

Improving education is crucial for inclusive and sustainable economic and social development

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Abstract

Education is fundamental to the achievement of inclusive and sustainable economic and social development and more just and cohesive societies. Despite having made considerable strides in terms of education access, progression and completion, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean face a dual challenge: accelerating progress and reducing gaps in education coverage and completion rates while improving the quality and relevance of education. Gains in access to education and to technical and vocational training have failed to translate into the skills that students need to adapt to lifelong learning and retraining processes and find their place in a changing world pervaded by technology. Prolonged school closures during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic exacerbated these challenges. For education to recover, a profound transformation is required, one that ensures financial sustainability and strengthens the region's institutional frameworks.

Keywords

Education, social development, economic development, basic education, secondary education, educational policy, equality, educational development, ECLAC, recommendations, Latin America and the Caribbean

JEL classification

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I. Introduction

Education is a human right and a key asset, both for economic and social development at the country level and for building more equitable, inclusive and cohesive societies. From a macroeconomic perspective, to invest in education is to invest in the greatest asset that countries have in their pursuit of inclusive and sustainable economic and social development. From a microeconomic perspective, a more educated populace is key in increasing innovation and productivity among workers and firms alike. In terms of social development, education is a right and a central pillar of social and labour inclusion. It facilitates social mobility, improves income generation, contributes to the reduction of poverty and inequality, and supports the exercise of citizenship.

Education was recognized as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 (article 26), and has since been ratified as such in several international treaties. In 2015, the States Members of the United Nations committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education is a key factor in countries' economic and social development and a driver of progress towards the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 (ECLAC, 2022).

Indeed, education has a direct bearing on opportunities to gain access to better social, economic, labour and cultural conditions. Progress in this field is associated with reduced poverty and inequality, access to decent work and improved health indicators, as well as upward social mobility and the full exercise of citizenship. Meanwhile, a population that has not acquired the right set of skills has implications for productivity and social and labour inclusion, significantly hindering countries' development, among other things. Given the direct relationship between a person's education and their present and future opportunities to improve their social, economic, labour and cultural conditions, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has highlighted education as one of the most critical areas to be addressed to reduce inequality and advance towards inclusive and sustainable economic and social development.

ECLAC has long studied education in Latin America and the Caribbean from the perspective of inequality, considering it a critical component of inclusive social development in the region. The studies have focused on school education (primary and secondary) and vocational training for young people transitioning from school to work. In the early 1990s, ECLAC and UNESCO published a book on education and knowledge as basic pillars for changing production patterns with social equity (ECLAC/UNESCO, 1992), containing policy guidelines and institutional proposals to encourage systemic connections among education, knowledge and development. Throughout that decade and into the next, ECLAC continued to analyse the challenges related to equity and reducing education gaps (Cohen, 1995) and the contribution of education as a critical link in reconciling growth with equity and participation in the societies of the future (Hopenhayn and Ottone, 2000). In the early 2000s, ECLAC was already highlighting the emerging importance of new information and communications technology, both in knowledge transmission and in countries' productivity and competitiveness, and the challenges that such technology posed for education systems (Hopenhayn, 2003; Sunkel, 2006; Sunkel and Trucco, 2010; Sunkel, Trucco and Espejo, 2014).

ECLAC has been an advocate for statistical monitoring of education gaps in relation to international goals and agreements in the region, namely the Millennium Development Goals (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2006), the Education for All movement, the Educational Goals for 2021 (ECLAC/OEI, 2010a and 2010b) and the SDGs (UNESCO/ECLAC/UNICEF, 2022), and has furthered its analysis of the structural inequalities that affect different populations (e.g. gender-diverse communities, Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, persons with disabilities and migrants) (Rico and Trucco, 2014; Trucco, 2014; ECLAC, 2016).

Education was the thematic focus of the *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2010*, and the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* (ECLAC, 2011 and 2022). It was also a central analytical focus of a document presented at the thirty-seventh session of ECLAC, entitled *The Inefficiency of Inequality* (ECLAC, 2018), which concluded that unequal access to education reduces skills and opportunities, thereby compromising innovation and stifling productivity.

