
LATIN AMERICA:
IN SEARCH OF OWN WAY

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THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF LATIN AMERICA:
STRATEGIES OF THE PAST AND CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

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Abstract. The social policy of Latin American states, based on the implementation of large-scale long-term programs since the beginning of the XXI century, has led to a significant reduction in poverty in the years preceding the global pandemic. At the same time, its results in reducing multifactorial inequality, ensuring access to education and health care, and overcoming regional disparities turned out to be insufficient. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a complex social crisis, which had particularly severe consequences for children, youth, the elderly from vulnerable groups of the population, representatives of Indian peoples. Despite targeted measures of “urgent social support”, governments faced challenges exacerbated by the unresolved old problems and faced the need to develop new models of social policy: deep structural reforms in education, health, social protection, increasing transparency and professionalism of government structures, expanding opportunities for the active working-age population. The article discusses various social strategies of Latin American countries; It is noted that there is a need for a difficult choice between the tactics of targeted benefits and long-term policies focused on the activity and social inclusion of vulnerable groups, the qualitative development of the entire social sphere. This work for the sake of the future will require significant financial investments and is impossible without economic growth, cooperation with business and civil society structures.

Keywords: Latin America, social policy, consequences of COVID-19, social inequality, education, healthcare, social reforms.

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СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ ЛАНДШАФТ ЛАТИНСКОЙ АМЕРИКИ:
СТРАТЕГИИ ПРОШЛОГО И ВЫЗОВЫ БУДУЩЕГО

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена проблемам разработки новых моделей социальной политики в странах Латинской Америки. Рассматриваются социальные стратегии латиноамериканских стран; отмечается необходимость сложного выбора между тактикой адресных пособий и льгот и долгосрочной политикой, ориентированной на активность и социальное включение уязвимых групп, качественное развитие всей социальной сферы. Автор заключает, что эта работа потребует значительных финансовых вложений и невозможна без экономического роста, сотрудничества с бизнесом и структурами гражданского общества.

Ключевые слова: Латинская Америка, социальная политика, последствия COVID-19, социальное неравенство, образование, здравоохранение, социальные реформы.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of 2020–2021 has escalated the controversy regarding the prospects, contradictions, tools, and possibilities of state social policy and its ability to influence the resilience of

society in the face of global challenges. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, which suffered heavy losses during the crisis, once again faced the need to reassess the models of the past and choose priorities for the future, which has

been repeatedly noted by both Russian and foreign authors.

Russian-language works in the field of Latin American studies pay much attention to the social problems of the region, aggravated by the multi-lateral impact of *COVID-19*, state policies, and the search for a way out of the deep crisis. Yermolyeva [1, 2] considered the long-term impact of the pandemic on human capital, the level of education and life prospects of the young generation. Yakovlev [3, 4] examined the opportunities for the development of dynamic industries able to provide employment and the formation of more efficient economic models based on the structural reorganization of business and finding innovative solutions to management problems. A number of works by Diyakova [5, 6, 7] and Kuznetsova [8] are devoted to large-scale social projects of the early 21st century to reduce poverty and inequality, national versions of anti-crisis policy, and the role of civil society organizations in the development of the social sphere. The papers by Scherbakova [9], Dashkina, Karateev, and Pashin [10] analyze some aspects of interregional relations during the pandemic and the response mechanisms of healthcare systems.

Foreign authors including those from Latin America, evaluating the large-scale impact of the crisis and the experience of the pandemic, note the incomplete overcoming of the most serious social problems: multifactorial inequality, poverty, and social exclusion of vulnerable population groups and representatives of indigenous peoples. Deep social disparities, unequal access of different population groups to the main systems of social protection, and their insufficient reform became, according to experts, the main reasons for the “*COVID-19* catastrophe” [11, 12, 13, 14]. Along with the criticism of the state’s mistakes, the studies of the modern post-pandemic period reflect on the prospects of achieving the set goals, emphasizing the possible ways of social reconstruction and the need to comprehend the mistakes of the past and to take into account the risks of the new stage of development [15, 16].

