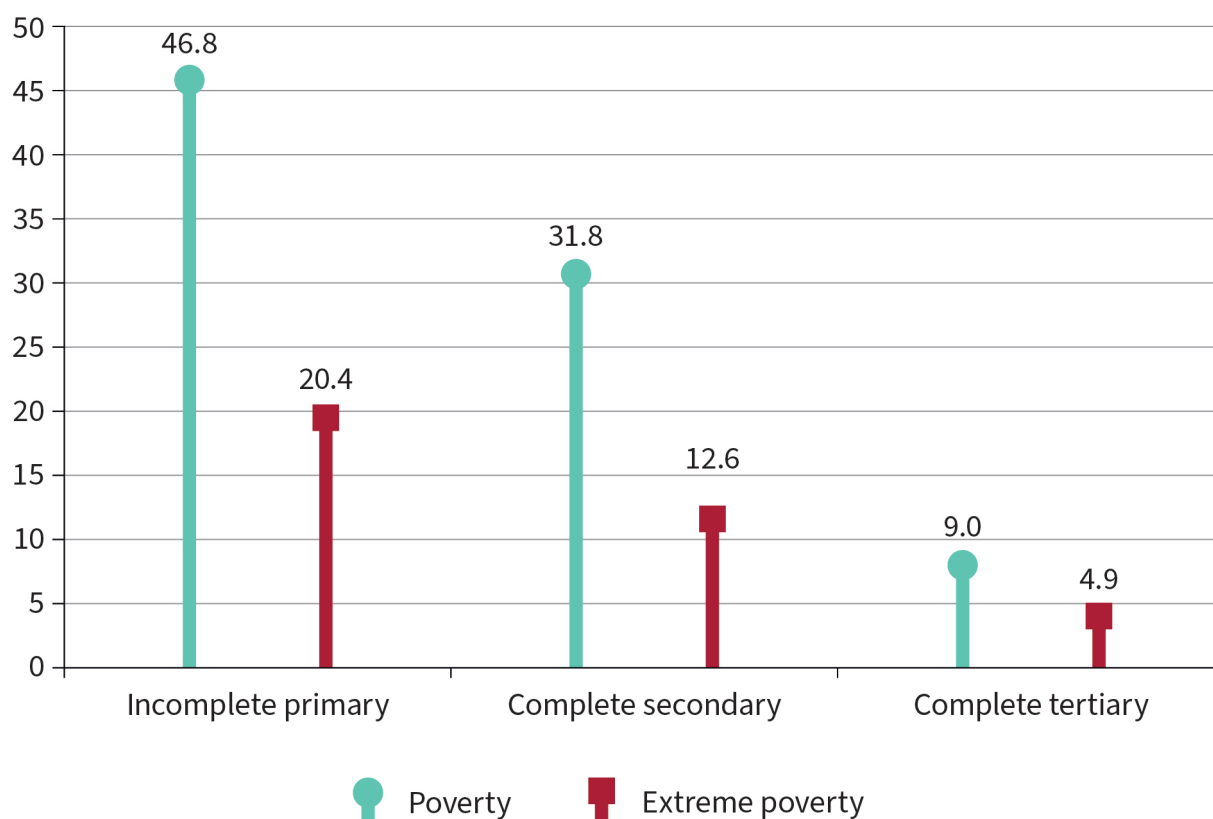
^a In the case of Indigenous Peoples, the weighted average of the following countries is used: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru and Uruguay.

^b In the case of Afrodescendants, the weighted average of the following countries is used: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

Figure 9

Latin America (18 countries):^a people living in poverty and extreme poverty by educational level of head of household and of spouse, 2021

(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

^a Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

D. Although the pandemic is expected to come to an end, the social crisis continues, and health-related challenges are intensifying

Almost three years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that its end is in sight, with death rates from COVID-19 declining globally and approaching the numbers reported in March 2020 ([WHO, 2022a](#)). Although this does not mean that the SARS-CoV-2 virus will disappear, mortality rates for COVID-19, both globally and in Latin America and the Caribbean, show that the virus has become much less lethal. As shown in figure 10, the seven-day moving average of confirmed COVID-19 deaths declined significantly in 2022 compared to 2020 and 2021. COVID-19 is thus expected to become endemic, which is to say a virus that is constantly present in a clearly defined geographic area or population group, as the influenza virus is, for example ([CDC, 2012](#)).

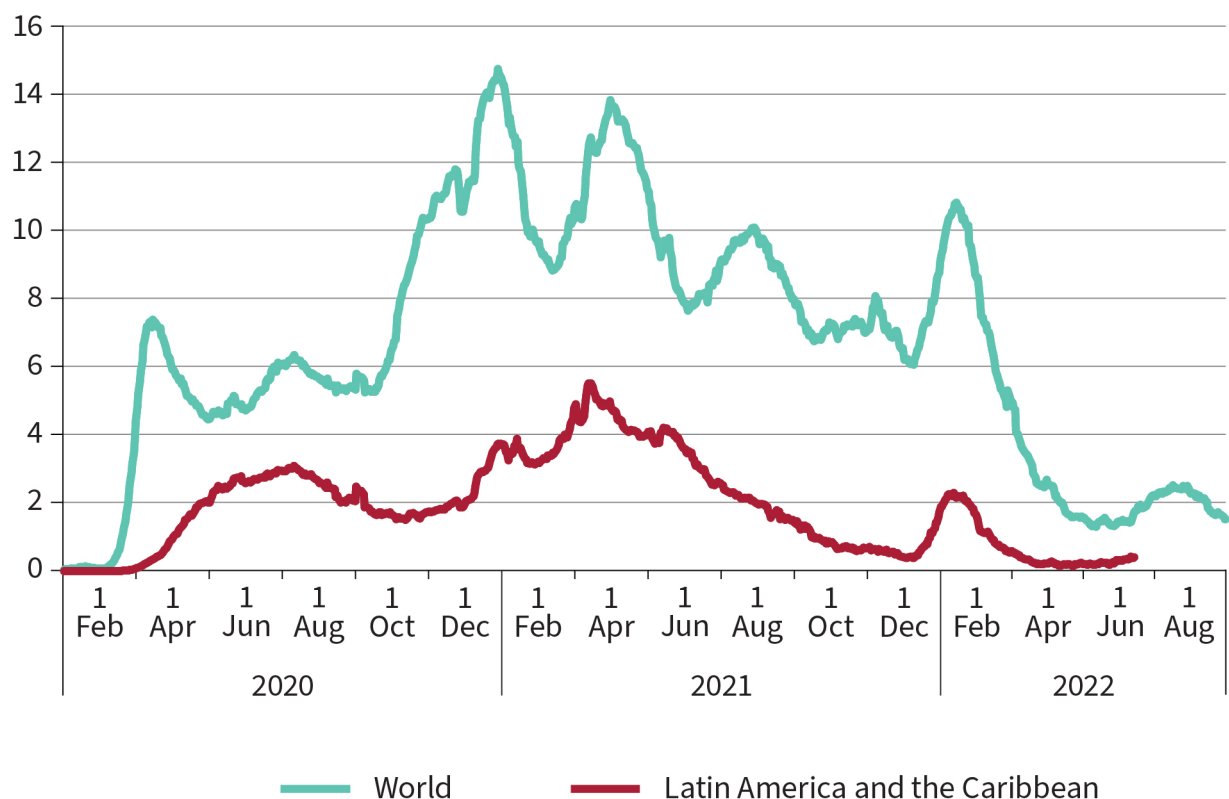
Although this may be a positive scenario epidemiologically speaking, the social crisis triggered by the pandemic is not over. Latin America and the Caribbean is still facing the various challenges of the impacts of the pandemic on dimensions that are central to inclusive social development.

