

Report of the first regional seminar on social development

Education in Latin America
and the Caribbean:
the prolonged crisis as an
opportunity for restructuring

Tomás Esper
Mariana Huepe
Amalia Palma
Compilers



Norwegian Ministry of
Foreign Affairs

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This document contains the report of the first regional seminar on social development, entitled “Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: the prolonged crisis as an opportunity for restructuring”, organized by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from 13 to 15 October 2021. The regional seminar and much of the background research presented therein, as well as the preparation of the present document, were carried out in the framework of the cooperation project between ECLAC and the Government of Norway, “Enhancing human capacities throughout the life cycle for equality and productivity”. The document was compiled and edited by Tomás Esper, consultant with the Social Development Division of ECLAC, Mariana Huepe, Social Affairs Officer, and Amalia Palma, Research Assistant in the Social Development Division, under the supervision of Daniela Trucco, Senior Social Affairs Officer in the same Division. Thanks are owed to Daniela Huneus of the same Division for her valuable comments.

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Summary

This document contains the report of the first regional seminar on social development, entitled “Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: the prolonged crisis as an opportunity for restructuring”, organized by ECLAC on 13–15 October 2021. This seminar would not have been possible without the support of the Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (OREALC/UNESCO), the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) at UNESCO Buenos Aires and the Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Coordination and cooperation among UN agencies is an essential requirement if the missions mandated to each agency are to be achieved. Finally, it should be noted that this regional seminar and much of the research that preceded it and that was presented over those three days was carried out thanks to the vital support of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) as part of the “Enhancing human capacities throughout the life cycle for equality and productivity” cooperation project between ECLAC and the Government of Norway.

Background

Education is a human right, a central dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and a key to ensuring the population's full social and labour inclusion, thereby contributing to economic growth, equality and participation in society. Higher levels of education are linked to reductions in poverty and inequality, improved health indicators, better access to decent work, upward social mobility and greater opportunities to exercise citizenship. Education, through the construction of capacities, also has a central role in the structural changes required by Latin America and the Caribbean.

Because of the protracted crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of access to vaccines and stubborn infection rates, centres of education in most of the region's countries still remain fully or partially closed. This has meant, on average, more than one academic year without face-to-face classes or with extended interruptions. The interruption of studies or the inability to ensure the same levels of continuity virtually —evidencing gaps in access to connectivity and digital equipment— in conjunction with the economic crisis affecting household incomes will increase the risks of rising school dropout rates, an upswing in child labour and delays in the learning process, deepening the previously existing gaps.

The intensity and scope of the crisis created a rupture in the educational system that makes it impossible to go back; what is implemented in the near future is certain to be the starting point for a new way of thinking about lifelong education and training and, for that reason, there is an urgent need to create venues to reflect on what kind of educational systems we want to move towards, and what steps must be taken to make them effective. Comprehensiveness is one of the keys that the pandemic informally put into operation in a more dynamic way and that hopefully has arrived to stay. The need to coordinate and interconnect education sector planning and execution with that of other sectors, particularly health, nutrition and social protection, has become apparent. A return to face-to-face classes with all the necessary health safety measures is of vital importance, especially for the most disadvantaged sectors. Schools perform a protective and monitoring role —the components of which include socialization, public health and the prevention of violence— that goes far beyond merely academic ends. In addition, the return to on-site classes would enable fathers, mothers and caregivers to return to the labour market, a factor of particular importance to women.

This crisis offers an unprecedented opportunity to increase the resilience of national education systems and transform them into inclusive drivers of equality that contribute to the fulfilment of the collective commitment made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This first regional seminar on social development is intended to provide experts from the United Nations and multilateral organizations, academics and the region's education decision-makers with a venue for reflecting on education as an engine of social development and on the education policy strategies being proposed as part of the transformative recovery with equality and sustainability in the region.

Opening remarks

Alicia Bárcena¹

Over the last year and a half, a protracted global health, social and economic crisis has had devastating consequences in our region. In 2020, the economy of Latin America and the Caribbean underwent its sharpest contraction since 1900 (-6.8%) and recorded the worst performance of any developing region. The available data also indicate that ours has been one of the regions of the world most affected by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic: by 30 September 2021, more than 1.4 million people had died from COVID-19 in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The economic and social effects of COVID-19 have been exacerbated by the region's structural problems, including its high levels of inequality and poverty, lack of social protection, labour informality and vulnerability. In 2020, estimates suggest that the number of people living in extreme poverty will reach 78 million, with another 209 million living in poverty (8 million and 22 million more than in 2019, respectively). At the same time, the region is characterized by weak and fragmented health and social protection systems, sprawling marginalized urban settlements without access to basic services, migrations and population displacements and conflicts of various kinds, in addition to being affected by the relentless consequences of the climate crisis.

Unfortunately, education has not been placed at the centre of the public-policy agenda debate for addressing this prolonged crisis and the post-pandemic recovery. Under the measures adopted to confront the health crisis, most of the region's countries closed their educational facilities, either totally or partially, in order to prevent contagion. This has meant the cancellation of face-to-face classes for, on average, more than an entire academic year, or extended periods during which classes have been suspended.

The interruption of studies or the inability to continue them in the same way virtually—evidencing gaps in access to connectivity and digital equipment—in conjunction with the economic crisis affecting household incomes threaten to result in increased school dropout and child labour rates, which will lead to delays in the learning process and deepen pre-existing gaps, generating what has been called a “silent crisis”.

¹ Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

There is an urgent need to promote a gradual and safe return to school, in close coordination with the health sector. Returning to school is very important, especially for the most disadvantaged sectors. Schools play a protective and monitoring role—in areas such as socialization, health and violence prevention—that goes far beyond academic purposes. They also help to improve possibilities for returning to the labour market, especially in the case of women.

At the same time, teachers and educational staff must be empowered so they can take contextualized and flexible pedagogical decisions, maintaining an appropriate balance between autonomy and support. The specific child-rearing, care and subsistence demands of people working in the educational field, the vast majority of whom are women, must also be taken into account.

The pandemic's impact on the mental health of students and their families—the result of increased exposure to the Internet, heightened social isolation and the loss of close family members—is also of particular concern. Strategies for educational continuity and return must prioritize the socioemotional well-being of the entire school community: not only that of students, but also teachers, who have been overburdened during the pandemic.