Meanwhile, despite the considerable interest in this issue, the acuteness and relevance of the problems associated with it, the long-term

process of evolution of social policies in Latin American states throughout the 21st century, the specifics of its various stages, determined by the challenges of the time, economic opportunities, and political priorities, have not yet been reflected in the scientific literature. Researchers also have not paid due attention to the trends of the new post-pandemic reality.

The tasks of this paper include: a review of social development strategies undertaken by the countries of the region in the era of relative prosperity, evaluation of their successes and failures; consideration of the set of measures of “emergency” state support, implemented during the pandemic, and their results; analysis of the reasons for the deep crisis in the health care and education systems; identification of the contours of new approaches aimed at positive changes in the future. Two decades of the 21st century provide rich material for studying the main trends in the formation of the social landscape of modern Latin America.

The methodological basis of this work is a comprehensive system approach, based on the analysis of key areas of social policy in the 21st century, making it possible to evaluate its general results and unresolved problems, to identify the interrelation of regional and national trends, political and social phenomena, and to determine the prospects for the development of new models. The methods of comparative and sociological analysis were used to consider different variants of reform strategies and programs, as well as the peculiarities of anti-crisis measures of social assistance.

SOCIAL STRATEGY OF THE PRE-PANDEMIC PERIOD

The targeted policy to overcome poverty and multifactorial inequality and develop the social sphere, pursued by Latin American states in the 21st century, resulted in a significant reduction in the number of poor people by 2018–2019. This policy relied on the implementation of large-scale long-term programs covering different groups of society.

The core element of this period’s strategy was a set of measures called “conditional payment programs” (*Programas de Transferencias Condi-*

cionadas, PTC). They were aimed at reducing not only poverty but also social deprivation, at increasing the role of independent efforts of representatives of the lower strata of the population in the education and preventive health care of children, continuing their own education, finding a job, and maintaining households. The main task of these programs was to change people's behavior, to break the "vicious circle of poverty", based on small but regular cash payments in exchange for the fulfillment of certain obligations [5].

The ideological basis of *PTC* was the concept of "multidimensional (multifactorial) poverty", which implied the consideration of poverty as a situation of lack not only of vital goods but also of social prospects. The inability to participate in the social and cultural life available to others, to receive quality education and health care, to have an image of the future and "the freedom to do what is valued" (in the words of the Bolivian researcher Sonia Montaña) [17, p. 365], results in a person's subjective experience of his/her own isolation, inferiority. Social exclusion is not always caused by poverty, but almost always accompanies it, which exerts a particularly negative impact on adolescents and young people. This circumstance was taken into account by conditional payment programs in all countries of the region, despite a number of peculiarities. Such programs focused on poor families, children, and youth and included support for school education, medical care and nutrition for children, advanced training temporary, and whenever possible, permanent employment for adults.

The most famous *PTC*, the very names of which indicated their purpose, were: Mexican *Oportunidades* ("Opportunities") and *Prospera* ("Prosper"), Brazilian *Bolsa familia* ("Family Allowance"), Colombian *Más Familias en Acción* ("Families in Action"), Peruvian *Juntos* ("Together"), Chilean *Chile Solidario* ("Solidarity Chile"), Argentinian *Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados* ("Unemployed Heads of Households") and *Familias por la Inclusión Social* ("Families for Social Inclusion"), Bolivian *Bono Juancito Pinto* ("Bonus of Juancito Pinto"), and others [18, p. 17, 19].

The most fruitful period of implementing *PTC* was between 2010 and 2015 with the programs reaching up to 132 million people (approximate-

ly 21% of the region's total population) by 2015 [18, p. 21]. However, since 2016, the slowdown in economic growth has led to a gradual reduction in the scale of these programs. They have faced increasing criticism from experts, who pointed out their auxiliary nature, effective only in favorable economic conditions, as well as from some government agencies and public organizations [19].

In the field of education, the countries in the region have made significant efforts to prevent early school dropout among children and adolescents from vulnerable social groups and to increase access to specialized secondary and higher education through measures such as quotas, scholarships, and preferential loans [5, p. 115, 116]. Additionally, efforts were made to promote youth employment in collaboration with businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These NGOs were also involved in organizing various forms of supplementary training, professional internships at companies, and providing scholarships for talented students through large corporations, utilizing other public-private partnership instruments [6].