ECLAC has repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen education, ensure access to quality services and view territorial inequalities and needs as central challenges to be addressed throughout the life cycle, beginning in early childhood. In that regard, ECLAC has proposed the mainstreaming of a gender perspective and of an intercultural and diversity perspective in education. This would support education systems that foster inclusion, highlight the valuable contribution of the knowledge and cultural development of diverse groups and populations, and strengthen opportunities for decent work and countries' productive development.

The next section of this article contains a brief regional overview of education in recent decades. It also presents the main indicators for school access and completion and for learning outcomes, including inequality gaps. The article concludes with a review of the main educational policy opportunities to address the challenges of educational transformation in the region.

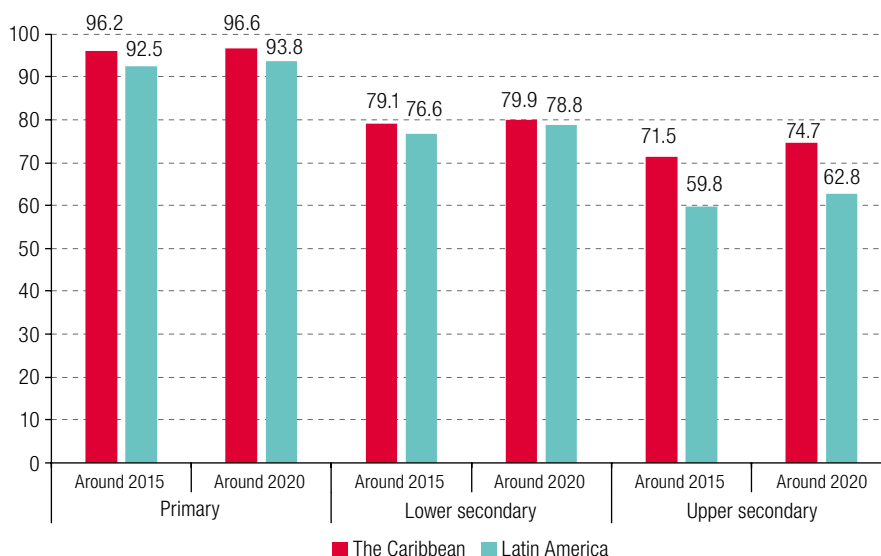
II. State of education in Latin America and the Caribbean

Over the past two decades, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have made considerable strides in school education in terms of access, progression and completion, for example by broadening compulsory education to include the pre-primary and secondary levels, and by implementing active policies to further expand it and to include groups that have historically been excluded. The majority of countries in the region achieved near-universal completion rates (93.3%) in primary education in 2020. However, progress in the completion of secondary education has been more mixed, with completion rates of 79.1% in lower secondary school and 63.7% in upper secondary school (UNESCO/ECLAC/UNICEF, 2022).² Access remains a significant challenge from the upper secondary level, in particular in the Latin American countries (less so in the Caribbean countries) (see figure 1). Access has improved in recent years in pre-primary education and higher education, but mostly to the benefit of students in the middle and higher income strata and those in urban environments.

However, progress has slowed in recent years. Inclusion and the reduction of inequality were major challenges for the region prior to the pandemic. Intractable exclusionary obstacles persist, and education trajectories continue to vary significantly according to income level, gender, territory and ethnicity or race, among other variables that form the region's structural social inequality matrix (ECLAC, 2016). Figure 2, which shows progress between 2000 and 2021 in the percentage of the population completing each education level, by top and bottom income quintiles, illustrates the increase in the percentage of the population completing compulsory education. Although the gap between the top and bottom quintiles has shrunk over time, it remains expansive at the upper secondary level and, owing to the crisis that struck the education system during the pandemic years, is at risk of increasing.

² Access rates for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education refer to simple averages for 25 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Figure 1
Latin America (18 countries)^a and the Caribbean (7 countries):^b completion rates in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, around 2015 and 2020 (Percentages)

