Region: Poverty Continues to Hit Children, Youth

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A joint study by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), published in late June in Santiago, Chile, revealed that nearly 63% of the children in the region suffer some type of poverty, with poverty understood to be a relation between deprivations that undermine the full exercise of children's rights and the income level of their families. The two UN agencies' report came at the same time as others released by national, multinational, and private agencies and an investigation presented in Geneva by a third UN agency, the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The first two reflect how, year after year, the gap has been widening between the richest and poorest in South America's economic powerhouse (Brazil) and provide dramatic statistics regarding infant mortality in the South American city with the lowest inequality levels (Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital).

The ILO study shows that, when today's poor children become young adults and join the labor force, they will suffer the highest unemployment levels.

Although unfortunately the studies were released separately, they together paint a powerful picture of the critical social reality in a region in which children and youth—the generations to which societies entrust the future—are the principal victims of unequal wealth distribution.

The ECLAC-UNICEF study covers 2008-2009 and unambiguously affirms, that poverty continues to be the greatest challenge for Latin American countries. If income of the household—that is, the place where children, adults, and elderly live together—is taken into account in the measurements, in 2008, 33% of the population were poor and nearly 13% lived in households with insufficient income to satisfy nutritional needs.

These figures, the report said, translate into 180 million poor and 71 million indigent people. In addition, the inequalities in income distribution, which, say the UN agencies, "is the most regressive in the world," have remained steady in the last 20 years.

Latin America, champion of inequality

On June 22, in Costa Rica, UNDP assistant secretary-general Heraldo Muñoz confirmed that reality. "If we compare our region with other regions on the planet, we see that we are the champions of inequality: of the 15 countries with the largest social gap, 10 are Latin American," he said.

Regarding solely children and adolescents, the statistics paint a frightening panorama. In 2007, 17.9% (some 32 million children and adolescents) were living in extreme poverty and seriously affected by one or more severe deprivations: precarious housing, serious global or chronic malnutrition (or both), and lack of access to potable water, sanitation services, electricity, education, and communications and the media. Just a year later, the percentage of that group that suffered moderate or severe deprivations had risen to 29.2%, and their families lacked sufficient income to satisfy their basic needs.
In addition, 15.8% suffer moderate or severe deprivations even though their families have enough income to potentially avoid such deprivations. And 17.8% of the children do not suffer deprivations that constitute a violation of their rights but nonetheless live in households with insufficient income.

In total, 62.7% of Latin American children are affected by one form of poverty or another. The investigation reached the conclusion that some 113 million children live at a level of social exclusion that undermines their well-being, and, either potentially or effectively, their fundamental rights go unfulfilled, "meaning that, in adulthood, the precariousness of their well-being is reproduced, affecting, therefore, future generations."

Establishing the basis for a novel concept—already hinted at but never fleshed out in its true dimension—María Nieves Rico and Ernesto Espíndola, the two UN experts responsible for the report "La pobreza infantil: un desafío prioritario" (Child poverty: a priority challenge), say that measuring poverty, much more than a simple problem of numbers, implies considering children poor when the violation of at least one of their human, economic, social, and cultural rights is confirmed. All these factors paint a picture of exclusion that not only affects the present but will condemn them to remain in the lowest strata on the social scale and without future possibilities to compete on an equal footing with children from more affluent households.

In this study, ECLAC and UNICEF assume that those factors (nutrition, access to potable water, sanitation, materials with which homes are built, the number of persons per room, school attendance and remaining in school, as well as access to radio, television, telephone, and electricity) need to be taken into account so that a real picture of poverty and exclusion can be drawn.

ECLAC says that the future does not look promising. In the other report released in late July, "Estudio económico de América Latina y el Caribe 2009-2010," the agency predicts that this year the region will have a higher-than-expected growth, especially the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay). That growth will be about 5.2%—which signifies a 3.7% increase in per capita GDP. However, next year the growth rate will drop to 3.8%, for a mere 2.6% increase in per capita GDP. The estimates indicate that South America will take the hardest hit. The conditions for combating poverty, even minimally, will not be favorable.

**World Bank sees little reason for optimism**

Complementing ECLAC's study is a World Bank report, indicating that the 2008 economic crisis pushed 60 million people into indigence worldwide, 10 million of them in Latin America, and that regional expectations remain similar for the 2010-2011 period.

Poverty and exclusion take on extreme dimensions in Brazil, the world's seventh-largest economic power and the largest in Latin America. The consumer-expenditure survey, "Pesquisa de orçamentos familiares 2008-2009," released on June 22 by the state Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia y Estatística (IBGE), pointed out that the average expenditure of each Brazilian belonging to the 10% of families with the highest incomes is 9.6 times that of those belonging to the poorest 40% of families. The study reveals two other factors indicative of exclusion and of a troubling social picture: 1) monthly spending by those with 11 or more years of schooling exceeds by 207% that of those with less than one year of school; 2) in families in which the head of the household is white, spending is 89% higher than that in which both parents are black and 79% higher than that of families in which the head of household is mixed race.
That same day, in London, Merrill Lynch Management released an annual report on the evolution of personal wealth in 2009. The report stated that 10 million individuals had a fortune of more than US$1 million, 17.1% higher than the previous year. In Latin America the increase was 8.3%, but in Brazil, the number of wealthy increased by 12%, comparable to the economic powers of the Asia-Pacific region.

Also on June 22, the official statistics agency of Buenos Aires revealed that infant mortality had increased from 7.3 per 1,000 live births in 2008 to 8.3 per 1,000 in 2009, with indices of up to 14.1 per 1,000 in the six southern barrios of the city with the highest rates of poverty, unemployment, school drop-out, and malnutrition—four of the factors considered by ECLAC to measure the real dimension of poverty.

On Aug. 12, in Geneva, an ILO report exposed the social reality of the region. In the report, "Global Employment Trends for Youth: Special issue on the impact of the global economic crisis on youth, August 2010," the UN agency specializing in labor issues pointed out that, although unemployment is an old malady, the phenomenon took on critical dimensions in 2009. Of a total of 105 million Latin American youth, 8.8 million were without work at the end of 2009 compared with 7.9 million in December 2008. Unemployment rose from 14.3% to 16.1%, a level that takes on worse dimensions if one looks at figures from 11 years ago: in 1998, unemployment stood at 15.6%. That is, although those years saw real economic growth, that growth did not lead to the creation of genuine new jobs and the rates of childhood and adolescent poverty worsened.

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