This three-day seminar will discuss topics such as the construction of more inclusive and resilient education systems, the situation of children, adolescents and young people during the health crisis, the establishment of an educational recovery agenda in the context of the pandemic, the skills and competencies needed in a changing context and the interconnection of educational policies with other social policies.

In addition, presentations will be given on the valuable work carried out by ECLAC in partnership with the institutions that assisted us in the organization of the seminar. These include a COVID-19 Report on education in times of pandemic that we published with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC) in 2020, which has been among the most read documents on our website in recent months (ECLAC/UNESCO, 2020). The seminar will also hear the main findings of a study carried out as part of a broader investigation that we began before the pandemic with the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Buenos Aires, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). During 2020, this research examined the extension and segmentation of secondary education in the region and investigated students' experiences as regards their educational tracks in the context of the pandemic. This publication is complemented by six national studies, which are available on our website.² A study on youth, education and work, jointly published by ECLAC and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) in 2020, will also be presented. The final session will receive a presentation on a joint study on comprehensive protection for adolescents conducted with UNICEF.

The intensity and extent of the crisis have revealed long-standing debts in the equality and quality of the region's education systems that constrain limit progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The crisis has entailed the breakdown of certain paradigms—such as face-to-face attendance and the use of digital technologies—in a way that makes it impossible to go back and demands the restructuring of systems to make them more resilient and inclusive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated changes in models of consumption, production and social interaction. Participating effectively in the digital era therefore requires not only connectivity, but also the building of digital skills, with their use leading to social well-being and economic growth. Progress must be made with the development of joint strategies in the digital, social and economic spheres, so that obstacles and gaps can be addressed from all relevant angles and digital agendas can be approached from a perspective of people's rights, gender equality and intersectionality and interculturality. In this, a key role is to be played by education in the framework of an intersectoral dialogue.

² To access these documents, see Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "Publicaciones de la CEPAL: selección temática" [online] <https://crm.cepal.org/civicrm/mailling/view?id=1260>.

These strategies must be complemented with other strategies for the development of skills throughout the life cycle. The use of digital technologies requires basic cognitive skills such as literacy and mathematics, operational skills, more complex abilities such as critical thinking and the ability to select information, and competences related to self-care and ethical behaviour in the digital world. The labour market demands skills that can be easily transferred between jobs and occupations and that satisfy the new demands. We must take advantage of this upheaval to rethink the skills on which training should focus.

Today more than ever, we must emphasize equality and inclusion in access to education and training, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalized population groups, such as indigenous peoples, people of African descent, refugees and migrants, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors, people with disabilities and people of sexual and gender diversity. In particular, we must address gender inequalities by encouraging the promotion of care services and women's participation in occupations traditionally considered male preserves.

I invite you to reflect on the steps we must take to move forward in defining actions to address the urgency of this silent crisis and guarantee the necessary funding and commitment of all sectors. We cannot run the risk of creating a lost generation, because, as the illustrious Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral said, "The future of children is always today. Tomorrow will be too late."

Panel I: Opportunities to rebuild more inclusive and resilient education systems

Moderator: Jean Gough, Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, UNICEF

Main presentation: "Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: the prolonged crisis as an opportunity for restructuring"

Alicia Bárcena, *Executive Secretary of ECLAC*



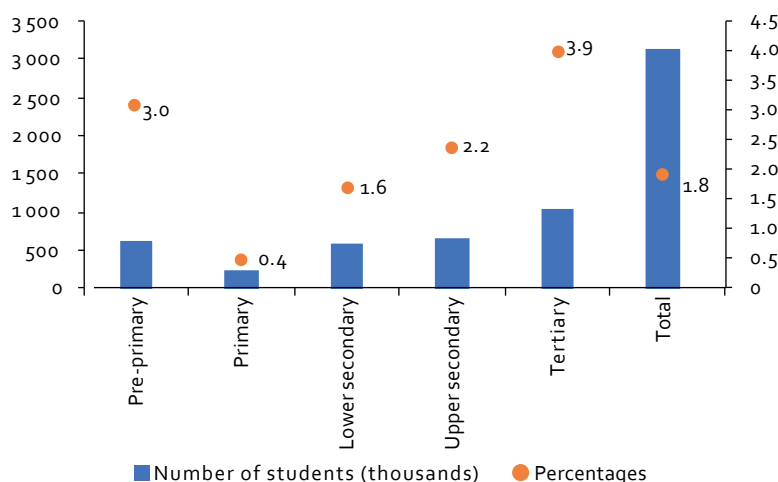
In Latin America and the Caribbean, the pandemic has brought with it a protracted health and social crisis. To date, the region has accounted for 20.3% of global COVID-19 virus cases and 32.2% of the global deaths, while representing only 8.4% of the world's population. In addition, the prolonged duration of the pandemic has deepened structural problems of inequality, poverty and informality. Despite the social protection policies the region implemented during 2020, it is estimated that poverty will return to its level of 12 years ago, with a setback of 20 years in extreme poverty levels. The most affected groups include young people and women, more than 30% of whom do not participate in the labour market due to an excess burden of caregiving tasks.

The crisis has had a significant and silent effect on children, adolescents and young people. The pandemic's impact is multidimensional and uneven, and it involves increased risks of child labour, domestic violence, malnutrition and deepening learning gaps, as well as mental health issues, poverty-related problems and others. Estimates indicate that up to 300,000 children and adolescents could be forced to work in the aftermath of the pandemic. Rising poverty among children is a dramatic phenomenon that needs to be addressed urgently. In 2019, 47.2% of the region's children and adolescents were living in poverty, compared to 30.5% of the general population, and estimates suggest an increase of up to 4 percentage points during 2020. In addition, more than 600,000 children and adolescents have lost their caregivers due to the pandemic.

The pandemic's consequences for education are vast and only exacerbate pre-existing inequities. In 2019, there was a 46 percentage-point gap in secondary school completion rates between young people belonging to the first income quintile (86%) and those in the fifth quintile (40%). In turn, in 2018, almost 50% of 15-year-old students did not attain basic levels of reading comprehension in ten of the region's countries that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Since the beginning of the pandemic, 99% of the region's students have suffered a total or partial interruption of their classes for at least 40 weeks, which amounts to an entire academic year. The consequences of these suspensions include the risk of increased school dropout rates for 3 million children and adolescents in the region, as well as significant delays in their studies and a lower motivation to learn (see figure 1).