The results achieved were mixed. Primary education in the region became almost universal, and by 2018, 75% of young people aged 25–29 from lower social strata had completed or partially completed secondary education. However, higher education remained largely accessible to privileged groups, with little change in the status of the middle class [source 1, p. 65; 5, p. 115]. Furthermore, the quality of education in municipal schools attended by children from poor families, along with inadequate infrastructure, remained low. As a result, the expansion of basic education to a broader population was not accompanied by an improvement in quality. Consequently, as Russian researcher Yermolyeva noted, the region was poorly prepared to face the new challenges of the 21st century, particularly in relation to the growing importance of IT technologies [20, pp. 38-40].

Equally important in the context of a gradually "aging" Latin America was the development of policies concerning the elderly. Direct financial support for this demographic, particularly those from lower social strata, through "solidarity" payments from the state, along with efforts to

enhance the efficiency of pension systems based on individual contributions (the “funded” component), became a central focus of the regional agenda. In countries that had only recently begun addressing demographic challenges — particularly urgent in Chile and Uruguay — this agenda was just beginning to take shape, and the pandemic underscored its critical importance.

Social spending by the region’s states increased steadily over nearly two decades of the 21st century, rising from an average of 8.5% of GDP in 2000–2002 to 11.2% in 2017. Some countries, including Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Bolivia, allocated about 13% of national GDP in 2016, Brazil — 15%, Chile and Uruguay — 16%, and Trinidad and Tobago — 16.6% [source 2, p. 118]. The share of social expenditures in the total budget spending of states also increased (from 45.8% in 2001 to 51.4% in 2016–2017) [source 2, p. 116].

Comprehensive social projects, high government spending, and favorable economic conditions resulted in the overall reduction of poverty in the region. According to the reports of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (*ECLAC, CEPAL*), the number of people living in poverty decreased from 44.5% of the population (221 million people) in 2002 to 29.6% (182 million people) in 2018, and the number of people living in extreme poverty slightly decreased in percentage terms from 11.2% to 10.2%, but increased in absolute terms (from 57 million to 63 million people), respectively [source 2, p. 20, 21]. Particularly great achievements came at the end of the period of consistently high rates of economic growth rates (about 3.8% annually) — the so-called golden decade of 2003–2013. By 2014, poverty had fallen to 27.8% (164 million people), and extreme poverty had dropped to 7.8% (46 million people), levels that Latin American countries had neither surpassed before nor since this brief era of relative prosperity [source 2, p. 20, 21]. Meanwhile, despite the growing negative economic trends at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the years preceding the onset of the *COVID-19* pandemic were characterized by relative social stability.

Against the backdrop of declining poverty, the results of policies aimed at reducing social in-

equality and providing access to quality education and health care for all were limited. The Gini index, which measures the level of social inequality, decreased from 0.54 in 2002 to 0.46 in 2017 [source 2, p. 17], but this reduction did not change the fact that the reform process was generally incomplete and limited. During the years of economic growth, not all resources were used for structural reform, such as, creating new jobs in the formal sector of the economy, expanding opportunities for disadvantaged youth, and overcoming the social exclusion of indigenous peoples. The inadequacy of the state’s efforts has been noted by many Latin American researchers. The Chilean sociologist Marta Lagos, for example, wrote that although the region was gradually becoming more prosperous, high levels of inequality and disproportion persisted. These inequalities did not disappear, but rather coexisted with the region’s increasing prosperity [source 3]. This fundamental contradiction was one of the causes of the mass social protests of 2016–2019, whose driving force was the youth (the 2019 protest movement in Chile was a vivid example), and became particularly evident during the global pandemic.

INSTRUMENTS OF “EMERGENCY” SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

The *COVID-19* pandemic demonstrated the short-lived nature of the successes achieved against the background of the unresolved deep-rooted issues in the key fields of social development associated with the formation and preservation of human capital — education, health care, and social protection of the population. The process of positive changes that began at the beginning of the century failed to achieve lasting and irreversible momentum and the global crisis of 2020–2021 had devastating consequences for Latin America.