This can also be seen in the impact of the pandemic on the health of the population and the situation of the countries' health systems. Latin America and the Caribbean has been one of the regions hardest hit by the pandemic since its outbreak in February 2020, in terms of both infections and confirmed deaths from coronavirus. According to available data on confirmed COVID-19 deaths ([WHO, 2022b](#)), the region continues to show greater vulnerability to the pandemic since, by 2 September 2022, the region accounted for 26.7%

of the total reported deaths from COVID-19, despite being home to just 8.4% of the world population ([United Nations, 2019](#)). This overrepresentation has continued over time. Data on excess mortality during the first two years of the pandemic show the region with 15.2% of the global cumulative value ([WHO, 2021](#)).

Figure 10

Latin America and the Caribbean (33 countries) and world total: 7-day moving average of confirmed COVID-19 deaths (1 February 2020–4 September 2022) (Thousands of persons)



Source: H. Ritchie Ritchie and others, “[Coronavirus Pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#)”, Oxford, University of Oxford, October 2020 [online database].

The impact of the pandemic on excess mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean is such that the region's life expectancy at birth has fallen by three years. This indicator dropped from 75.1 years in 2019 to 72.1 years in 2021 ([ECLAC, 2022f](#)). This is the largest drop anywhere in the world caused by the pandemic. In addition, the effect of displacement of care for diseases other than COVID-19 during the pandemic had a strong impact on the region's health systems, as a result of accumulated regular morbidity owing to the postponement of care or interruption of medical treatment ([ECLAC, 2022b](#)). Thus, health systems have been faced with the challenge of reorganizing to meet the population's delayed health needs in a timely manner and to meet the unmet health-care demand resulting from the pandemic itself.

Another area where significant challenges remain as a result of the pandemic is progress in vaccinating the population. This measure, together with the set of public health and social protection measures implemented by the countries of the region, has been fundamental in containing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and mitigating its impact on human health. However, profound inequalities remain in access to vaccines. By 10 November 2022, 22 of the 33 countries in the region still had not reached 70% of the total population with at least two doses and 7 countries were below the threshold of 40% of the population fully vaccinated. The countries with less than 40% of the population fully vaccinated are Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Suriname. The countries that have still to reach 70% vaccination coverage are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago. This inequality is a violation of health rights and adds to uncertainty about possible alterations or mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that could be more aggressive and produce a setback with respect to the current epidemiological situation.

The region's vulnerability to the pandemic and the setbacks it suffered in various dimensions of sustainable development are largely explained by pre-existing gaps in health ([ECLAC, 2022b](#)). Health inequalities reflect the social determinants of health, the axes of the region's social inequality matrix, and the structural weaknesses of the health and social protection systems.

Against this backdrop, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates both the need and the opportunity to transform health systems towards being universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient. This entails guaranteeing universal and effective access to comprehensive and quality health services ([PAHO, 2018](#)), strengthening the first level of care under models focused on the needs of individuals, their families and communities, and improving integration and coordination of health systems with social protection systems ([ECLAC, 2022b](#); [Cid and Marinho, 2022](#)). To this end, it is urgent to increase public spending on health, with sustainable financing, on the basis of a new social compact supported by a new fiscal covenant. This must go hand in hand with a reduction in out-of-pocket spending and a more solidarity-based financing model that will help to end the segmentation typical of the region's health systems, whereby different health subsystems specialize in different segments of the population and therefore reproduce health inequalities. It is also a priority to make health systems more resilient in order to be prepared for future crises and potential pandemics.

Along with these urgent transformations to health systems, in the short and medium terms it will be imperative to develop new mechanisms for adaptation in the event of crises. This entails challenges in multiple public policy areas. In terms of education systems, for example, the population needs to undergo continuous preparation to face new crisis episodes (be they health crises or events associated with the ongoing climate crisis), consolidating preventive protocols that can support continuity in students' education and avoid fresh interruptions.

The pandemic also had a significant impact on the socio-emotional well-being and mental health of children, adolescents and youth, as well as on teachers and support staff working in schools. In some cases, the prolonged lack of socialization has led to issues of conflict and school violence. Although these are expressions of deeper social problems (particularly violence), they have been exacerbated by the disruption to educational pathways. All this requires that health and education policies be coordinated to ensure the necessary support for the recovery of education and the educational pathways of this generation of students.

E. The challenges of a highly informal labour market that generates and deepens inequalities

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it had a serious impact on the labour market. Almost three years after the pandemic began, Latin America and the Caribbean have seen a partial recovery in employment, although the indicators are still lower than they were before the pandemic. As ECLAC has documented ([2021c](#), [2022a](#) and [2022b](#)), this recovery has been slow, incomplete and uneven, with a lag in employment levels compared to economic activity and persistent structural inequalities, particularly for women and young people. Projections indicate that the future of the region's labour markets remains complex and uncertain, with slowing growth in the number of employed, as well as an increase in unemployment and labour informality ([ECLAC, 2022a](#); [Maurizio, 2022](#)).

Indeed, after the historic contraction in the number of employed in the region during 2020, employment showed a strong upturn at the end of 2021, although not enough to bring it back to pre-pandemic levels ([Maurizio, 2022](#)). With the end of the lockdown measures and movement restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the pandemic, labour