Among the main challenges that the pandemic posed for education systems and families was the unexpected transition to remote learning. First, teachers did not feel prepared for online or distance education and, second, students did not have the resources—computers and Internet access—needed to ensure a harmonious continuity of learning. In a comparative study conducted in six of the region's countries, secondary school students indicated feeling behind in their studies, expressed their fear of losing friends and family and reported high levels of exhaustion from online learning at home.

Figure 1
Latin America and the Caribbean (30 countries):^a students at risk of not returning to education,
projections as of June 2020^b
(Thousands of students and percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "How many students are at risk of not returning to school?: advocacy paper", *UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response*, Paris, 2020.

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

^b Projections made on the basis of International Monetary Fund (IMF) data on the decline in per capita GDP, historical enrolment, and gender parity index in education. The methodological details can be found in UNESCO (2020).

Prior to the pandemic, the region's education systems were undergoing a silent crisis that has since been brought to the forefront by the multiple challenges generated by COVID-19. Nevertheless, this grave crisis offers a unique opportunity for rebuilding more inclusive education systems, which is an imperative in the face of the pandemic's consequences. The first essential tasks are to guarantee the return to face-to-face classes, increase investment in education and reorganize the institutional framework of schooling in pursuit of inclusion. At the same time, distance education during the pandemic has yielded valuable lessons that can be used to extend learning times and reduce coverage gaps. The extension of compulsory schooling has been a necessary but not sufficient step, since millions of children continue to be denied access to schooling, and those who do have access do not acquire the learning that will allow them to develop fully in the future. It is therefore essential to recover and increase the levels of educational investment in the region, to support and assist teachers in embracing the digital skills and innovative pedagogical tools that were catapulted by the pandemic, and to rethink the organization of education systems so they address the diverse needs of the region's students, without losing sight of the focus on quality education and equal opportunities. The exit route from the crisis that we take will shape the futures of a generation, and the lessons of the crisis must therefore be transformed into active educational policies to guarantee the right to education and full lives for all the region's children.

- Session recording: available [here](#).

Main ideas from the discussion

Jaime Perczyk, *Minister of Education of the Argentine Republic*

Paula Villalta Olivares, *Deputy Minister of Education, Costa Rica*

Jorge Poblete, *Undersecretary for Education, Chile*

Cinthya Game Varas, *Deputy Minister of Education, Ecuador*

An open discussion was led by education policymakers from four of the region's countries: Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile and Ecuador. The comments focused on two central issues: national responses to the crisis, and plans and possibilities for the future reconstruction. The first point emphasized how the pandemic has jeopardized many of the gains made since the turn of the century, with a focus on those students who stopped attending school. In this regard, mention was made of the consultative and participatory processes led by different national ministries, involving administrators, teachers and families and using surveys, open meetings and the advice of expert panels. Another point of agreement was the serious impact in terms of lost learning and the consequences of social distancing measures and school closures for the socioemotional health of students and teachers.

In view of this pressing problem, a number of converging lines were drawn for meeting the challenges ahead: first, re-establishing full on-site attendance at all levels, with emphasis on secondary schools because of the greater difficulties facing that sector; second, guaranteeing the reincorporation of all children who have abandoned school or have attended only intermittently; and third, prioritizing and recovering learning. A cross-cutting element in these objectives is the restoration of education funding levels to their pre-pandemic levels, so as to provide quality education services that incorporate comprehensive training and meet the economic needs of young people. Emphasis was also placed on the urgent need to connect all the region's educational facilities to a secure and fast Internet network. This would enable agile, accurate and effective information and monitoring systems to support decision-making and to streamline school administrative processes. Another key task is the promotion of continuous teacher training with a focus on digital skills, so that many of the practices

adopted during the pandemic can be permanently incorporated and students' learning time outside the classroom can be extended. Finally, reference was made to the importance of progress with the vaccination of both teachers and children for an effective return to school.

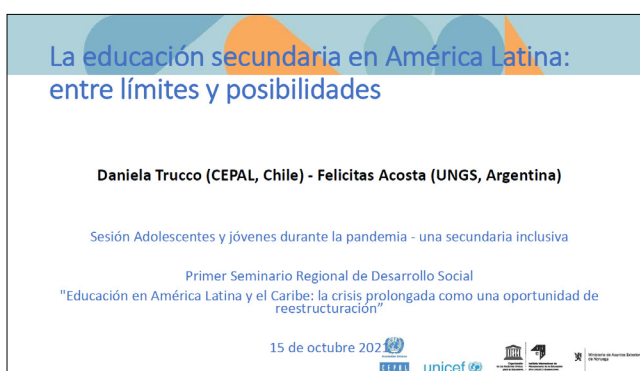
In closing, the ECLAC Executive Secretary stressed the importance of learning from the experiences of countries and education systems during the crisis. Despite the worsening of the pre-existing crisis, the pandemic made new experiences possible, and they must be put to good use in order to rebuild education for the future. On the one hand, it is necessary to think about ongoing education throughout the life cycle and the creation of venues for education that transcend the school. On the other, priority attention must be paid to the pandemic's socioemotional impact on students, families and teachers, and emotional education and psychosocial well-being must be fully incorporated as key elements in education systems. The silent crisis in education has been indisputably placed at the forefront by the pandemic. Despite the seriousness of that double crisis, however, there is a great opportunity to rethink education, so that education systems can become engines of equality for the most disadvantaged children, with an unwavering commitment to future generations.