In 2020, the number of people living in poverty increased to 33.0% (204 million), and the number of people living in extreme poverty — to 13.1% (81 million people compared to 62 million in 2002). At the height of the pandemic, the situation regarding extreme poverty was even worse than before the onset of social reforms [source 4, pp. 67–69].

During the pandemic, Latin American countries strived to pursue a policy of “emergency” targeted assistance, applying the tactics of various benefits and allowances and rapidly shifting away from the long-term planning strategies that had characterized the previous decade. The new phase of crisis management included emergency family allowances, lump-sum or recurring payments to workers in public and private sectors who had lost their jobs, informal sector workers, and self-employed individuals. Additionally, various benefits were provided for small and medium-sized enterprises, along with deferrals on payments for utilities, loans, and fines. Food assistance programs targeted vulnerable groups such as children, students, the elderly, and families. The focus was on assisting the most vulnerable population groups, including the poorest strata and parts of the middle class, as well as the hardest-hit sectors of the economy [7].

The scale and nature of assistance during the *COVID-19* pandemic varied across Latin American countries, shaped by each nation’s level of wealth, social protection traditions, and the competence of their governments. Analysis of several key cases revealed that Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, and El Salvador adopted a more targeted and differentiated approach, focusing on the needs of the most affected social groups. In particular, in Bolivia, a country with a population of 12 million people, several types of emergency lump-sum allowances were paid to vulnerable groups, including the poor elderly, people with disabilities, women with children under two, families with primary school children, and citizens aged 18–59 who lost their jobs or income during the lockdown. These payments, ranging from \$58 to \$145, supported nearly the entire population, covering around 10 million people in 2020–2021 [source 5, pp. 4–8].

In Argentina, with a population of 45.8 million people, in addition to the “Emergency Family Income” (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia*) targets the poorest families who lost income from informal employment. Additionally, there was a program to support small and medium-sized businesses through preferential loans, payment deferrals, and monthly payments to employees,

ranging from \$55 to \$92. Individual entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises in the most affected sectors, such as tourism, hospitality, culture, and fitness, also received assistance. These payments were repeated as quarantine restrictions were extended [source 6, pp. 5–8].

Chile also adopted a highly differentiated approach. In addition to the monthly “emergency bonus against *COVID-19*” (*Bono de Emergencia COVID-19*), for the poorest families, children, pensioners, and people with disabilities, the government offered targeted support to the middle class. This included one-time allowances for individual entrepreneurs and small business owners who lost their income (up to \$643), preferential loans, and payments to public transportation drivers (up to \$643). In 2020–2021, this aid reached about 80% of affected households (10.4 million people out of Chile’s population of 19.4 million) [21] and significantly boosted public confidence in the right-centrist government of Sebastián Piñera (2018–2022), whose popularity had declined following the 2019 protests.

In Peru, with a population of 33.7 million, government emergency social assistance was highly targeted, reaching not only the poorest groups but also micro-enterprise owners and informal sector workers, particularly in the tourism industry. During the quarantine period, support was provided to souvenir and printed matter vendors in closed supermarkets, street vendors, tour guides, as well as owners and employees of small cafés [source 7].

The peculiarity of El Salvador, with a population of 6.8 million, was the large-scale free distribution of \$1 billion worth of food (through agreements with large businesses) to 1.7 million needy families. The government also suspended payments for utilities, telephone, and Internet services, mortgages, and consumer loans. Small and medium-sized businesses received substantial subsidies [source 8, p. 14]. Medical students who worked in the social service system during the pandemic received presidential bonuses [source 9].

In Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and some other countries, a less detailed, more universal approach was taken, involving mass payments of “emergency”

cash benefits and the expansion of existing benefits for vulnerable groups of the population [7]. A key example is Uruguay with 3.5 million inhabitants where anti-crisis measures included the expansion of existing social programs to a wider population and the introduction of tax benefits for small and medium-sized businesses. A stable system of social protection, traditionally high government spending on social development, combined with a low poverty rate (3% in 2019) and trust in the authorities, allowed the government to cope with the situation without resorting to the development of special targeted measures or enforcing a strict lockdown [source 8, p. 15].