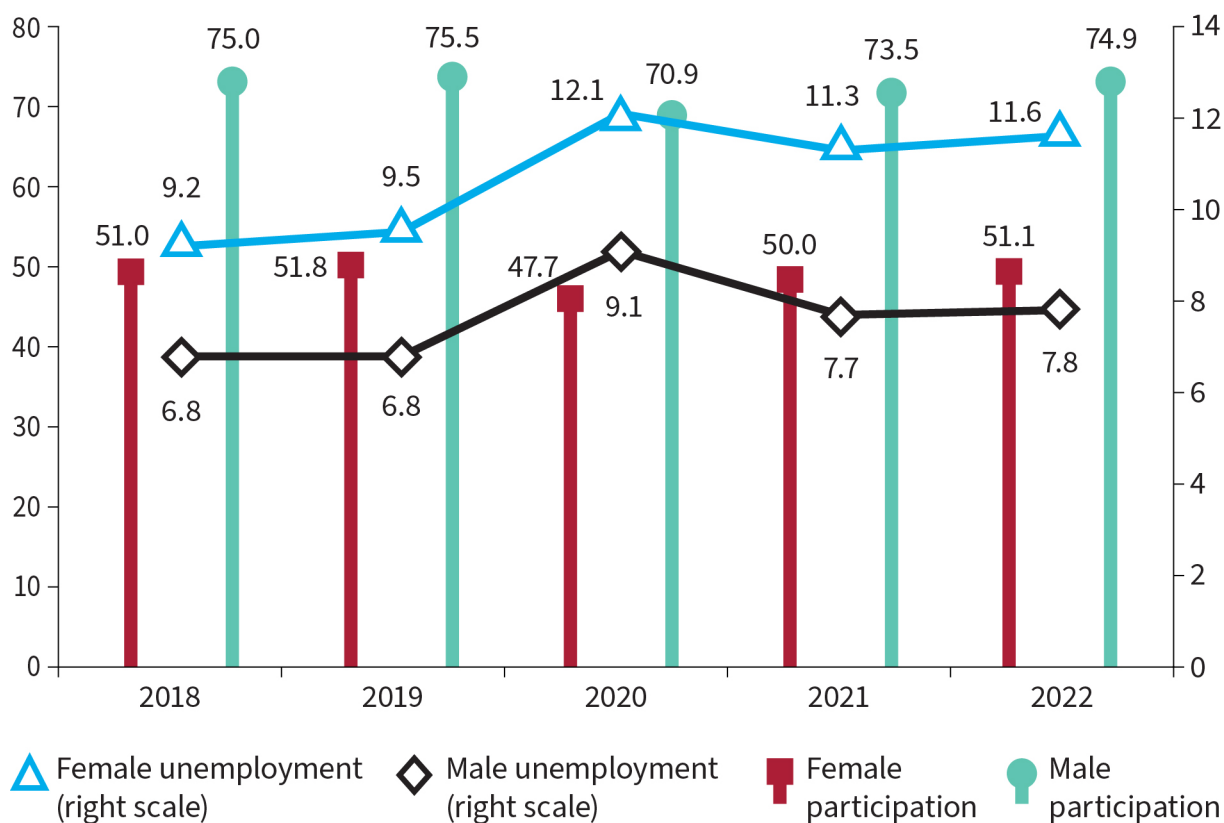
market participation increased in most countries in 2021. This growth was accompanied by a significant increase in the employment rate and a fall in the unemployment rate, although to different extents in each country. As discussed in chapter I, the expansion of labour demand had a direct impact on household income, with employment income growth rates above 10% in Argentina, Costa Rica and Peru. However, given the context of slowing job creation in most countries in the region, figures for the first quarter of 2022 for 14 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean show a total employment rate of 56.2%, somewhat lower than in 2019. Meanwhile, in the first quarter of 2022, for the same group of countries, the total participation rate also showed partial signs of recovery, at 62.4%, about 1 percentage point below its 2019 level. Gender inequalities in this indicator continued during the recovery in the labour markets. As shown in figure 11, gender asymmetries are also present in unemployment rates. Between 2019 and 2020, the unemployment rate for women increased from 9.5% to 12.1%, while for men the rate rose from 6.8% to 9.1%. Despite the improvement recorded in 2021, when the unemployment rate for women dropped to 11.3% and the rate for men to 7.7%, projections for 2022 remain above the rates for 2019, at 11.6% for women and 7.8% for men (ECLAC, [2022a](#) and [2022j](#)).

The partial recovery in employment has occurred mostly in the informal sector, which accounts for around 70% of net job creation in several countries in the region ([ILO, 2021](#)). Figure 12 illustrates the evolution of the informal employment rate taking 2019 as a baseline. It shows an initial drop between the first and second quarters of 2020, followed by an upturn which, by the end of 2021, took the rate slightly above pre-pandemic levels. The recovery in employment driven by the informal sector is a sign of great vulnerability, over the long term, to the risk of falling into poverty or to the effects of inflation, given the lack of access to social protection mechanisms and a high level of job insecurity.

Figure 11

Latin America and the Caribbean (24 countries):^a labour force participation and unemployment rates, by sex, 2018–2022

(Percentages)



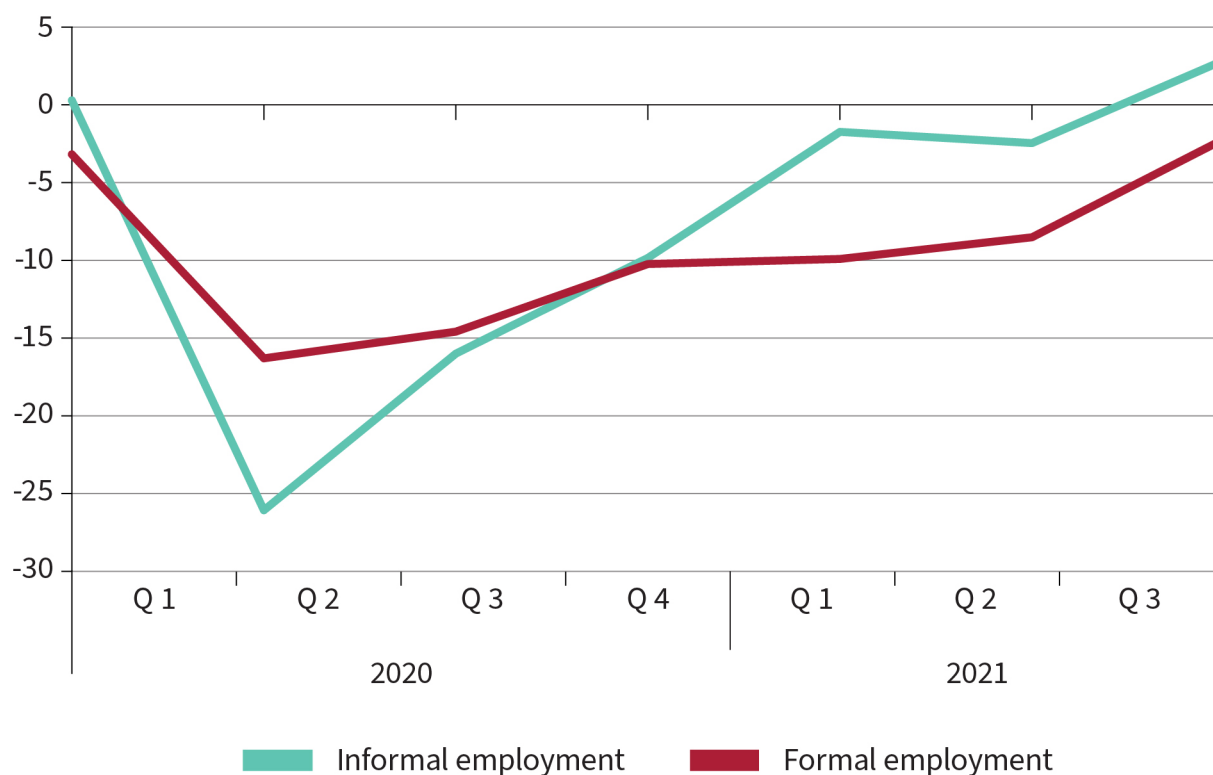
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of official figures from the countries and projections.