Panel II: Adolescents and young people during the pandemic: inclusive secondary schools

Moderator: Pablo Cevallos Estarellas, *IIEP UNESCO Buenos Aires*

Main presentation: "Secondary education in Latin America: between constraints and possibilities"

Daniela Trucco, *ECLAC*, and Felicitas Acosta, *National University of General Sarmiento, Argentina*

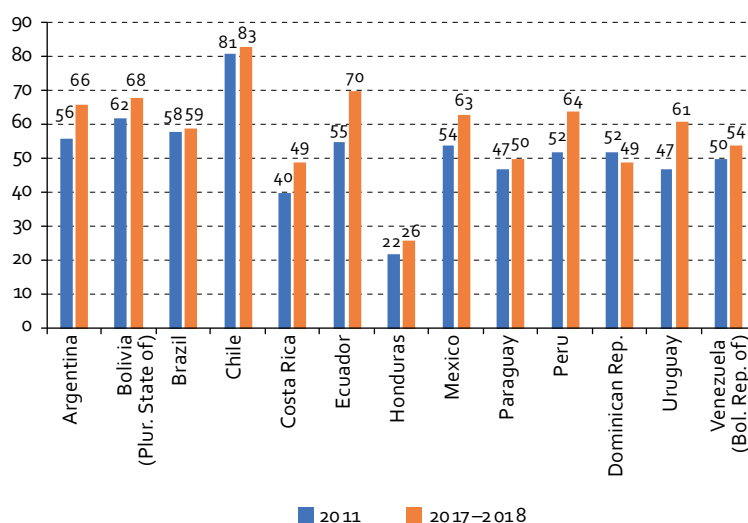


Secondary education was the main focus of sector policies in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past decade. In general, the region's countries implemented policies and amended their legal frameworks to extend compulsory schooling to the conclusion of secondary education, in order to expand access to the right to education for adolescents and young people. At the same time, the extension of compulsory schooling was accompanied by changes in the institutional organization and structure of secondary education, in order to successfully bring on board those groups of students entering secondary school for the first time. In that context, ECLAC—together with IIEP UNESCO and UNICEF—undertook a study into the diversification of secondary school structures and educational segmentation in Latin America

(Acosta, 2021). The research was divided into two stages. The first involved collecting and analysing educational indicators from 13 countries in the region, in order to identify progress, challenges and trends in the expansion of compulsory schooling. The second focused on the experiences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic in six countries.

The first stage of the study concluded that the coverage of the region's education systems has improved significantly over the past decade. Both lower and upper secondary net enrolment rates improved significantly, while the gap between the first and last income quintiles narrowed in almost all the countries studied (with some exceptions such as Mexico and Honduras, where inequalities in access exceed 15 points between the groups).

Figure 2
Latin America (13 countries): evolution of net enrolment rates
in upper secondary education, around 2017–2018
(Percentages)



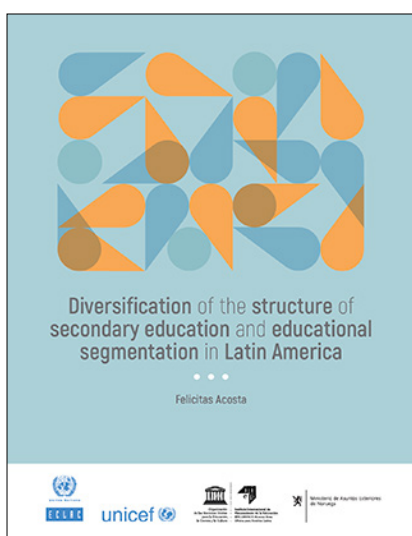
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

The countries sought alternatives to traditional formats in order to expand their institutional offerings at the secondary level and increase access by different socioeconomic groups. However, the differentiation of supply has usually involved processes whereby students are segmented into educational tracks of varying quality and are thus confronted with unequal educational offerings. The classic segmentation mechanisms include the separation between public and private education, rural and urban areas, and baccalaureate and technical curricula. Additionally, recent reforms have given rise to new segmentation mechanisms, such as alternative modalities for completion (such as Telesecundaria in Mexico or the Primary and Secondary Study Termination Plan (FinES) in Argentina), transitional models and other curricular adaptations according to institutional type.

The second stage of the study listened to the voices and experiences of students in the education systems of Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay. Among the highlights of the comparative analysis were the perception that private schools are synonymous with higher quality and standards of care, the appreciation of technical education for the specific competencies and skills with which it equips students, and the fact that alternative circuits generate an education supply that more closely matches the diverse realities of those who attend. At the same time, the students emphasized the importance of family environments and the availability of the education supply when choosing a secondary

school, as well as the implicit costs that complying with compulsory schooling entails (Acosta, 2021). Their narratives from the pandemic revealed inequalities in access to digital resources such as the Internet and computers, inequalities between private, elite public or traditional State offerings, and gaps between rural and urban areas. Among their concerns the students highlighted the difficulty of sustaining distance schooling and the lack of links forged by schools in that context.

Finally, the study identified a number of elements that support educational trajectories and help guarantee the fulfilment of the right to education: inclusion policies such as scholarships, institutional arrangements such as tutoring and recreational activities, and social and emotional ties between staff and students (Acosta, 2021). At the same time, alternative and remedial offerings have been successful in sustaining the trajectories of students from sectors not accepted in regular education. The research project concludes that extending compulsory schooling is necessary but that alone it is not sufficient to guarantee the effective fulfilment of the right to education. In light of the new challenges posed by the pandemic, the region's countries must promote integrated structures within the secondary level and ensure greater cohesion and coordination in State agencies' public policies for adolescents and young people. Increasing educational investment to generate adequate material conditions without distinction between areas or modalities is another imperative for States. Finally, reorganizing the institutional conditions of schooling, facilitating transitions between levels, training secondary school teachers and professionalizing support roles are, among others, necessary policies to effectively fulfil the right to quality education for all students in the region.



Report: *Diversificación de la estructura de la escuela secundaria y segmentación educativa en América Latina* (Acosta, 2021).

- Session recording: available [here](#).

Main ideas from the discussion

Javier González, *Education Research and Innovation Laboratory for Latin America and the Caribbean (SUMMA)*

Juan Pablo Valenzuela, *University of Chile*

Vincenzo Placco, *Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, UNICEF*

Comments on the presentation addressed three main issues. The first was the inclusion of various minority groups and the outstanding debts owed to them. Particular mention was made of the importance of increasing public spending on inclusive social policies and offering differentiated academic tracks at the secondary level in order to guarantee equal and equitable access to education for all children and adolescents. Emphasis was also placed on the challenges facing countries such as Chile as a result of the high level of segregation within their educational systems and the progress they had made in that regard. In this regard, the participants applauded the anti-segregation policies implemented in Chile in recent years, its high secondary school completion rates (85%) and the decrease in grade repetition. Finally, they emphasized the importance of strengthening non-formal education as a vehicle for the fulfilment of the right to education, and of interconnecting it with formal education: millions of young people who were out of school prior to the pandemic were already participating in such programmes. For this reason, the importance of establishing certifications and improving coordination between different institutions was highlighted as a fundamental step towards improving young people's access to the labour market.