In Brazil, with a population of 200 million and one of the most severe pandemic experiences worldwide, social support for affected groups was primarily implemented through general anti-poverty programs, without a strong focus on identifying the most vulnerable and needy. This approach was largely influenced by far-right President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023), whose policies centered on minimizing state social spending and reducing the scope of related programs [7, p. 36, 37].

The effectiveness and justification of the “emergency” assistance measures adopted across the region were widely questioned due to their compensatory nature, which had limited impact on alleviating the difficult economic situation or preventing crises in other social sectors. Monthly cash payments were generally insufficient, rarely exceeding the poverty line; only in Chile did they surpass it by 12%. In countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and the Dominican Republic, these payments covered only 33% to 54% of the cost of a basic consumer basket, including essential non-food items. In other countries, they were much lower, such as Mexico, Uruguay, and Guatemala (16%), Costa Rica (19%), Bolivia (8%), and Ecuador (5%) [source 4, p. 138].

While critical assessments of these measures are justified, it is important to note that from March 2020 to the end of 2021, various support programs reached up to 60% of the population in South America and 30% in the Caribbean, assisting a total of 111.5 million households, or approximately 422 million people. These assistance programs, designed and implemented relatively

quickly in extreme conditions (85% of them were launched in the critical year of 2020), were adapted to the specific needs of each country. Despite their limitations, these measures helped mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic and sustained the livelihoods of the most vulnerable groups [source 4, p. 136].

HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION: THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE CRISIS

The crisis in the health system was triggered by the *COVID-19* pandemic, but it had deep-rooted internal causes that had been accumulating for years. These included underfunding, regional imbalances, disintegration of system components, an emphasis on specialized high-tech care, and the overall incompleteness of reforms initiated at the beginning of the century, which were intended for gradual, long-term implementation. Although these challenges varied across countries, they were prevalent in the vast majority of the region. During the pandemic, limited cash allowances and sporadic distribution of free medicines and personal protective equipment were insufficient to prevent the unfolding negative scenario.

Among the major shortcomings of the system, ECLAC experts emphasize the poor development of primary health care services available to poor population groups, the shortage of hospitals and medical personnel (doctors and nurses), intensive care units, medicines, vaccines, etc. For example, in the region, there were only 20 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants, compared to 35 specialists in developed countries [source 4, p. 105]. The general inconsistency of actions, unequal access to high-quality services, inefficiency, and fragmentation characterized the work of health care systems in almost all countries of the region with a few exceptions like Cuba, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and, to some extent, Chile. This situation contributed to the fact that by December 2021, Latin America and the Caribbean — home to only 8.4% of the world’s population — accounted for 30% of global *COVID-19* deaths and nearly 17% of all infections [source 4, p. 99].

It is worth noting that there were certain differences in the financing and organization of health care systems in each country, which even-

tually affected their quality and resilience during times of crisis. For example, Cuba and Uruguay were distinguished by high levels of government funding in the pre-COVID period — more than 6% recommended for the region by the Pan American Health Organization (*Organización Panamericana de Salud, OPS*). Argentina allocated 5.9%, Costa Rica and Colombia — 5.5%, Chile and Panama — 4.6%, Bolivia and El Salvador — 4.5%, and Brazil — 4%. Other countries invested even less, such as Mexico with 2.7% and Peru with 3.3% [source 4, p. 102].

Inadequate pre-crisis financing was not always the main reason for the challenges faced. The professionalism and timeliness of government decisions, the adaptability of healthcare systems, and the organization of public health measures and vaccination campaigns were also crucial. Countries like Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile, for example, managed these tasks relatively successfully.

Alongside this, the multifactorial crisis has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities among the most vulnerable social groups including children and the elderly from impoverished backgrounds, Latin Americans with African roots (*afrodescendientes*), and representatives of indigenous peoples. The inaccessibility of quality and timely medical care for inhabitants of Indian communities in remote rural areas had particularly tragic consequences. In Mexico, mortality from *COVID-19* was 64% higher among Indians with confirmed cases of the disease than in the rest of the population, and nearly 20% higher in Colombia. In Chilean municipalities historically inhabited by the Aymara and Mapuche Indian peoples, mortality rates exceeded the national average by 30% and in some regions by as much as 100%. At the time of writing, complete statistical data were not available to assess the situation in other countries in the region [source 4, p. 128, 129].