Note: Figures for 2021 are preliminary. Figures for 2022 are those projected in ECLAC, *Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022*.

^a Weighted average for the following countries: Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.

Figure 12

Latin America (10 countries):^a variation in number of workers
(formal and informal), 2020 and 2021 compared to 2019
(Percentage variations)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), [Towards transformation of the development model in Latin America and the Caribbean: production, inclusion and sustainability](#) (LC/SES.39/3-P), Santiago, 2022, on the basis of International Labour Organization (ILO), [ILOSTAT](#) [online database].

^a Includes 10 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

The recovery and strengthening of education systems will play a key role in the transformation of the current context of deep structural inequalities and gaps in access to social protection. This is the only way to make outright progress towards labour inclusion and decent work and to face the renewed risks arising from changes and transformations in the world of work and the current situation of recurring crises.

F. Gender inequalities in educational and employment trajectories

Increased access to education by girls, young women and women in Latin America and the Caribbean has been considered one of the region's great advances in terms of education in recent decades. In fact, women's rates of completion of secondary and higher education are higher than men's. On average, 67.4% of women between 20 and 24 years of age have completed secondary education, compared to 60.9% of men in the same age group ([ECLAC, 2022d](#)). Similarly, the percentage of women exceeds men at all levels of higher education. This is reflected by the gross enrolment rate gender parity index for higher education, which shows that 12 countries in the region have exceeded the parity threshold in women's favour, ranging from 1.05 in Mexico to 1.45 in Cuba ([UIS, 2022](#)).

However, advances in women's access to education have not translated into equal conditions in the labour market. Gender inequality is a historical and persistent hallmark of the region. Its structural challenges are reflected in occupational segregation, wage gaps and lower participation by women in the labour market, across countries. These challenges are also evidenced by underrepresentation of women in higher-productivity and economy-driving sectors relating, for example, to the areas of science, technology,

engineering and mathematics. In this context, the unequal burden of unpaid care work is a critical structural challenge that prevents women's full participation and impedes progress towards their economic autonomy.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted and even deepened these structural challenges of gender inequality. Women have absorbed the effects of the crisis through increased unemployment, informality, poverty, unpaid domestic and care work, and more precarious living conditions. In 2020, during the pandemic, there was a large exodus of women from the labour force, setting their participation rates back by almost two decades ([ECLAC, 2021b](#)).

The effects of the pandemic have also accelerated pre-existing trends in the region. Technological changes are one clear example, as they have occurred at exponential rates and transformed entire production, management and governance systems ([ECLAC, 2018](#)). One of the main challenges in this situation is to equip the population with the capabilities and skills they need to cope with a context marked by both transformation and uncertainty ([ECLAC, 2019](#)). Education plays a fundamental role in this, as do the challenges linked to the potential harmful effects of job automation and the gendered exposure to them.

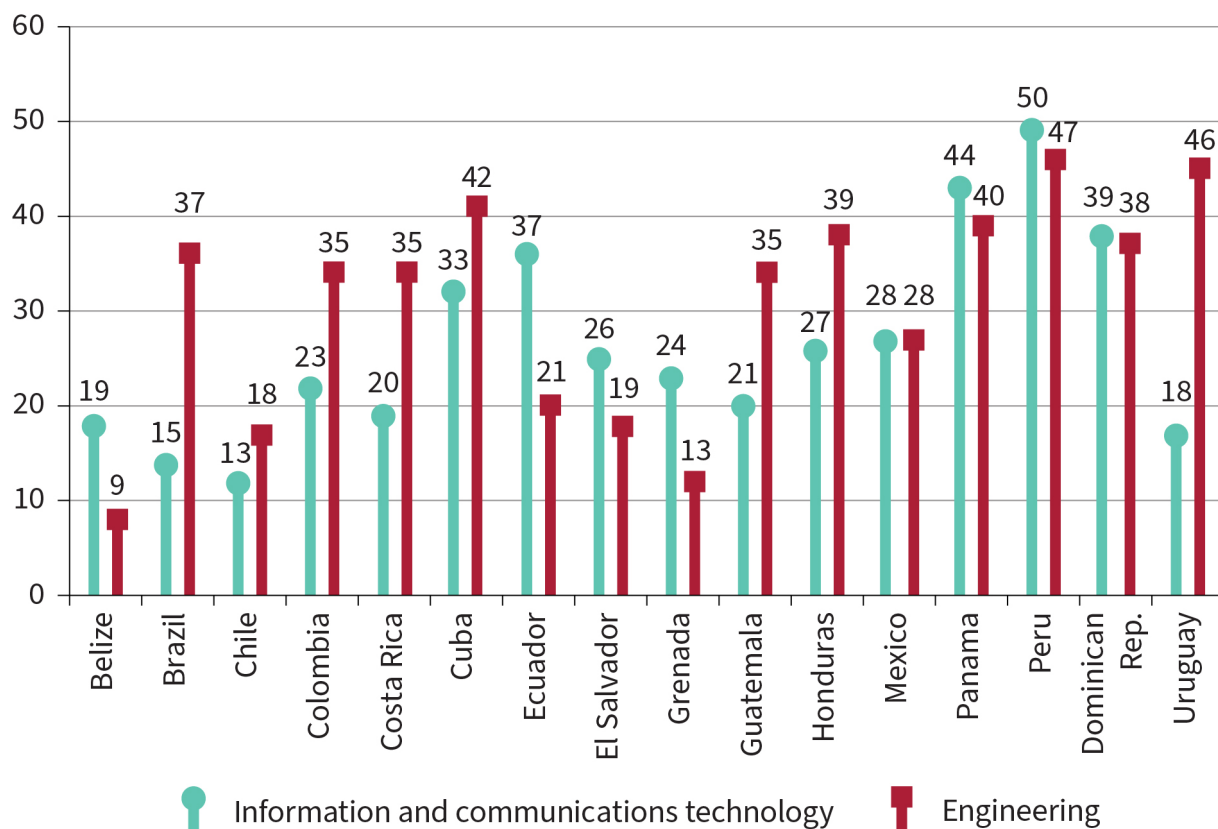
One of the gaps in education that is most significant and impacts women's labour market situation is their low representation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses. Women have lower rates of entry and completion in these areas. These gaps appear early in women's educational pathways, widen at the secondary level and have an impact on career choices and, consequently, on women's careers and economic autonomy. In Latin America and the Caribbean, less than 30% of total graduates from tertiary education between 2002 and 2017 were from science, technology, engineering and

mathematics courses. Women were underrepresented, at less than 40% of the graduates in these careers, with the exception of five countries and territories (Argentina, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Panama and Uruguay). From 2002 to 2017, some countries appear to have seen a decrease in female science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates. For example, the proportion fell from 22.8% in 2008 to 18.8% in 2017 in Chile, from 34.9% in 2011 to 34.1% in 2017 in Colombia, from 32.3% in 2008 to 29.2% in 2016 in Ecuador, and from 47.8% in 2008 to 44.6% in 2016 in Uruguay ([ECLAC, 2019](#)). According to information from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), women are underrepresented in fields related to information and communications technologies and engineering, industry and construction, with less than 50% in all the countries considered, as shown in figure 13. These gender gaps also contribute to perpetuating the low participation rate of women in research and development, scientific production, publication of academic research, patenting and representation in academic leadership positions.