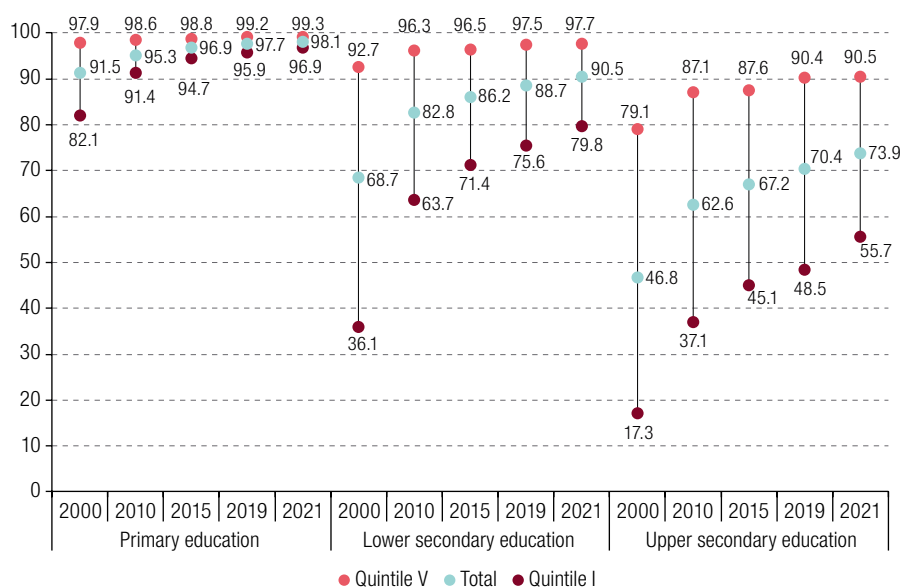


Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/United Nations Children's Fund/Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO/ UNICEF/ECLAC) (2022), *Education in Latin America at a crossroads. Regional monitoring report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

^a Simple average for: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

^b Simple average for: Barbados, Guyana, Haiti (excluding primary), Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Figure 2
Latin America (14 countries):^a completion rates in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary^b education, by top and bottom income quintiles, 2000, 2010, 2015, 2019 and 2021 (Percentages)



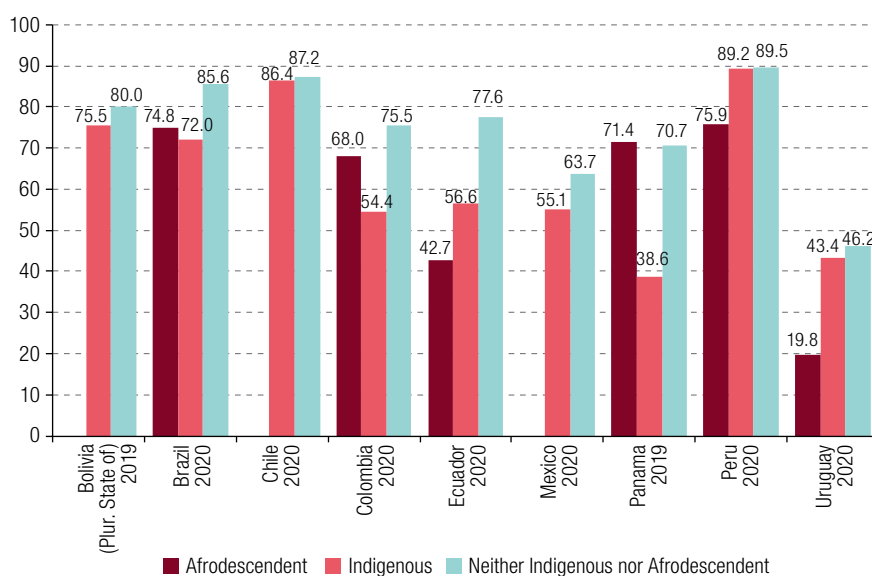
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

^a Weighted average for: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

^b Takes into account completion of primary education among young people aged 15–19 and lower and upper secondary education among young people aged 20–24.

In upper secondary education, access, progression and, in particular, completion have continued to improve, but progress has been insufficient and uneven. Broadening regulatory frameworks is a necessary step in achieving universal secondary education —as many countries have done in recent decades— but it is not sufficient in and of itself (Acosta, 2022). The gaps in upper secondary completion rates expose and perpetuate inequalities related to gender, area of residence, ethnic or racial background and migration status, all of which are considered axes of the region’s social inequality matrix. These dimensions combine and intersect to create critical bottlenecks, which block educational pathways and hinder progress in social and labour inclusion and in the reduction of poverty and inequalities (ECLAC, 2022 and 2016). Figure 3 shows ethnicity and race gaps in completion rates among young people aged 20–24. Upper secondary completion rates constitute a major challenge for Ecuador and Uruguay, in particular, where Afrodescendent young people are most disadvantaged by inequality, and for Panama, where the same is true for Indigenous young people.