Panel III: Educational recovery agenda in the face of the pandemic

Moderator: Claudia Uribe, *Director, OREALC/UNESCO*

Main presentations: “National educational responses to COVID-19”
Alejandro Vera, *OREALC/UNESCO*

“Evolution of school reopenings in Latin America and the Caribbean”
Ruth Custode, *Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, UNICEF*



How did the region's countries respond to the unexpected crisis created by the pandemic? Were their educational systems prepared to adapt to the new reality of distance education? How does the educational response in Latin America compare with other regions? These were some of the main questions explored by the seminar's third panel.

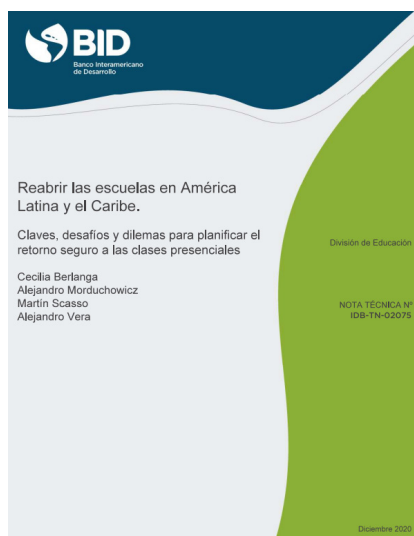
During 2020, virtually every education system in the world closed its schools, at least partially, on account of the pandemic. In that context, Latin America and the Caribbean stands out as the region that kept its schools open for the shortest period of time (an average of 33 weeks). Conditions for the reopening

of schools are far from ideal in the region. In particular, the high average class size (more than 30 students per teacher), the lack of alternative spaces to the classroom and their precarious infrastructure hinder and delay the possibility of a safe return. Similarly, remote learning in the region also faces a number of obstacles. In particular, the population's access to the Internet is very unequal: only 25% of the population in rural areas has Internet access compared to 54% in urban areas, and there is a similar gap between the richest and poorest quintiles in the different countries.

The transition to distance education was abrupt and unplanned, putting the continuation of students' educations at risk. States adopted various measures to mitigate inequalities, such as providing connectivity devices or granting subsidies for their purchase, the creation of virtual platforms and direct economic supports for low-income families. One of the greatest risks associated with the pandemic is the loss of learning, an area where the response of the region's countries has also been deficient. Only 19% of the countries have carried out standardized diagnostic evaluations at the national level, and 8% at the subnational level. The lack of such assessments endangers an understanding of the real dimensions of the pandemic's impact on learning and the capacity of States to adopt informed policies for recovery.

During 2021, the region's situation regarding the opening of schools and conditions for distance education have been very similar to those of 2020. In September 2021, a total of 16 countries still had their education systems partially closed, eight were totally closed and seven were holding regular face-to-face classes. The school closures are estimated to have impacted 141 million children and adolescents over the past two years and, as of September 2021, some 86 million were still without face-to-face classes. Given this situation, the essential tasks include prioritizing the safe return of all children to school, conducting learning assessments as inputs for national planning and extending support to teachers in the challenges ahead.

Report: *Reabrir las escuelas en América Latina y el Caribe: claves, desafíos y dilemas para planificar el retorno seguro a las clases presenciales* (Berlanga and others, 2020).



- Session recording: available [here](#).

Main ideas from the discussion:

Andreas Schleicher, *Director for Education and Skills, OECD*

Francis Jones, *ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean*

Paulina Araneda, *Council Chairperson, Education Quality Assurance Agency, Chile*

First, a detailed examination of the impact of COVID-19 on education was conducted. Among its main points, and in line with the other presentations made at the seminar, it was emphasized that distance education posed the greatest risk of learning loss and dropout for students from the most disadvantaged sectors. In turn, those risks were linked to poorer labour market access for those students, endangering their futures and potentially increasing the violation of their rights. Secondly, the remarks offered focused on the importance of mental health and the consequences of the pandemic for children and adolescents and for teachers and administrators. Emphasis was placed on the need to deploy mental health specialists at schools and to address the emotional needs of the different education system stakeholders. In concluding, it was suggested that thought be given to the crisis as an opportunity to think about what kind of education systems should be rebuilt. Emphasis was thus placed on the possibility of breaking with the pre-existing frameworks in terms of possibilities and on the importance of families, who have played a central role in the continuation of children's education during the pandemic and are key actors to be taken into account when thinking about the future of education.

Panel IV: Skills and competencies needed in a changing context

Moderator: Daniela Trucco, *ECLAC*

Main presentation: “Education, youth and work: skills and competencies needed in a changing context”

Tamara Díaz Fouz, *Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI)*, and María Luisa Marinho, *ECLAC*



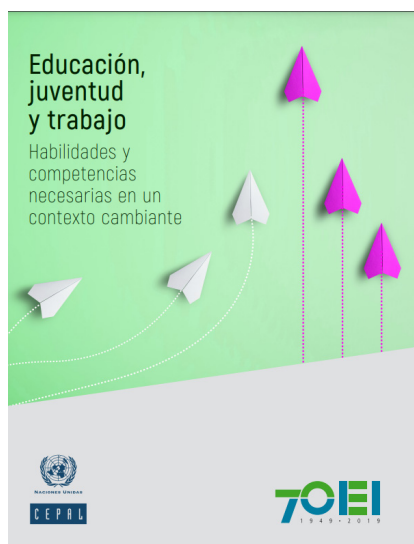
Preparing young people to enter a dynamic and changing labour market is currently one of the greatest challenges facing school systems. In addition to the existing gaps in education access and quality, changes are under way that will affect both the present and the future, with the digital revolution advancing at a much faster rate than the capacity for adaptation that education systems have shown in the past. This context is further complicated by the challenges posed by the pandemic in terms of lost learning, increased inequality gaps and school dropout rates. Tension exists between the demands of the labour market and the skills and learning imparted in schools: on the one hand, the labour market demands soft skills, such as communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, leadership and problem solving; on the other,

curriculum structures and the traditional teaching system are not always in alignment with those skills. In light of that tension, the study presented at this session addressed the following key question: to what extent are education systems providing the skills needed for a successful insertion into the labour market?