A similar challenge exists in technical and vocational education and training. This form of education has great potential to boost the careers and education pathways of women in the region, especially those in low-income sectors. Secondary school technical and vocational education and training could be a potential area for development of applied science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills, since it is estimated that 50% of workforce occupations in these fields require technical and vocational qualifications at either the secondary or post-secondary level. However, technical and vocational education and training programmes are highly segregated by gender, and there are a series of curricular, organizational and cultural obstacles to girls and young women taking advantage of the potential of this type of education to develop their futures ([Sevilla, 2021](#)).

Figure 13

Latin America and the Caribbean (16 countries): women as a proportion of total tertiary education graduates in information and communications technologies and engineering, latest data available
(Percentages)



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Latin America and the Caribbean report. Inclusion and education: all means all](#), Paris, 2020.

Note: The percentages of female graduates from tertiary education are based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics classifications in information and communications technology and in engineering, manufacturing and construction.

It is necessary to progress towards an economic recovery that fosters women's participation in sectors capable of driving the economy, thereby contributing to progress in the three dimensions of sustainable development ([ECLAC, 2020a](#)). That recovery should also remove income barriers, guarantee labour rights and ensure, through the entire education system, the equal development of the skills required for the jobs of the future. This calls for gender-responsive comprehensive public policies that are multidimensional and that address the structural challenges of gender inequality in a synergistic manner. This entails mainstreaming the gender perspective in all employment and education policies, placing special emphasis on the link between education and employment, in order to enhance women's education pathways and careers. Another area of opportunity is to include technical and vocational education and training as an area of great potential for expanding opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, especially for low-income women. Lastly, in line with the Regional Gender Agenda, public policies are needed to strengthen science, technology, engineering and mathematics vocations that represent progress regarding the elimination of gender stereotypes and the development of digital skills among women, especially those with lower income levels. This involves making progress towards ending the sexual division of labour and the unfair social organization of care, which is one of the barriers that has the greatest impact on women's education pathways and careers. To this end, it is essential to promote social co-responsibility for care, reduce the burden of care in households and move towards systems that ensure care as a right. It is also crucial to invest in the care economy as a central element of sustainable development with equality.

G. The crisis in education opens opportunities to address its structural problems

The education crisis opens up an unprecedented opportunity to drive the recovery and transformation of education systems to foster comprehensive development and human capabilities that can have an impact on strategies for sustainable development with equality. In particular, the pandemic has opened a space to debate, disseminate and identify the structural problems that the education sector was already suffering and that need to be addressed in order to transform the sector. It has become clear that it is imperative to design, invest in and implement strategies and policies for the recovery and transformation of education, in order to make the leap needed to face the uncertainties, new challenges and rapid changes of the twenty-first century ([Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2023](#)).

Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022, in line with the United Nations Secretary-General's call to convene the Transforming Education Summit in the framework of the 2022 General Assembly, offers recommendations for education in Latin America and the Caribbean, with a sense of the opportunity that lies ahead. The Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education ([United Nations, 2022](#)) argues that the crisis in education makes it necessary to rethink the purpose and content of education in the twenty-first century. This transformation should be based on four key areas to support student development: learning to learn, learning to live together, learning to do and learning to be. The Summit agreed upon five thematic action tracks that require attention in order to mobilize the transformation of education, and this edition of the *Social Panorama* puts forth recommendations for education policies for the region in line with these action tracks.

The first action track concerns the need for inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools.

To this end, the following recommendations are made for Latin America and the Caribbean:

- Expand the coverage of early childhood education, which should be a priority in the regional policy agenda for equality, because the foundations of learning and the main drivers of inequality are present from early childhood.
- Continue and accelerate progress towards universal secondary education, which, as ECLAC has been arguing for over a decade, is the minimum standard for fostering pathways out of poverty and giving people greater opportunities for well-being. Chapter II identifies the institutional conditions needed to support this process and regain the path towards one of the central targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4.
- Coordinate education with other public policy sectors to address the gaps in educational inclusion structured by the axes of the matrix of social inequality in the region (in terms of gender, socioeconomic level, ethnicity and race, territory, disability and migratory status).

The second action track adopted at the Transforming Education Summit addresses learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development. In the context of the learning crisis that the region is experiencing and the risks of widening gaps, it is crucial to:

- Resume evaluation processes in order to ascertain more clearly the impact that the closure of educational establishments and distance education has had on learning processes, in order to be able to design better recovery strategies.
- Take advantage of the lessons in innovation gained during the crisis to rethink the set of core competencies and skills to be developed.

- Foster the development of cognitive and socioemotional competencies. The importance of transferable skills, which help to increased resilience and flexibility to cope with the changes and uncertainties of the twenty-first century, has become very apparent in recent years.
- Develop training and education policies for lifelong learning that are coordinated with world of work and the productive sectors, in a context of rapid technological change. In the highly dynamic context of today, both young people and adults must have multiple opportunities to acquire new skills to complement those they already have.
- Foster higher education access and, especially, completion as the backbone of an inclusion policy. Technical and vocational education and training programmes have a strategic role to play in the region and should be strengthened.

The third action track concerns teachers, teaching and the teaching profession. During this period of protracted social crisis, education systems showed that they had major capacity to innovate, rapidly establishing different strategies to maintain teaching and learning processes ([ECLAC/UNESCO, 2020](#)). Within this framework, chapter II of this edition of the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean* recommends the following:

- Retain successful experiences and build in strategies that have served to renew and update ways of teaching or ways of increasing educational coverage.
- Continue fostering spaces for flexibility and creativity in order to encourage innovation to increase quality, inclusiveness and educational relevance.
- Attach greater value to the role of teachers and encourage their professionalization in order to carry forward the necessary transformation in education.

The fourth action track agreed upon in the framework of the Transforming Education Summit refers to digital learning and transformation. It has become clear that education over digital media is here to stay and that certain paradigms about means of teaching no longer hold. Both digital learning and transformation must be maintained in the process of transforming education. There can be no going back to previous means of educating. Accordingly, it is important to:

- Harness digital technologies to accelerate learning recovery, improve the quality of education and reach excluded populations.
- Ensure effective connectivity, which includes connection to the Internet and electric power, as well as access to appropriate digital devices, in coordination with the digital agendas of each country. For example, to achieve this connectivity, [ECLAC \(2021e\)](#) estimated that the annual cost of guaranteeing a basic digital basket, which includes monthly connectivity plans, a laptop, a smartphone and a tablet per household, would amount to 1.8% of GDP in the countries where the estimate could be made.
- Invest in the development of the digital skills of the educational community, in order to make use of the resources available to improve inclusion and learning.
- Progress with implementing hybrid teaching formats, which combine face-to-face and online arenas, while allowing people greater flexibility in educational trajectories, as well as new forms of teaching that include technological tools and innovative educational resources.
- Strengthen educational management and, as part of this, bodies for inclusion, follow-up and monitoring of educational processes, by means of digital media.