Figure 3
Latin America (9 countries): young people aged 20–24 who completed upper secondary education, by ethnicity and race, around 2020
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America 2022* (LC/PUB.2022/15-P), Santiago, 2022 and on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

Sustainable Development Goal target 4.2 is to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education by 2030. In that regard, children should have access to at least one year of compulsory pre-primary education. Mexico has prescribed the earliest age of compulsory education in the region (age 3), compared to age 4 or 5 in other countries. Compulsory education in early childhood is less common in the Caribbean countries. Despite progress in recent years, more than half of children under the age of 5 have never been enrolled in educational development programmes or pre-primary education (UNESCO/ECLAC/UNICEF, 2022). Pre-primary education attendance varies greatly according to age, with higher rates observed in the older groups. Higher attendance rates are also seen in the top socioeconomic bracket of the urban population.

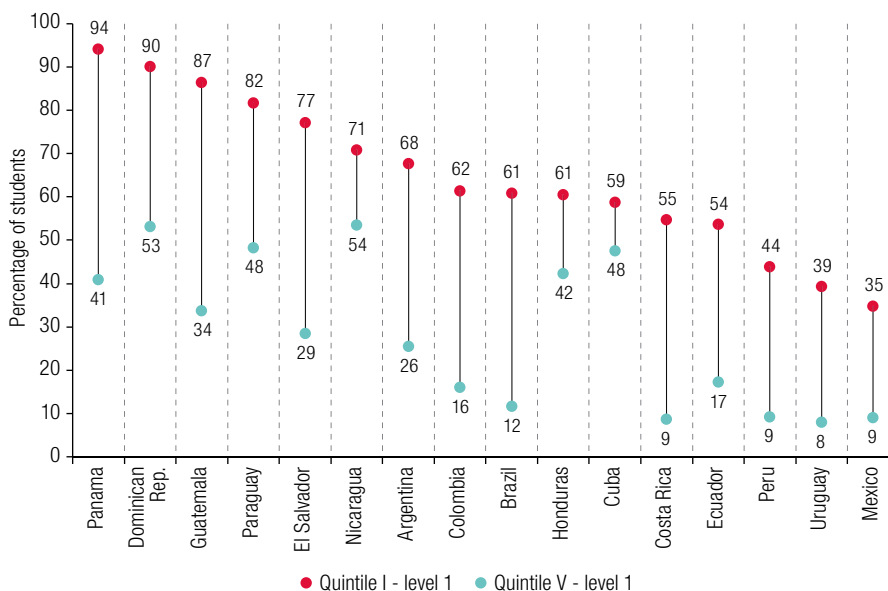
This inequality is reflected and reproduced in education systems partly because the expansion in access has been based on diversifying the education supply, which has led to greater segmentation among students in terms of academic achievement and education quality (Acosta, 2022). Thus, the region faces an education quality deficit, with standardized tests showing that learning outcomes have been stuck at

concerningly low levels since before the COVID-19 pandemic. The protracted disruption of in-person learning could leave a lasting scar on current generations of students (Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022; ECLAC, 2022).

In 2019, the Fourth Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE) was conducted by the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE).³ The results showed that, on average, approximately half of students in the third grade in participating countries achieved minimum levels of proficiency in reading and mathematics (54.6% and 50.9%, respectively), while the percentages for sixth grade students were even lower (31.3% and 17.2%, respectively). However, those averages belied considerable variation both among and within countries. In 13 of the 16 countries that participated in the study, over 50% of low-income students performed at the lowest level, and in many cases that percentage was significantly higher. Among the participating countries, the proportion of low-income students (first quintile) at the lowest proficiency level was up to six times greater than the proportion of high-income students (fifth quintile) at the same proficiency level (see figure 4).

Figure 4

Latin America (16 countries): proportion of students at the lowest proficiency level (1), by income level (first and fifth quintiles), according to ERCE 2019 (Percentages)



Source: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (2021), *Los aprendizajes fundamentales en América Latina y el Caribe: evaluación de logros de los estudiantes. Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (ERCE 2019). Resumen ejecutivo*, Paris.