First, the study's findings indicate that the Ibero-American countries are making great efforts to orient their education systems towards a competency-based approach that would allow progress toward quality, equitable education for all. This can be seen both in legislative changes and in the adoption of a shared educational agenda aligned with the proposals made by international organizations. Efforts have also been made at the organizational and classroom levels, such as curriculum management, and in the initial and ongoing training of teachers. However, despite the efforts and progress made, a significant gap continues to exist between the discursive or legal spheres and concrete changes within schools and learning as regards the demands of the labour market.

Among the groups most disadvantaged by these inequalities are women, who report the highest levels of informality and unemployment and receive the lowest salaries (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). At the same time, young people (15 to 29 years old) are the age group with the highest levels of informal work and the worst salaries; approximately 20% of them neither have educational qualifications nor are employed in the job market (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). In that context, the automation of work poses a major threat, since these groups generally have fewer specific competencies and skills for successfully entering the labour market.

In closing, it was suggested that it was important to think about the challenges posed by the changing labour market for young people in Ibero-America as well as the need for States to devise responses that anticipate the coming changes. First, automation creates a shift in the skills required by the labour market in favour of soft and non-routine competencies and skills. Second, the sharp economic contraction is having a very significant impact on the region's job market, with the inequality matrix placing certain groups in particularly vulnerable situations during the current crisis. For that reason, training and education policies are necessary throughout the life cycle, to consolidate the adoption of education models that focus on skills and to strengthen the interconnection of educational offerings with the labour market through educational, curricular and evaluation policies.



Report: *Educación, juventud y trabajo: habilidades y competencias necesarias en un contexto cambiante* (ECLAC/OEI, 2020).

- Session recording: available [here](#).

Main ideas from the discussion:

Cristóbal Cobo, *World Bank*

Fabio Senne, *Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br), Brazil*

Cora Steinberg, *UNICEF*

Diana Rodriguez, *ECLAC Division for Gender Affairs*

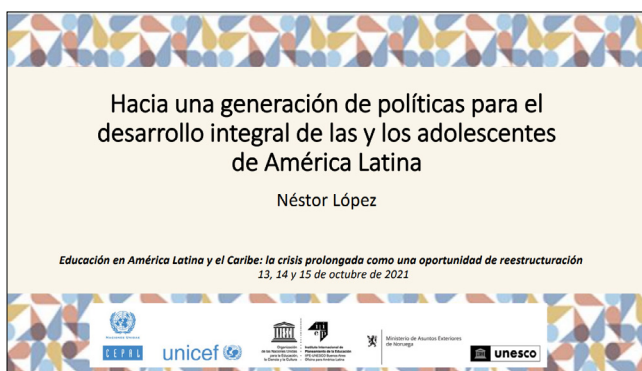
The comments on the presentation highlighted the risk of making education an instrument in pursuit of the demands of the labour market. At the same time, although the automation of work is a fact, the real dimension and speed of the phenomenon was questioned, and it was proposed that focusing on generating a high capacity to adapt to the future would be better than trying to predict it. In addition, the issues of the skills demanded by the labour market was raised again, as indicated by the student opinions reported in the UNICEF study. The report reveals that the students themselves maintain that the soft skills required by the job market are not taught at school, which leads to tension between the objectives of public policies and the weaknesses of design and implementation, mainly when these arise in a fragmented manner. Finally, the participants discussed gender inequalities in labour market access, pointing out how women are particularly disadvantaged in comparison to men. Regarding this point, the inequalities in access to technology and to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies were highlighted, as were violence and abuse in online spaces, and the meeting stressed the need for active policies to break those dynamics.

Panel V: Education, comprehensive social protection and the pandemic

Main presentation: "Towards generating policies for the comprehensive development of adolescents in Latin America"

Alejandra Trossero, *UNICEF*

Néstor López, *consultant*



What is it to be young or adolescent, and what are its implications in the present times? Adolescence and youth are two stages of life that connect childhood to adulthood and, as such, they are a construct of modernity, arising in particular as a result of State actions to define public policies for this age group. Determining the onset of adolescence is the relatively simpler task, since it occurs at the same time as the development of a person's reproductive capacity. Identifying the onset of youth, however, is somewhat more difficult, mainly due to its strong cultural component. One possibility is to see both as elements on a continuum, at one end of which the person is dependent on his or her family and primary community (childhood) and, at the other, autonomy, the formation of a nuclear family of his or her own and economic independence (adulthood). From a demographic standpoint, adolescence ranges from 10 to 19 years of age, while youth ranges from the ages of 15 to 29. The blurred boundary between the two stages

—if indeed there is one— poses challenges for social policies, such as being sensitive and specific to each stage of life and providing resources to protect the adequate socioemotional and economic development of people as they move towards the future.

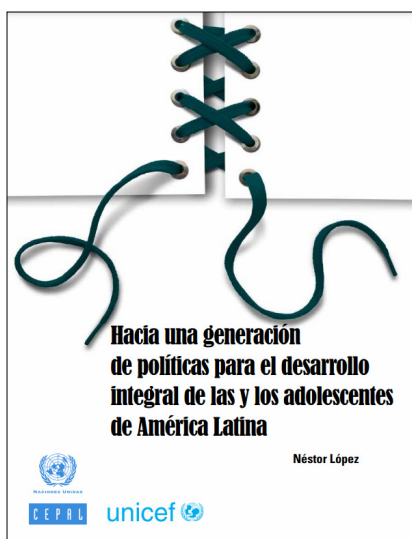
The international political and regulatory agenda on adolescence³ is composed of three axes. The first involves encouraging the full and comprehensive development of all adolescents through universal, quality education and access to health services and cultural and social goods. The second entails access to universal, comprehensive social protection systems that provide adolescents and their families with a decent base level of well-being. The final element is the elimination of all forms of violence or abuse, as well as the full enforcement of the principle of non-discrimination.

Being an adolescent in Latin America, however, is marked by poverty and a number of inequalities in access to protection systems. First, adolescents face such forms of violence as harassment, physical and psychological attacks, labour and sexual exploitation or trafficking, as well as discrimination based on ethnicity or gender. Second, access to health and education is also very unequal, within both the public and private systems. In particular, although access to secondary education among the region's adolescents and youth reported a notable improvement between 2002 and 2018, the region's average enrolment rate is 67%. Added to this, over the 2014–2018 period, there was a sharp deceleration in secondary school completion rates compared to the previous period (2002–2014), when they fell from 6.9% per year to 2.5%. This deceleration underscores the need to redouble efforts, which is even more necessary on account the pandemic crisis.