As a result, factors such as the segregation of megacities along social lines, overcrowding in poor neighborhoods, lack of public transportation, inadequate modern housing, insufficient access to comfortable living spaces, clean drinking water, electricity, and the Internet, became even more significant during the pandemic, exacerbating medical issues that were less pronounced in more stable times.

The situation in education was equally concerning. Latin America ranked first globally in terms of the duration of school closures, with an average of 70 weeks — 63 weeks in the Caribbean and 72 weeks in South America — compared to a global average of 40 weeks. Countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru experienced some of the longest closures, with schools shut for more than 80 weeks. This unprecedented situation forced approximately 165 million students across all educational levels to adopt remote learning, a system that had never been implemented on such a massive scale, leading to numerous challenges [source 10, p. 99, 100].

The availability of distance learning was directly linked to the economic and social status of families. Children and adolescents from vulnerable groups, as well as the so-called new middle class — those who had only recently emerged from poverty — faced significant challenges, including a lack of personal computers, modern smartphones, quality internet access, and adequate study spaces at home, where multiple family members were often working or studying simultaneously. The situation was particularly dire in remote rural areas and indigenous communities, where local radio stations were used to conduct classes, as seen in Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. In addition, teachers in municipal schools serving low-income neighborhoods were often poorly prepared for the shift to distance learning. These schools typically lacked adequate computer equipment, and students, already under prolonged psycho-emotional stress, could not rely on close adults for assistance, as many lacked the necessary digital literacy [source 10, p. 101].

The success of distance education across Latin America varied greatly, depending largely on the overall level of national development. Information technology was widely accessible to almost all children and adolescents aged 5 to 20 in affluent sectors of society, with countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica boasting access rates exceeding 94%. However, among low-income families, only 55% of children and youth were able to participate in online learning without interruptions to their schooling.

In some countries, this figure was even lower: 44% in Bolivia and Panama, 32% in Mexico, 21% in Colombia, 19% in Peru, 13% in Ecuador, and just 10% in El Salvador [source 10, p. 102].

In this context, the assistance provided by various NGOs and volunteers became essential. Such initiatives emerged across almost all countries in the region and often relied on the support of businesses. For example, in Colombia and Peru, the NGO *Empresarios por la Educación* (“Entrepreneurs for Education”), after quarantine measures were introduced, played a key role in creating free computer centers with internet access for youth and adults in remote areas, supplying equipment to municipal schools, and improving the computer literacy of both teachers and students [sources 11, 12]. Private companies in Ecuador, united in the NGO *Unidos por la Educación* (“Together for Education”), allocated funds to restore the educational process in a number of rural schools in the country [source 13]. In Argentina, the NGO *EducAR 2050* (“Educate 2050”) launched the campaign *Nadie afuera educación* (“No One Outside Education”), which aimed to attract business investments to support schools and teachers [source 14]. Partners in this initiative included the *BBVA-Argentina* bank and *Pan American Energy* (PAE), the country’s largest energy company.

While this targeted aid, driven by civic activism and the spirit of solidarity typical of Latin American public life, had a positive economic and psychological impact, it could not fully substitute for the state’s role or compensate for the severe social damage caused by the pandemic.

In all countries of the region, the ever-present threat of early withdrawal of children and adolescents from the school system has grown. For example, in Argentina in 2021, about 360 thousand students dropped out of school, and up to 880 thousand students were in the “border” situation due to the inability to continue education [source 15]. In relatively prosperous Chile, struggling to achieve universal secondary education, 40 thousand students left the school system in 2021, and more than 50 thousand students in 2022 (which is 24% more than in 2019) [source 16].