- The pandemic has demonstrated the need for an integrated information system to obtain data about the overall state of educational communities in relation to the possibility of crisis, in order to make systems more resilient.

The fifth and final action track agreed upon at the Transforming Education Summit, which is fundamental for implementation of this education policy agenda, refers to financing. This is discussed in greater detail in [section J](#). Taken together, these policies and the transformation of the education system will contribute directly over the medium term to the social and economic recovery of the region and to sustainable development, laying the foundations for development of the skills necessary for labour inclusion under decent working conditions in the changing world of work.

H. The role of the social institutional framework in the face of a prolonged social crisis

Given the prolonged social crisis in the region, it is essential to strengthen social institutions to address the challenges identified and take advantage of the opportunity to promote strategies to advance inclusive social development. Strengthening of social institutional frameworks is one of the four pillars of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development ([ECLAC, 2020a](#)), together with the construction of universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems, quality social and labour inclusion policies, and regional cooperation and integration. Four key elements must underpin progress towards strengthening the social institutional framework. Firstly, the juridical and normative dimension, comprising coordination between regulations adapted to the challenges of the region and essential principles such as the rights-based approach, the

gender approach and universalism sensitive to differences. Secondly, the organizational dimension, composed of coherent organizational frameworks, with clear and effective mandates, and management and personnel policies. Thirdly, the technical and operational dimension, concerning management and implementation tools supported by information and communications technologies that enable the design, execution and monitoring of quality social policies. The fourth and final element is the financing dimension, consisting of sustainable financing, which must be sufficient, efficient and transparent.

Strengthening social institutional frameworks is a necessary structural task, as an essential part of generating good-quality social policies, as well as for ensuring the efficient, transparent and legitimate use of social investment. However, in times of crisis it is common for emergencies and the social demands to run up against a weak, fragile, unstable, opaque and unpredictable social institutional framework. This ultimately forms a bottleneck that limits the effective implementation of public policies in response to these crises and demands. It also hinders legitimate shifts in social policies towards new government programmes.

Accordingly, a strengthened social institutional framework is not an obstacle to change or innovation in social policies; on the contrary, it allows them to occur in a comprehensive and less disruptive manner. Conversely, weak social institutions tend to lead to inefficient action, resources that are insufficient or not spent, and a high risk of waste, diversion or misappropriation. Together, this contributes to keeping institutions highly opaque and fuelling public distrust of government action.

Beyond the sphere of social policies, the transformative role of the State in general, and the construction of true welfare states in particular, rest on a strengthened social institutional

framework. This has a financial dimension both in terms of mobilizing the necessary resources in a sustainable manner, and in terms of ensuring effective implementation with broad legitimacy. In turn, efficiency and legitimacy in resource use are an indispensable condition for building long-term consensus around a new social and fiscal compact.

I. Social investment for advancing inclusive social development

The financing of social policies, which is to say social investment, is one of the four interdependent dimensions of the social institutional framework and it is crucial that countries treat it in a joined-up manner with their development strategies. From the point of view of social investment, this means that the quality of social spending and its impacts are inseparable both from the volume of resources and from the social institutional framework that enables resources to fulfil their purpose in a sustainable, effective, efficient and transparent manner, through social policies and programmes that offer confidence and certainty to citizens. Given the volumes of resources mobilized for social investment and how these have evolved, there is a clear need to ensure that they are used within a framework of transparency and accountability.

As described in *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2021* ([ECLAC, 2022b](#)), during the first two decades of this century, average social spending by central government in 17 Latin American countries was broadly stable relative to GDP. In this context, there were two significant increases during the economic crises experienced in 2000 and 2008, both followed by three years of partial reversal. In 2020, the first year of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, central government public spending reached a new milestone, at 13.8% of GDP,

the highest level ever relative to GDP. This reflected both real growth in social spending and the fall in GDP in Latin American countries.¹ As in previous crises, the level of social spending decreased in 2021, but nevertheless remained far higher than in the years prior to the pandemic, at 13% of GDP on average. This happened, as shown in figure 14, in a year with positive economic growth rates and heterogeneous trends in social spending in the countries.

Similarly, social spending as a share of total central government public spending in Latin America came down by 1.2 percentage points, on average, with respect to 2020, and stood at 54.5% in 2021. Thus, it continued to be the largest component of total public spending.

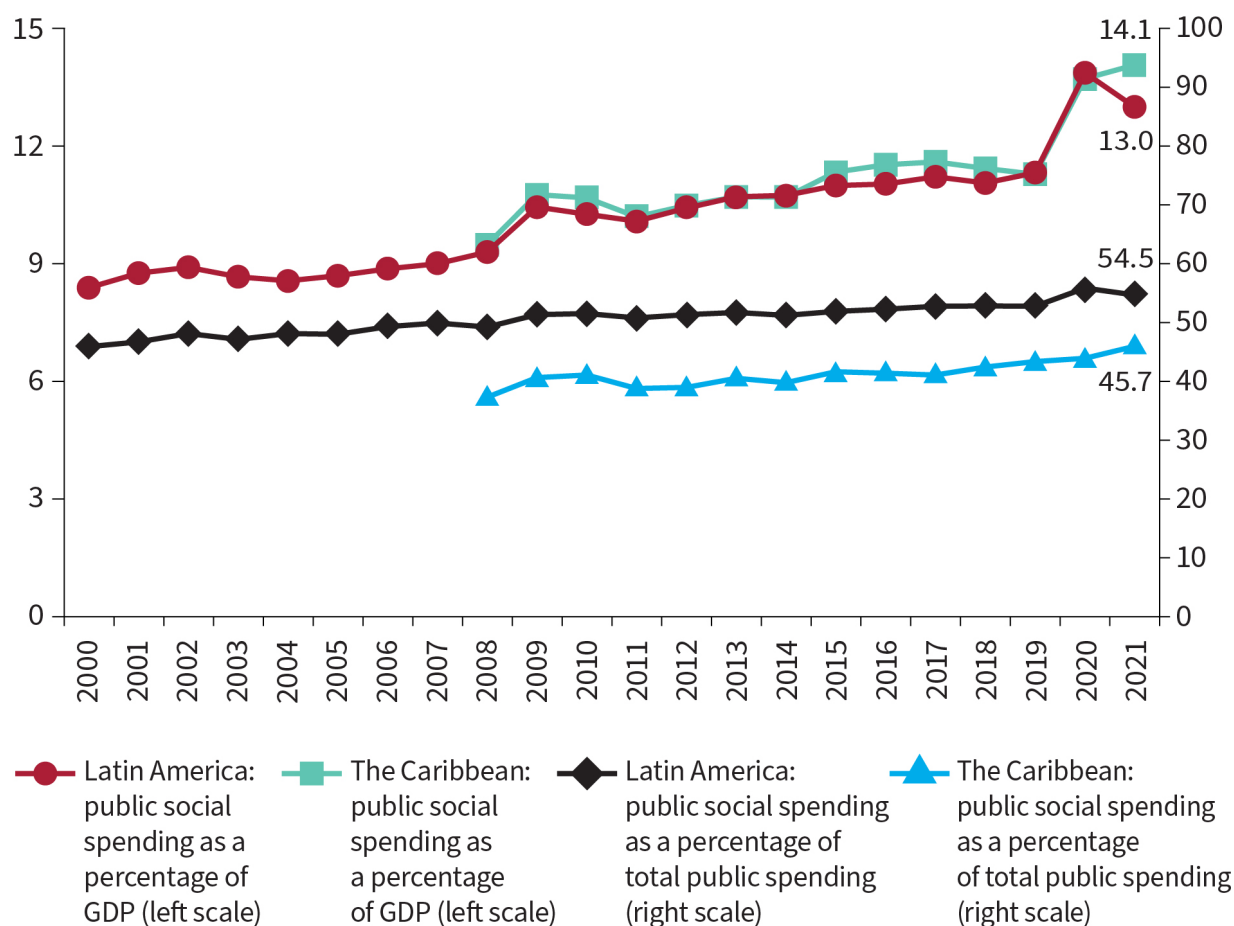
In the five English-speaking Caribbean countries for which comparable data on central government social spending were available for the period between 2008 and 2021, the historical trend in the average has been relatively similar to those in Latin America. In 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of central government social spending also rose significantly, by 2.4 GDP percentage points over 2019. In 2021, unlike in the Latin American average, public social spending continued to grow and reached a new record of 14.1% of GDP, as outlined in chapter IV.