In addition to the above, social policies targeting the region's adolescents are organized around five critical obstacles: (i) adolescents and young people are perceived as a source of problems, (ii) the existence of a sectoral vision of policies for adolescents and youth, (iii) the adult-centric basis of State action, (iv) the persistence of practices based on the denial of identity, and (v) the fantasy of the “bubble effect”, whereby adolescence is seen as a separate stage demarcated from the rest of adult life, instead of including it in a more comprehensive approach to redistributive actions aimed at guaranteeing social rights throughout life.

Comprehensive protection systems for adolescents involve multiple dimensions, and common bases must therefore be established for an effective strategy that can consolidate those systems. The range of State interventions must be structured around two major objectives: (i) ensuring the resources necessary for the full and comprehensive development of all adolescents, focusing on health, education, recreation, culture and participation, and (ii) guaranteeing that adolescents are protected from exposure to material deprivation that could threaten their well-being and hinder their development, ensuring their protection against all forms of violence and discrimination. A short-term agenda is needed to begin the consolidation of the systems for the comprehensive protection of the rights of adolescents through two major strategies. The first of these is to stimulate a climate of debate and awareness that will enable the repositioning of the place of adolescents on the public agenda and make progress towards a policy agenda that is agreed upon and legitimized by society. The second is to promote venues for research and the production of knowledge to allow an advanced understanding of how the policies that affect the quality of life of adolescents in our countries actually function. These lessons would serve as input for public deliberation, thus consolidating an informed and democratic debate.

³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948; the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of 1966; the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989; the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) of the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth.



Report: *Hacia una generación de políticas para el desarrollo integral de las y los adolescentes de América Latina* (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2021).

- Session recording: available [here](#).

Main ideas from the discussion:

Mercedes Mateo, *Chief of Education, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)*

Daniel Titelman, *Chief, Economic Development Division of ECLAC*

Cecilia Rossel, *Catholic University of Uruguay*

In the comments that followed, an urgent call was made for attention to be paid to the gravity of the education crisis in the region and the dramatic consequences for future human development in the region if quick and effective action is not taken. The main focus was around avoiding a “lost generation” due to COVID-19 and, to this end, it was proposed that two moments in the life cycle be emphasized: early childhood and adolescence. The crisis demanded immediate action, particularly the motivation of students and active policies to address the inequalities that predated the pandemic and aimed at the reinsertion of those young people who had dropped out of school in the last two years. It was also stressed that States’ structural efforts must be accompanied by increased funding for policies to specifically address the transition from the education system to the labour market. In this regard, the informal labour market was noted as one of the region’s major scourges, and that fiscal incentives and active public policies from States were needed to encourage incorporation into the formal labour market, primarily by young people. Finally, specific mention was made of the vulnerability faced by adolescents in the region, and it was noted that conditional income transfer policies—which have enjoyed practically universal adoption—have proven to be relatively effective in strengthening access to basic protection services (health, education and culture). In turn, the participants considered that these policies were of a provisional nature—seen as a bridge, for example, to formal employment—and they emphasized the need for States to guarantee full access to basic services to enable the full development of the region’s young people.

Concluding remarks: interconnecting education policy with other social policies and the opportunity to rethink education

Alberto Arenas de Mesa⁴

These three days of dialogue and reflection have provided an opportunity to discuss several of the education-related issues that require urgent action to address this prolonged and silent crisis, which has had a profound impact on the well-being of children, adolescents and youth in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Yesterday, ECLAC released a COVID-19 Report that states we are amidst a prolonged health crisis, and no longer an emergency situation as was said in 2020. Although 2021 has seen signs of economic recovery in many of the region's countries, the social crisis persists and it will be difficult to recover from its impact on poverty, inequality, unemployment, informal employment and education. The pandemic has had a major impact on education and the risk of losing an entire generation must be urgently addressed.

In that context, controlling the health crisis is critical. In the short term, to effectively control the health crisis, comprehensive policies that cover health, education, the economy and social protection are needed. In the medium term, we must take advantage of the historic opportunity provided by the pandemic to rethink and restructure education systems and thus move towards resilient and inclusive systems that offer quality education solutions. This must, of course, be accompanied by strategies to ensure the sector's financial sustainability.

This crisis offers an unprecedented opportunity to transform education systems to increase their resilience and rebuild inclusive, quality educational systems that further the collective commitment to the 2030 Agenda. The challenges are undeniably enormous and not all of them have been addressed over these days, given this event's concentration on educational offerings at the school level. There will be other occasions to reflect on the opportunities and challenges to be addressed in early childhood education and higher education.

⁴ Chief, Social Development Division of ECLAC.

Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions in the world where face-to-face classes have been interrupted for the longest: an average of almost 48 weeks, or more than one school year. As discussed at this regional seminar on social development, this has undoubtedly impacted educational content and learning.

School closures and distancing and care measures forced States and centres of learning to undertake a rapid transition to distance education, in the absence—in the vast majority of cases—of the conditions necessary to do so. Making the adjustments required taking account of the characteristics of national and subnational curricula, the countries' resources and capacities for creating distance education processes, the levels of segregation and educational inequality in the countries and the timing of the school year.

The education authorities present on the first day of this regional seminar highlighted the efforts made at the national level to restore face-to-face classes within different educational levels, along with the efforts related to prioritizing and recovering learning and students' socioemotional well-being. There was agreement on the importance of building on the innovations and progress made during the pandemic: in other words, on the impossibility of returning to education as we knew it.

The authorities also stressed the importance of timely information systems to reveal more about the innovations that worked and those that did not in different contexts, as well as to identify the different needs of students, particularly those most at risk of dropping out of school.

Inequality has been evidenced and exacerbated by the pandemic: policy options designed for education at the current juncture must recognize the historical debts towards those groups to guarantee their right to education, in terms of both the availability and access to learning opportunities and in the provision of quality education that is relevant and adapted to their conditions, needs and aspirations.

ECLAC has emphasized the importance of continuing to make progress in the coverage and quality of secondary education as the minimum floor to guarantee social and economic inclusion.

The session "Adolescents and young people during the pandemic: inclusive secondary schools" detailed several of the elements that appear to act as barriers or obstacles and that can result in segmented trajectories in secondary education: selection mechanisms such as entrance or graduation exams, mismatches between primary and secondary school and among sections of the latter, and the irrelevance of pedagogical and organizational proposals.