Note: The countries are ordered from the highest to the lowest percentage of students in the first quintile at the lowest proficiency level.

According to a UNESCO analysis (2021) of the factors that explain the differences in learning outcomes reflected in ERCE 2019, the socioeconomic level of schools had the greatest impact, even after controlling for students' socioeconomic level. This demonstrates the effect of the region's high levels of social segregation on learning outcomes. Whether a school is in a rural or urban environment and whether it is publicly or privately administered are also factors that correlate with both the school's socioeconomic level and that of its students. In that regard, there is a significant results gap that places urban schools ahead of rural and peri-urban schools. Learning outcomes and adaptation

³ The Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education comprises a network of education quality assessment systems in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is coordinated by the UNESCO Office in Santiago de Chile (OREALC).

to the pandemic also differ between private and public schools (Acosta, 2022). There is significant room for the region to improve by implementing educational policies that create more opportunities for students at disadvantaged schools.

With regard to secondary school, the results of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), showed that on average half of students aged 15 in the participating countries in the region performed at the minimum level in reading. That proportion was slightly less than half in sciences, and one third in mathematics.⁴ According to the results of the same assessment in 2022, three out of four students in the region did not achieve basic skills in mathematics, compared to 31% of students in OECD countries. The percentage of students who performed poorly in mathematics increased in almost all countries in the region between 2018 and 2022. These results have remained relatively consistent since the mid-2010s, with only minor variations. In addition to differences in learning outcomes for basic cognitive skills between the region's students and those in OECD countries, there are significant differences within countries, in particular between the most and least advantaged students (ECLAC, 2022; Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022).

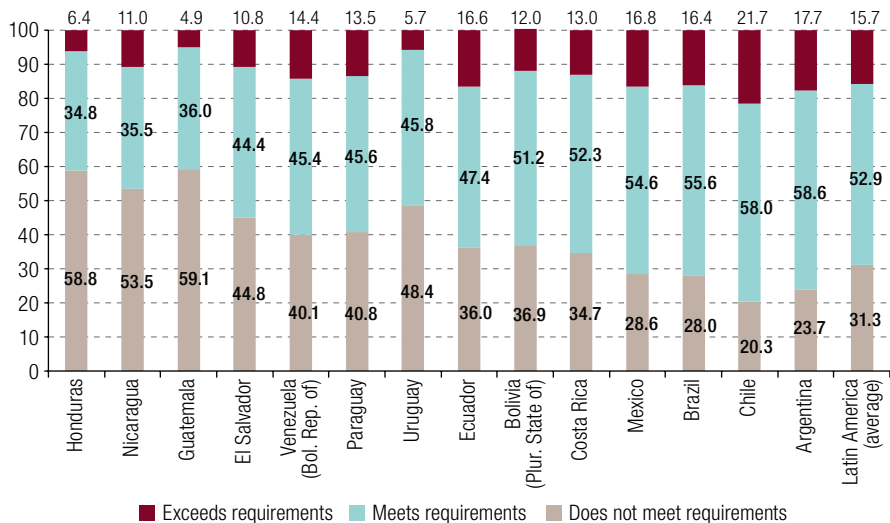
In recent decades, emphasis has been placed on expanding access to education for girls, young women and women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Progress in secondary and higher education has been extensive; indeed, the completion rate for women in secondary and higher education has surpassed the rate for men. However, gender gaps persist in learning outcomes for basic cognitive skills, and education bias and career bias remain. In general, girls significantly outperform boys in reading and writing, while boys outperform girls in mathematics. In the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which are increasingly sought-after disciplines in the labour market, girls and young women are underrepresented. Fewer women than men are choosing to pursue STEM disciplines, and retention rates among those women who do, are lower than the rates of their male counterparts, and lower still at higher levels (ECLAC, 2022).

Standardized test results show that the region's learning crisis, which predates the pandemic, will likely be exacerbated by the two years or more of interrupted in-person learning due to COVID-19. Fewer than half of workers in the region have the level of education required by their occupation as defined by the International Standard Classification of Occupations, although there is significant variation among countries, according to the analysis of Gontero and Novella (2021). In Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala, the majority of workers do not meet the minimum education requirement of their occupation, while in Uruguay and El Salvador, that proportion is nearly half (48.4% and 44.8%, respectively). In Chile, meanwhile, one in five workers has a level of education that either overqualifies or underqualifies them for their position (see figure 5). This illustrates the relevance problem facing the region's education systems: the skills taught in schools and the skills that are valued and sought after in the labour market are out of sync, and there is a disconnect between the interests and expectations of new generations.