In addition to the common factors associated with poverty such as a higher risk of drug addic-

tion, early pregnancy, involvement in youth criminal gangs, the need to serve family members, lack of employment prospects, and no emotional support at home — many countries faced their own specific challenges that became more apparent during the pandemic. In countries with significant territorial disparities, early school dropout rates were closely linked to the level of development in particular states, departments, or municipalities. This correlation was especially evident in Mexico, Brazil, Peru, and Colombia [source 17, p. 24]. However, an unusual trend was observed in Bolivia, where, despite considerable variation between departments, the rate of permanent school dropouts decreased from 1.74% in 2019 to 1.16% in 2022 (data for 2020 are missing). Authorities attribute this decline to the success and continuity of the *Bono Juancito Pinto* conditional payment program which provided monetary incentives for students to stay in school. By 2023, the program had benefited 2.3 million students [sources 18, 19]. This conditional payment system played a critical role in encouraging students to continue their education, serving as a buffer against the pandemic’s educational disruption.

In Peru, the challenges of organizing distance learning in indigenous languages, compounded by the remoteness of rural areas, led to around 370,000 children dropping out of school during 2020–2021 [source 20]. In Colombia, 181,000 students interrupted their education in 2020, with that number rising to 337,000 by 2022. Colombian sociologists attribute this trend in part to the country’s pervasive “culture of violence”, as well as the psycho-emotional stress that disproportionately affected children from vulnerable social groups. Additionally, increased levels of mutual aggression and discrimination contributed to the rising dropout rates [source 14]. In Brazil, experts have highlighted particularly significant setbacks for children aged 5 to 9 from poor backgrounds. This group, once seen as benefiting the most from public policy achievements over the past 40 years, has now faced severe challenges in terms of future educational opportunities and social integration [21].

Thus, the education systems of Latin American countries, already grappling with significant

challenges before 2020, now face the very real threat of falling behind other nations and the demands of the modern economy. The shift to distance learning during the *COVID-19* pandemic exposed deep, multifaceted inequalities across Latin American societies.

The long-term consequences of these losses are difficult to assess. According to experts, interruptions in the educational process can result in a significant deterioration of reading and writing skills and poor knowledge of mathematics — the so-called learning poverty (*pobreza de aprendizaje*), which negatively distinguished Latin America from Western Europe, Asia, and the United States even in the pre-pandemic period [source 17, p. 39].

Preliminary estimates suggest that the number of secondary school students lacking basic knowledge and essential competencies could increase from 52% in 2019 to 79% in the near future [source 10, pp. 116-117]. This alarming rise is expected to have profound impacts on the adult lives of today's schoolchildren, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. It will likely diminish their chances of obtaining professional education and securing stable employment, while also significantly raising their risk of falling into poverty [2].

The comprehensive crisis brought on by the *COVID-19* pandemic has shown that reducing poverty alone, without addressing regional disparities, improving healthcare and education infrastructure, implementing widespread computerization in schools, enhancing the quality of primary healthcare, overcoming the social exclusion of vulnerable groups, and upgrading the qualifications of teachers and healthcare workers, leads to only temporary, reversible progress. The tragic return to poverty experienced by the “new middle class” during the pandemic starkly illustrated this fragility. Reflecting on these lessons has become an urgent priority in the current era.

IN SEARCH OF POSITIVE CHANGES

The end of the pandemic was marked by a gradual economic recovery and a modest reduction in poverty, though it did not signify a full

social revival. The economic growth rate in 2023 was 2.2%, lower than in 2022, and exhibited significant regional disparities. South America's economy grew by 1.5%, while Central America and Mexico grew by 3.5%, and the Caribbean Basin by 3.4%. In contrast, the growth rates in 2022 were higher, at 3.8%, 4.1%, and 6.4%, respectively. The employment rate increased by only 1.4% in 2023, compared to a more substantial 5.4% in the previous year [source 22]. Experts, noting the slowdown in growth rates, emphasize the need to search for more effective models, to develop a new economic and financial strategy aimed at attracting large-scale investments in the development of the most dynamic, productive industries that can generate employment and income for the working population [4].

In terms of poverty, the percentage of people living in poverty decreased to 29% of the region's population (181 million people) in 2022, which was slightly lower than the pre-pandemic levels. However, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty remained unchanged at 11.2% (70 million people), the same as in 2019, according to ECLAC's annual report *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2023* [source 23].

