

The cooperation between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean for inclusive growth and reduction of inequalities (and the role of education)¹

La cooperación entre la Unión Europea y América Latina y el Caribe para el crecimiento inclusivo y la reducción de las desigualdades (y el papel de la educación)

A recent advertisement in *The New York Times* claims the following: 'In a world under pressure, make understanding a priority'. Although it is a commercial, it conveys a very significant message, i.e., in a rapidly developing world, the ability to critically evaluate facts may become essential, not only to advance in one's professional career but also to understand one's environment (whether social, economic or ecological) and make conscious choices as an employee, a consumer, a voter and, ultimately, as a citizen. Lack of education is associated with the lack of social inclusion for an individual and loss of cohesion for the society. This may sound like a dystopian vision, but is inequality related to education, and where should the world policies stand to guarantee a fair distribution of wealth?

The region of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is among the most unequal regions in the world (CEPAL,² 2011).

Studies by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),³ however, exhibit that income inequality in the OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half-century. The average income of the richest 10% of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10% across the OECD, i.e., seven times more than 25 years ago. Notably, inequality, which was

reported to be moderate back then, has increased since 2008.

In the European Union (EU), income inequality has increased since the onset of the economic crisis⁴ because the process of income convergence between countries has been hampered, and income inequalities within countries have expanded. Moreover, EU's approach mainly focuses on pay and income inequality, projecting the consequences of low income on access to welfare, health and education services.

Can policy commitments to grant access to welfare, health and education services reverse the trend and generate better economic wealth, rather than being dependent on it?

Most would accept the principle that providing education results in access to a better life. Beyond the individual level, particularly, at the societal level, there prevails a belief that fair access to education over a long term can promote economic growth in an inclusive manner and therefore lead to social cohesion. However, the LAC and EU revealed that simple equations, such as richness equals wealth, and education equals economic growth, do not necessarily apply if they are not supported by a parallel adequate policy development for the creation of working opportunities. If literacy aids citizens with a better ability to become informed, a clash with reality may occur when moving into higher education when guidance towards the working life is unable to match, if not the market, at least (or perhaps primarily) the needs and opportunities of the society, as societal inclusion may be deprived either due to lack of

1 Disclaimer: The thoughts and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the author, and not necessarily to the author's employer, affiliation, organisation, committee or other group or individual.

2 CEPAL United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2011) *Protección social inclusiva en América Latina: una mirada integral, un enfoque de derechos* cepal.org/es/publicaciones/2593-proteccion-social-inclusiva-america-latina-mirada-integral-un-enfoque-derechos

3 OECD (<http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm>)

4 Eurofound (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/topic/inequality>)

opportunities or due to the inability to take advantage of these opportunities.

The link between education and the fast-changing nature of work worldwide must be reconsidered. This may occur through many initiatives such as better foresight in programming, life-long education plans, stronger partnerships with industries, establishment of flexible professional skills programmes and/or other options; however, fundamentally, education alone cannot solve the issues of unemployment and social inclusion if it is not ingrained in a broader development plan of a country or region, particularly in the case of EU or LAC.

Unlike other historical periods, the changing dynamics of international cooperation is a key aspect for generating common (global) and evenly distributed wealth. In fact, globalisation of markets and human resource mobilisation are changing relations between countries and prompting the definition of common policies from distant regions of the world, beyond existing collaborations on vocational drives.

As countries face increasingly similar difficulties (unemployment, inequality, climate change, etc.), there is now a call for universality and integration of policies in terms of common goals and shared results⁵.

Hence, in such situations, EU–LAC Foundation, established by the heads of state and government of the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States' (CELAC) members, provides a great opportunity.

Although this Foundation was created in 2010, its constitutive agreement was operational in this year (i.e. 2019), thereby establishing it as an international organisation consisting of 62 members—33 states of LAC and 28 members of the EU.⁶

In a joint communication,⁷ the EU–LAC calls for joining forces for a common future, foreseeing the promotion of a transformation towards green and blue economies and a transition to a circular economy that includes developing sustainable and smart cities, enhancing connectivity, using space technologies and advancing the digital economy; moreover, all these initiatives require investment in knowledge, innovation and human capital (as described by M. De Sole in 'The EU–CELAC Common Research Area state of play').

The approach is not economically driven but is formulated on the basis of shared values. This may sound utopian, but it represents vital common grounds for planning long-term policies that can go beyond yearly economical checks and build the future.

If it remains consistent and constructive, the dialogue on policy choices between EU and LAC will directly affect roughly 1.1 billion people within these two areas, and their citizens will have the opportunity to direct the policy decision path by means of democratic decisions and will eventually enjoy the benefits of it.

The outcome of this cooperation between the EU and LAC will undoubtedly condition the course of the entire world economy from the viewpoints of the critical mass expressed and of the capacity, particularly in terms of sources, human capital and expressed knowledge.

It is an opportunity that cannot be missed!

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5 UNESCO (2015) Rethinking education: towards a global common good?

6 EU–LAC Foundation (<https://eulacfoundation.org/en>)

7 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: joining forces for a common future https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/eu-lac-communication_en.pdf