Improved access to education has not translated into a population equipped with the necessary skills to reap the benefits of development and propel the region forward in the transformation of its productive structure to achieve sustainable development. The quality and relevance of education must be examined, with a focus on the skills and capacities that will equip students to take advantage of lifelong learning and retraining opportunities and find their place in an evolving and technologically dependent world (ECLAC/OEI, 2020). Because access to educational opportunities is unequal, the linking of education and work perpetuates and amplifies social inequality. Moreover, it ensures the continuation of intergenerational inequality throughout the life cycle. Education that is segmented according to socioeconomic status and level of education of students' households maintains existing gaps in access to decent work and well-being.

⁴ For Latin America, this figure refers to simple averages from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay.

Figure 5
Latin America (14 countries): proportion of workers whose level of education does not meet, meets or exceeds required qualifications, around 2019
(Percentages)



Source: S. Gontero and R. Novella (2021), "El futuro del trabajo y los desajustes de habilidades en América Latina", *Project Documents* (LC/TS.2021/206), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2021.

Short technical and vocational education and training programmes (TVET) fulfil a fundamental role in reinforcing coordination between the education sector and countries' labour market and productive development opportunities. They also strengthen inclusion and the school-to-work transition. TVET is an essential part of the education supply at the secondary and higher levels in Latin America and the Caribbean, but its structure is far from uniform. In the countries of Latin America, the prevailing structure is segmented, with parallel academic and general education pipelines. In the English-speaking Caribbean countries, TVET tends to take the form of electives open to all secondary school students, which creates a system better suited to the current need for education trajectories that can accommodate multiple lifelong learning opportunities. Although the cross-cutting intention of secondary-level TVET in the region is to prepare students for all manner of higher education opportunities, it is generally recognized that students from such programmes have general education deficiencies that cannot be corrected at the higher learning stage. If this situation is not rectified, efforts to create TVET bridges between secondary and higher education will be fruitless (Sevilla, 2017).

Aligning TVET programmes with the needs of productive sectors presents considerable challenges. The majority of such programmes in the region have not built solid relationships with firms and employers, which limits students' access to on-the-job training opportunities; nor do TVET programmes encourage employers to systematically participate in designing their curriculum. Only a small fraction of students complement the education that they receive in school or other institutions with practical experience in firms, which constitutes a significant shortcoming in efforts to strengthen the transition from education to decent work (Sevilla, 2017). In addition, skills certification processes are not well developed, despite their critical role in creating training pathways to accommodate the multiple routes that new generations are taking to learn throughout the life cycle (which can include self-directed learning and does not necessarily include training in formal institutions or jobs).

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, gaps in learning outcomes and educational attainment (i.e. access, progression and completion) are at risk of widening. Of all the regions, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced the longest period of partial and total school closures (70 school weeks

between February 2020 and March 2022). Owing to a lack of material and non-material resources, many students became disengaged from teaching and learning processes during school closures, and the lack of socialization opportunities led to diminished development of cognitive, social and emotional skills. The impacts of the pandemic, which are already in evidence, include greater risk of school dropout, learning delays, social conflicts, and problems related to the social and emotional well-being and mental health of children and adolescents (ECLAC, 2022; Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022).

During the pandemic, the region's education systems implemented innovative remote education methods through the use of analog and digital technology. Nevertheless, there were significant challenges in ensuring the continuity of education, in particular the lack of effective connectivity in households and other necessary material and non-material learning resources (e.g. suitable spaces for study and for active caregiver support, respectively), as well as the lack of digital skills among the various stakeholders of the education community (teachers, caregivers and students).