“Although we point to the reduction of poverty in 2022, there is no reason to celebrate”, stressed ECLAC Chief Specialist José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs. “More than 180 million people in our region do not have enough income to meet their basic needs, and 70 million of them lack the income needed to acquire a basic food basket. In total, nearly one-third of the region's population is living in poverty, a percentage that rises to 42.5% in the case of children and adolescents — a reality we cannot tolerate” [source 23].

The countries in the region, while in the midst of a slow economic recovery, have yet to develop a coherent new social strategy. The paths to the future remain in the early stages, with efforts focused on identifying specific tools for transformation that can address both broad fundamental goals and the unique challenges of each nation.

One potential model for overcoming the crisis is the strengthening of regional integration, which is pursued, for example, by the Central American countries and the Dominican Republic, which at

the end of 2020 adopted the “3R Plan for Recovery, Social Reconstruction and Resilience” (*Plan 3R — Plan para la Recuperación, Reconstrucción Social y Resiliencia*) (source 24). The essence of the project is to strengthen regional cooperation for the development of targeted social policies, reforms in the sphere of urban planning, the improvement of housing and communal infrastructure in poor urban and rural areas, and the development of the labor market, providing jobs for young people, women, and migrants. The plan was supported by the governments of Central America and the Dominican Republic, the Council for Central American Social Integration, as well as the UN Special Structure for Sustainable Urban Development and the program for cooperation between the European Union and Latin America (*EUROsociAL*).

In most countries across the region, a wide range of differentiated programs continues to provide material support to various social groups living in poverty, including families, children and adolescents, students, the elderly (both retired and pre-retired), the disabled, and the unemployed. Social policies in Colombia, Peru, and Chile are characterized by their high degree of targeting. In Brazil, after Inacio Lula da Silva came to power in 2023, the large-scale program *Bolsa familia* (“Family Allowance”), which had been suspended under the neoliberal Jair Bolsonaro and covered 21.8 million households, was resumed [22]. The leitmotif of Brazilian social initiatives is the fight against poverty and hunger — “Brasil without hunger!” (*Brasil Sem Fome*).

At the same time, in some cases, there is an emphasis on developing new approaches, more focused on social inclusion, adaptation, and strengthening the independence of the lower strata of society. One example is the Chilean program *Familias* (Families), which provides two years of socio-psychological and labor support to families in situations of poverty. Professional staff correct the emotional and social behavior of participants and provide information about the existing benefits and services, employment and educational opportunities, and local communities that unite people with similar problems. Upon successfully completing the program, families are eligible for

a monetary allowance [source 25]. This initiative reflects a shift towards exploring non-monetary methods of support while maintaining existing, proven assistance tools.

Given the deep social contradictions in contemporary Latin America, governments will have to choose between relying on short-term strategies of targeted allowances and payments, or pursuing long-term policies aimed at promoting the inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups and improving the quality of the overall social sector. Achieving these goals will require substantial financial investment and will not be possible without economic growth and collaboration with businesses, professional development centers, and civil society organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, Latin American governments are once again confronted with challenges, exacerbated by unresolved longstanding issues, and the pressing need to develop new models of social policy. The urgency of implementing deep structural reforms in education and healthcare, improving the effectiveness of social protection systems, and expanding formal employment opportunities for the active, able-bodied population is clear. Providing effective support to the emerging middle class, engaging with young people, expanding their life prospects, and leveraging various tools (both state and non-state) to ensure access to modern education for youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have become particularly important priorities. Increasing the level of responsibility, transparency, and professionalism of state structures, as well as the level of solidarity and justice in society as a whole, plays a fundamental role.

Social changes are difficult to predict and measure in detail, and often yield results that can surprise or disappoint reformers. However, one positive outcome of the *COVID-19* crisis is that it exposed existing problems with striking clarity, forcing governments to recognize and prioritize specific national issues and formulate corresponding solutions.

According to many experts, future reforms will only succeed through two interconnected processes: improving the quality of public administration and enhancing its creative role, while simultaneously activating civil society structures. Partnership and collaboration between the state and society will be indispensable resources for designing and implementing long-term, successful policies.

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