Even though secondary education in the region has been expanding in recent decades, the session highlighted the need to accelerate the speed of expansion processes but, at the same time, to prevent the diversification of educational offerings from reproducing the dynamics of segregation and inequality. In other words, there is a need to recognize, appreciate and build on the diversity and different needs of students, but without compromising the quality and relevance of the education provided.

Among the issues discussed, for example, was the need to strengthen non-formal education and improve its interconnections with formal systems, so that learning alternatives adapted to their particular needs are available to all children, adolescents and young people.

The experience of the past year shows that distance education programmes—online and by radio or television—have their limits and have exacerbated the structural educational gaps that already existed in the region prior to the pandemic, increasing the risks of school dropout and learning delays. Not all distance education can be implemented digitally or using the Internet, because of the significant proportion of the population that does not have access.

The session titled "Educational recovery agenda in the face of the pandemic" highlighted the difficulties that the region has faced in reopening its schools due to certain structural conditions, such as the infrastructure deficits that affect many of its educational facilities and prevent the safe return of its students, especially at schools in rural areas.

It was noted that the pre-primary level had remained closed for the longest period of time, and the importance of taking steps to achieve the full reopening of those schools was stressed. In addition, the meeting saw data from 2020 indicating that even in situations where schools were reopened, not all students returned to their classrooms; this highlights the importance of implementing better follow-up and monitoring systems and of taking steps to reach all children, adolescents and young people.

The regional seminar on social development underscored the imperative of rethinking education and training, prioritizing the need for students to be prepared to understand, live together and act in times of crisis and uncertainty, making decisions at the individual and family level and promoting collective solutions to urgent challenges that contribute to rethinking and structurally transforming the world.

Some countries have designed curricular prioritization proposals that include a reduced set of essential learnings in the different disciplines, moving from curricular prioritization to the current curriculum and modularizing content by level, from the essential to new learnings associated with integrated or significant objectives that can be interconnected across subjects.

Participants at the session “Skills and competencies needed in a changing context” said that part of the uncertainty we face is a consequence of the impact of the digital revolution and the fourth industrial revolution, which are evolving at an unsuspected speed and magnitude. This impact translates into major changes in terms of the skills required and the disappearance and creation of jobs.

Thus, the impact of the digital revolution will depend on how well prepared people and countries are to take advantage of the opportunities that new technologies offer. Compounding the challenges that the region must face are the consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on economies and job markets. It is therefore essential that training and education policies throughout the life cycle are in place. The highly dynamic current context demands that both young people and adults have the opportunity to acquire new skills to complement those they already have.

Despite having, on average, more years of schooling than older generations, young people face higher unemployment rates and their participation in labour markets is frequently marked by segmentation, precariousness and informality. All this makes it difficult for them to develop and consolidate their skills in the job market. As discussed, we must develop in the present the ability to adapt to the changes of the future, and that involves not only the development of digital skills, but also the development of basic and fundamental knowledge and socioemotional competencies. These efforts must involve interconnected actions both within the State and between the State and other actors, such as industry, in order to leave no one behind. As ECLAC Executive Secretary Alicia Bárcena said at the inauguration of this seminar, education is not resolved only through education, but in a comprehensive manner.

One particular situation to be addressed is the risk of educational disengagement and school dropout among the most vulnerable groups as a result of the effects of the prolonged health, social and economic crisis. In the short term, it is necessary to promote the continued involvement of the children and adolescents who are most likely to drop out of school and to exhaust all possible options to encourage them to continue learning. In the medium term, mechanisms must be created to ensure that there is no negative impact on the education experience or advancement of students who have not been able to continue learning during this period. This entails adopting measures such as eliminating repetition and establishing flexible schemes for curricular continuity together with support strategies for the recovery and acceleration of learning. These pedagogical measures should be complemented by socioemotional and social and financial security measures for students and their families.

Coordination with other policies for protecting and upholding children’s rights and social protection for families with dependent children are essential to better reach vulnerable families, as discussed during the session “Education, comprehensive social protection and the pandemic”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a particular impact on children, adolescents and young people belonging to populations that have historically endured situations of greater vulnerability, such as rural, indigenous and Afrodescendent populations, migrants, women and people with disabilities. The current crisis is therefore expected to widen the already existing gaps in the development of the region's children, adolescents and youth.

Mothers, fathers and caregivers have also had to deal with an unusual workload and scarce resources to support their children in educational tasks, without access to pedagogical and digital tools. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of caregiving tasks for the sustainability of life, as well as their unfair distribution to the detriment of women, on whom most of these tasks fall, and whose duties now also include efforts to ensure the continuity of their children's studies.

Currently, due to both the structural social and economic problems and the pandemic, the region is experiencing a marked deterioration in its living standards, which can be seen in increasing unemployment, poverty and inequalities. These objective indicators have their correlations in subjective expressions of both individual and collective unrest. The social and economic impact of the pandemic threatens to deepen this malaise, at a time when transforming the dominant development model and consolidating a new shared project is more urgent than ever.

The role of the State has expanded in the shadow of a crisis that was initially seen as a temporary, wide-ranging emergency but that has turned into a prolonged crisis: one that can no longer be addressed through temporary interventions or mechanisms, but rather is expanding the challenge of adapting and strengthening the State's medium- and long-term capacities to implement permanent policies and instruments designed in accordance with a structural approach.

Education is a fundamental element in national development. To invest in education is to invest in people; it is to invest in the most basic asset that the region's countries have to undertake such tasks as confronting inequality and achieving higher levels of development.

In that context, major efforts must be made to place education at the centre of the debate on public policies for confronting the pandemic and, consequently, it is critical to build a narrative that reaches not only those of us who are convinced but, most particularly, those responsible for public policy decisions and that allows for the consolidation, among other factors, of the financial sustainability that education systems require to confront this silent crisis and the impacts of the pandemic.

In this debate, ECLAC has suggested that the pandemic provides us with an opportunity to progressively build true welfare states, which requires forging social compacts that must be accompanied by new fiscal pacts, as well as rethinking the role of the State in the face of the challenges of inequality, sustainability, low productivity, technological shifts and climate change, and advancing towards universal, comprehensive and sustainable social protection systems. The restructuring of the region's education systems has to be interconnected with this broader debate, since education is a central axis for development, equality and participation in society, and for ensuring that no one is left behind.

- **Concluding remarks:** available [here](#).

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