Lastly, even in the countries of the region that have prioritized public spending on education in recent decades, this effort has been insufficient to achieve the targets of Goal 4 by 2030, and the pandemic has only made matters worse in that regard. On average, Latin America and the Caribbean meets the minimum benchmarks of allocating at least 4%–6% of GDP and at least 15%–20% of total public expenditure to education, in accordance with the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, at the country level, performance is mixed. For example, of the 16 countries for which data are available up to 2019, 7 have not met either benchmark. Moreover, analysis shows that public expenditure on education per student in the region is much lower than in more advanced economies. In 2019, the OECD countries spent on average four times more than Latin America on pre-primary, primary and secondary education and over five times more on tertiary education (with gaps ranging from US\$ 5,000 per student enrolled in pre-primary education and nearly US\$ 9,000 per student in tertiary education).⁵ These spending gaps are even more significant when taking into account the fact that the education challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean are greater and more profound than in the other group. Moreover, the region's education systems face considerable difficulties regarding efficiency and equity, indicating that there is an opportunity to improve education outcomes by reallocating inputs (Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022).

III. Opportunities to strengthen the region's educational policy agenda

As stated in the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* (ECLAC, 2022), the educational attainments of previous decades in Latin America and the Caribbean had already begun to erode in the years prior to the pandemic, and the region was facing a learning crisis and intractable exclusionary barriers that were difficult to overcome and that hampered the achievement of the Goal 4 targets by 2030. The pandemic intensified these challenges but also created an opportunity to innovate and to transform education in the region. This transformative impetus must be harnessed, and education and technical training need to be prioritized in regional agendas and policies to make progress on the SDGs. To invest in education is to invest in the most valuable asset that countries and their citizens have, and in the prosperity of society itself. It constitutes an essential contribution to inclusive, sustainable and equitable social development (ECLAC, 2022).

Efforts to reduce inequality and foster inclusive access to training and education are more important than ever. Groups who are in the most vulnerable and marginalized positions, such as Indigenous Peoples, Afrodescendants, refugees and migrants, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities,

⁵ Simple average for 7 Latin American countries, 7 Caribbean countries and 32 OECD countries.

persons with disabilities and sexually and gender-diverse communities, must be prioritized. Early warning systems should be developed or strengthened, leveraging digital technology to prevent school dropout and monitor the most at-risk student populations. To that end, it is imperative that resources and services for school, psychopedagogical and psychosocial support be equitably distributed among schools, classes and students at risk (Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022).

With regard to school education, the recommendations of ECLAC are principally focused on universal education access and completion. This can be achieved through institutional arrangements that include historically excluded groups and that ease the transition from one education level to the next and, ultimately, to the labour market. For example, ECLAC recommends the elimination of barriers to access (such as exams and financial costs borne by families, including the costs of uniforms, materials and transport); the improvement of communication among institutions; the postponement or elimination of specialization; the availability of supportive figures (such as tutors, vocational counsellors or teachers focused on academic reinforcement); and the implementation of information systems that enable the monitoring of individual student trajectories. In addition, ECLAC recommends the reduction of gender inequality by implementing gender-differentiated strategies for preventing school dropout and fostering learning opportunities in all areas. It is important to reform institutional and cultural practices that promote traditional gender stereotypes and limit opportunities and alternatives for student development from early childhood, not least because such practices affect countries' economic and social development potential. It is equally important that such reforms originate from within school systems.

Likewise, with a view to addressing deficiencies in the necessary conditions for schooling while taking a holistic approach to well-being and the protection of rights, ECLAC recommends strengthening coordination with other public policy sectors, in particular social protection systems. In that regard, attention should be focused on household income support and the design of care policy measures that strengthen the education trajectories of girls and women, as well as policy measures on health, labour and transport, among others. For example, while cash transfer programmes with education components vary in their design and mode of operation, their overall expansion in the region positions them as one of the main social protection tools for childhood, adolescence and youth. Impact assessments of these programmes show positive results in enrolment, attendance, years in education, graduation and student retention. With regard to the latter, educational grants and meal programmes have proved to be valuable tools. They help to strengthen the link between students and schools while alleviating household income needs and countering the incentives for adolescents and young people to choose employment over school (Rossel and others, 2022; ECLAC, 2022).