¹ According to the 2021 figures published in *Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* ([ECLAC, 2022a](#)), all countries except the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Haiti show positive annual GDP growth rates, and in 29 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean the average growth rate was 6.5%.

Figure 14

Latin America and the Caribbean (22 countries): central government social spending, 2000–2021

(Percentages of GDP and of total public expenditure)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of official information from the countries.

Note: For Latin America, the figures shown correspond to the arithmetic mean for 17 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Coverage in the Plurinational State of Bolivia corresponds to central administration and that of Peru to general government. The data for Colombia, Panama and the Plurinational State of Bolivia refer to 2020. For the Caribbean, the averages correspond to the arithmetic mean of the values for five countries: Bahamas, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Social spending also increased sharply as a share of total central government spending between 2020 and 2021 in the five English-speaking Caribbean countries. The 2 percentage point rise in social spending contrasted with Latin American countries, although the average proportion remains lower. In some countries, this is attributable to the large proportion of interest payments, rather than to fiscal policy initiatives. This is particularly evident in the case of Jamaica. Conversely, in the average of total public spending as a percentage of GDP, the difference is in favour of the Caribbean countries, where it was 1.1 percentage points higher than in the average of Latin American countries in 2021.²

Real-term growth in the countries' central government social spending (in constant 2018 dollars) remained positive in 2021, but at significantly lower rates than in 2020. In 2021, growth in this indicator averaged 1.3% in Latin American countries; 1.4% in South America and 1.3% in Central America. This is one of the lowest rates in the series analysed and, when combined with a year of higher economic growth than the previous one (6.5%, on average, in 2021), it translates into a drop in public social spending relative to GDP. In the case of the five English-speaking Caribbean countries, the public social spending growth of 2% has remained above the 2010–2019 average, and in 2021 was in the order of 10.3%.

The distribution of resources among government functions retained the same profile of the past two decades. Spending on the health function is notable, as, on average, it has sustained the level of growth of the last two years marked by the pandemic. Central government social spending remains heterogeneous across the region. In Barbados, Brazil and Chile it exceeded 17% of GDP and in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Paraguay it remained below 10.5%. In yearly per capita terms, while Bahamas, Barbados,

² The figure for total government spending by the central government published in *Fiscal Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021* ([ECLAC, 2022i](#)) includes 12 Caribbean countries.

Chile and Uruguay spent between 2,730 dollars and 4,045 dollars in 2021, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay and the Plurinational State of Bolivia spent under 600 dollars. In order to make the region's public social spending more effective and efficient, the fundamental challenges remain of increasing the adequacy and sustainability of that spending, in order to close the gaps with respect to developed countries and make greater progress in consolidating information on social investment and its outcomes.

J. Investing in education is investing in people, in the inclusiveness of development and in the capacity to adapt to change

Social spending on education at the central government level has historically been a priority in the region, with average values close to 4% or 4.5% of GDP in the past decade. These levels are much higher in some of the countries that publish data for broader institutional coverage. Most of the resources are invested at the primary and secondary levels, although the tertiary level receives the most resources per student. Spending is heterogenous in the case of education as well, particularly in the distribution at the pre-primary and tertiary levels. The significant gap with developed economies is also noteworthy: the countries with the highest levels of spending in the region are at the lower end of the distribution compared to OECD members.

In addition, in the Latin American and Caribbean region it is important to consider the role of household spending in financing education. This is very uneven within and among countries, particularly with respect to the educational levels to which resources are allocated and the amounts that the different socioeconomic strata spend on education. However, this unevenness diminishes when these expenditures are analysed as a proportion of total household spending.

Although the countries of the region have prioritized spending on education in recent decades, before the pandemic they were already facing difficulties in achieving the targets set out under Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030 ([Gajardo, 2020](#); [UNESCO, 2017](#); [UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022](#)), and these difficulties have increased over the past two years. In this regard, three key points stand out. First, given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, more investment in education is needed to finance learning recovery measures, strategies to mitigate the rise in school dropout rates, and new resources to improve school infrastructure and equipment to comply with health protocols ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Second, the current economic slowdown and the consequent decline in household income make it likely that demand in the public sector will rise, as students migrate from the private sector. Lastly, the impact of the technological revolution makes it necessary to invest resources in adapting the system to improve effectiveness and inclusion and reduce gaps. This effort goes beyond the education sector and requires an intersectoral policy involving various stakeholders, from both the government and the private sector, aimed at ensuring effective connectivity for the entire population.

K. Moving towards universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems

The various challenges outlined in this edition of the *Social Panorama* show that it is essential to address short- and medium-term needs in order to create the conditions for progress towards sustainable development with equality. On the one hand, the region should focus on strategies to expand and strengthen human capacities in the short and medium terms. This is a key objective for social and labour inclusion, strengthening and supporting transformations in educational policies and health systems. On the other

hand, in order to move in this direction, it is necessary to coordinate multisectoral efforts, as demonstrated by the pandemic. For example, health and social protection policies need to be increasingly coordinated, under the social determinants of health approach ([Cid and Marinho, 2022](#)). In the case of education, the serious impacts of the pandemic show the growing need for greater coordination between education policy and other sectors. In particular, coordination is essential between education, social protection and health policies. Access to social protection and health systems plays a key role in the continuity of educational processes, providing basic conditions to enable students to continue and complete their education.