One key measure in continuing to improve coverage and quality is to encourage investment in education from early childhood. Learning foundations are laid in the early stages of childhood, the period in which the main drivers of inequality are activated. Early childhood education enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of education systems and the return on investment at subsequent education levels, and it plays a central role in supporting economic growth. It includes structural aspects, such as the existence of adequate infrastructure and group dynamics (e.g. the ratio of adults to children), as well as qualified teachers; and process-related aspects, such as the establishment of a curricular framework and pedagogical proposals built in an inclusive manner and led by governments. The professional development of teachers working in early childhood education is also a crucial component of ensuring quality education, as their training and pay remain low and their work receives little social recognition (ECLAC, 2022).

In view of the evolving and uncertain present, ECLAC recommends policies that ensure education and training throughout the life cycle and that are coordinated with the labour market and productive sectors. In that regard, ECLAC highlights the strategic role and importance of strengthening TVET programmes. These can form a bridge between secondary-level TVET programmes and more advanced

programmes in order to provide continuing education with direct paths to the labour market. From an economic perspective, it is essential to improve the identification, anticipation and closing of gaps in the professional pipeline for countries' productive development in strategic sectors. The disconnect between skill supply and demand highlights the problem of educational relevance, failures to coordinate between the productive and business sectors and the education sector, and a lack of capacity on the part of local businesses to define the skill sets that they require. Qualifications frameworks are one important tool being developed in the region in this regard. A fundamental purpose of these frameworks is to bridge the disconnect between education, professional training and qualification. They encourage the recognition of professional and educational experience with a view to developing education trajectories that avoid dead ends that block access to higher or more specialized levels of education. Meanwhile, skills certification mechanisms should be developed at the regional level to facilitate education and labour inclusion, taking into account the growing migratory flows between the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Learning recommendations have been focused on strengthening the development of cognitive, social and emotional, and digital skills in education systems. Students should receive the necessary preparation to be able to meet the constantly evolving demand for labour, learn to think for themselves and develop the skills that are needed to recognize and develop creative solutions to problems. The strong emphasis on skills development in education systems requires a paradigm shift in order to shed the conception of students as passive actors in teaching and learning processes. Instead, they should be recognized as stakeholders with agency who are capable of resolving complex problems, both individually and collectively. Countries must resume and strengthen the implementation of diagnostic and training assessments to support the measures needed for learning recovery in the wake of the pandemic.

ECLAC also continues to recommend the use of digital tools to support, complement and improve teaching and learning processes. Hybrid education models are particularly useful in the current context, as they provide tools with which to recover from learning losses and address the increased risk of school dropout, as well as expand education coverage, in particular in rural and remote areas. In addition to ensuring effective connectivity, the digital transformation of education requires investment in digital skills development for the education community. This recommendation goes hand in hand with other priorities, such as achieving universal effective connectivity (access to quality Internet service and devices with which to connect); strengthening the role of teachers so that they are empowered to implement a more flexible approach to learning that is dictated by student needs; developing the digital skills of the various stakeholders of the education community (teachers, administrators, caregivers and students); and creating accessible and user-friendly platforms and content. Education management information systems can also be improved with new technological tools.

ECLAC recommends ensuring the financial stability of education systems with strengthened learning institutions to achieve a more efficient and equitable use of resources. In particular, greater investment is required to finance post-pandemic learning recovery measures and strategies to mitigate the potential rise in dropout rates, offer educational alternatives to students who will not return to school, and cover new expenditures on improvements to school infrastructure and equipment to comply with health protocols. In addition, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, together with decreased household income, could lead to an influx of students from the private sector to the public sector; this too would call for increased investment in infrastructure and equipment. In addition to efforts to secure more resources, countries should take targeted measures to ensure these resources are used more efficiently and equitably.

Lastly, ECLAC recommends that countries advance towards a new social, political and fiscal compact that recognizes and strengthens the role of education in achieving inclusive and sustainable economic and social development to decisively confront the structural causes of inequality in the region. In 2022, the Secretary-General of the United Nations called for transforming education to meet higher

purposes in the context of the twenty-first century, which can be grouped into the following four areas: (i) learning to learn; (ii) learning to live together; (iii) learning to do; and (iv) learning to be. Latin America and the Caribbean is the most unequal region in the world, and its education systems, in general, have failed to effectively contribute to social mobility and equal opportunities for all. Therefore, measures must urgently be implemented to narrow gaps, resume learning processes and shift focus towards the pursuit of the objectives laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a view to achieving inclusive and sustainable social development for all (ECLAC, 2022).

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