The worsening of the population's living conditions is evidence of the serious shortcomings of social protection systems in terms of ensuring adequate levels of well-being and fully guaranteeing the exercise of economic, social and cultural rights. Income protection is a fundamental dimension of these systems and is particularly important when household consumption levels are being impacted by inflation and food price rises, and the emergency social protection measures implemented in the first two years of the pandemic are being drastically reduced. The available information shows a sharp fall in the levels of spending and coverage of these measures in 2022. Whereas they covered 50.2% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020 and 47.2% in 2021, by August 2022 they covered only an estimated 15.6%. Likewise, while spending was estimated to be close to 90 billion dollars in 2020 and commitments were announced in 2021 for an estimated 45.271 billion dollars, between January and August 2022 this amount fell to less than 6.2 billion dollars (Atuesta y Van Hemelryck, 2023).

In a context of ongoing social crisis that is becoming more complex in the new economic scenario, it is essential to establish mechanisms to ensure a certain level of well-being and income. To this end, use should be made of the lessons learned from the experience of

expanding emergency social protection measures and employment protection policies during the pandemic ([Salazar-Xirinachs, 2022](#)).³ An initial review of the measures implemented to contain the deterioration of the well-being of the most vulnerable households in the face of rising prices shows that, as well as expanding the coverage or amounts allocated to pre-existing programmes, even those implemented during the pandemic, some countries have opted for new emergency cash transfers. There is thus a risk that, amid successive crisis, the institutional weaknesses of social protection systems and their policies will end up fragmenting, rather than uniting, efforts to guarantee permanent income protection. In order to consolidate mechanisms to protect income levels against any occurrence, at this point it is necessary to seek ways to institutionalize emergency benefits, as well as to coordinate the existing schemes (Holz y Robles, 2023; [Robles and Rossel, 2022](#)). Another possibility is to review options aimed at linking transfer programmes more strongly with labour inclusion measures ([Salazar-Xirinachs, 2022](#)). It is essential to protect food and nutritional security and income levels, especially for children and adolescents and their households. This makes it crucial to strengthen multisectoral policies concerning the availability of good-quality food and access to it, in conjunction with education policies, school meals programmes ([ECLAC, 2021a](#)), family benefits and other policies aimed at protecting the income of these households ([ECLAC, 2021d](#)).

In order to make progress towards both sustainable development with equality and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, it is essential to strengthen social protection systems, firstly through universality that is sensitive to differences, leaving no one behind. Secondly

³ For information on emergency social protection measures and employment-related measures, see the ECLAC [COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) and [“Social protection measures to confront COVID-19”, Social Development and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

through comprehensiveness, to be able to face numerous and renewed risks. Thirdly, through sustainability, thus fulfilling commitments to this and future generations. Lastly, through resilience, to face consecutive crises with capacity and flexibility. This requires progress in the construction of welfare states based on social rights that ensure quality public services, reduce vulnerability to social risks and ensure sustainable income levels ([Briggs, 1961](#); [ECLAC, 2021d](#)). The construction of a welfare state requires a solid social institutional framework based on social and fiscal compacts, underpinned by a broad social consensus to advance along this path, with solidarity and progressiveness, and with a view to strengthening democracy, political stability, social cohesion and sustainable development with equality.

L. Presentation and summary of the key messages of the chapters

Following this introduction, the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* has four chapters. Chapter I presents the relevant macroeconomic background in terms of the evolution of per capita GDP, employment, household income distribution and the consumer price index. It also examines trends in income inequality and poverty over the past two decades (2002–2021). The data do not show any improvement with respect to the situation prior to the pandemic, and give cause for concern over the increased impact of higher inflation on low-income households due, among other factors, to the greater share of food in their consumption basket. The chapter also discusses changes that occurred in social stratification during the pandemic. Given the focus of this edition on the impacts of the pandemic on the region's educational landscape, it also considers factors that directly or indirectly influence the educational opportunities and outcomes of children

and adolescents from different income strata. To this end, it compares the incidence by income strata of certain critical deprivations in access to goods and services that impact learning opportunities.

Chapter II addresses the worrying silent crisis of education as another of the pandemic's major consequences and the successive crises that have accompanied it. Despite previous progress in access to education, the lengthy interruption of face-to-face educational services during the pandemic deepened long-standing educational inequalities. This was reflected in gaps in access to quality alternatives for continuing education and in the availability of resources for remote learning. Despite the measures adopted by governments to mitigate these inequalities, such as providing digital devices or grants for buying them, and direct financial support to low-income households, the prolonged closure of schools and the economic effects of the pandemic will have large educational costs. Those costs will scar the educational and labour trajectories of the generations affected, damaging their income and general well-being in the short and medium terms. The gaps are wider in the case of population groups that already faced greater barriers to accessing quality educational services, such as persons with disabilities and migrants, and, in the case of challenges concerning intercultural education and the promotion of Indigenous languages, Indigenous people and Afrodescendants. However, this silent crisis in education also represents an opportunity for transformation. The chapter addresses a number of priorities, including maintaining safe conditions for reopening schools, investing in strategies to identify the costs of disruption to face-to-face education, in terms of both learning and socioemotional well-being, and designing and implementing recovery strategies aimed at leaving no one behind. In this context, digital education emerges as an opportunity to accelerate learning recovery, include students in more vulnerable situations and prevent increases in school dropout rates.

Chapter III looks at access to education and the unequal labour impacts of the pandemic on men and women. The severe setbacks experienced by women in the labour market contrast with their notable advances in access to education, which, paradoxically, have not translated into greater equality in the labour market. The chapter considers in particular the role to be played by the development of more knowledge-intensive sectors, especially in fields related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, in advancing towards progressive structural change. These sectors offer higher-productivity jobs, better pay and more high-value production chains. Nevertheless, it is one of the fields of education where women face the largest gaps. This has repercussions, among other factors, in their low representation in the labour market in these areas. Chapter III also examines the gender segregation in access to technical and vocational education and training in the region that tends to go unnoticed in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields and skills. Lastly, it offers a set of policies with a gender perspective that can contribute to progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, as well as to full gender equality and women's autonomy in the region.

Chapter IV analyses the social institutional framework and the evolution of social spending in Latin America and the Caribbean. Social institutions are crucial for establishing universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems. After historic levels of public social spending in 2020 amid an unprecedented contraction in economic activity, in 2021 the fiscal deficit declined and both overall public spending and public social spending showed lower growth. ECLAC advocates an approach focusing not only on the evolution, volume, use and financial sustainability of the public resources that make up social spending, but also on other institutional dimensions. This would enable those resources to fulfil their purpose in an effective, efficient, transparent and accountable manner by means of high-quality social policies, as set forth in the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development.

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