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Fourth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean

Virtual meeting, 13 January 2021

REPORT OF THE FOURTH MEETING OF THE PRESIDING OFFICERS OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Virtual meeting, 13 January 2021

UNITED NATIONS

ECLAC

UNDP

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A. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

Place and date of the meeting

1. The fourth meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean was held as a virtual meeting on 13 January 2021, and was convened jointly by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), pursuant to paragraph 23 of resolution 2(II) adopted at the second session of the Regional Conference on Social Development, held in Montevideo in 2017.

Attendance[1]

2. The meeting was attended by representatives of the following countries in their capacity as Presiding Officers: Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay and Uruguay.

3. Representatives of the following ECLAC member countries also attended: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

4. The following associate members of the Commission were also represented: Anguilla, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, and Turks and Caicos Islands.

5. Attending from the United Nations Secretariat were representatives of the resident coordinator system.

6. The meeting was also attended by representatives of the following United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

7. Representatives of intergovernmental organizations and cooperation agencies also attended.

Chair

8. The Presiding Officers elected at the third session of the Regional Conference on Social Development of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Mexico City from 1 to 3 October 2019, were as follows:

Chair: Mexico

Vice-Chairs: Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay

[1] See the full list of participants in annex 2.

B. AGENDA

9. The Presiding Officers adopted the following agenda:

1. Adoption of the agenda

2. Presentation by the secretariat on the social situation in the region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Presentation by the Chair on progress in the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development.

4. Presentation by the secretariat on advances by the technical working groups and the draft plan of work for the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development.

5. Other matters

6. Consideration and adoption of agreements.

C. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Opening session

10. At the opening session, statements were made by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); Luis Felipe López-Calva, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and Javier May Rodríguez, Secretary of Welfare of Mexico, in his capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

11. The Executive Secretary of ECLAC said that 2020 had been a year of great challenges, as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had triggered a crisis of historic proportions in Latin America and the Caribbean, reversing two decades of progress. Governments had been forced to implement emergency measures to mitigate the effects in the health, economic and social spheres, in order to protect the population —prioritizing the most vulnerable— in a regional context of high inequality and severe employment and income problems. There was an urgent need to strengthen cooperation mechanisms and, to that end, ECLAC and the entire United Nations system offered their support to the regional authorities. In 2020, the Regional Conference on Social Development had been very active, holding several virtual meetings to exchange information and identifying a pressing need to reinvent protection and recordkeeping mechanisms, to ensure that social measures reached informal workers. All of that required collaboration between the different ministries and a strategic perspective to promote the post-pandemic consolidation of the welfare state.

12. The Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of UNDP said that Latin America and the Caribbean had been the most affected region by the pandemic in economic, health and social terms, and the countries had made great fiscal efforts to address its impact. To achieve a recovery in which a more productive, inclusive and resilient system was built, it would be crucial to coordinate and improve the

quality of actions to: procure and distribute vaccines as quickly as possible; implement prudent fiscal management with ambitious social aims; obtain financing both domestically and on international markets. It was also vital to coordinate and improve actions relating to systemic governance, such as those aimed at reactivating education systems, universalizing health protection and promoting digitization for inclusion. The new Regional Collaborative Platform, which was jointly coordinated by ECLAC and UNDP, was important and involved all agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system in the region. At the fourth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, discussions would be held with member States to ascertain their expectations regarding the work of the platform.

13. The Secretary of Welfare of Mexico, in his capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, addressing the representatives of the member States, said that their participation and collective determination would be of vital importance to achieving the shared goal of social well-being for the population of Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that had been characterized by solidarity and cooperation between its peoples. That solidarity was the only lifeline in the most severe recession in the history of the region, in which implementation of the four axes of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development was even more important. The two main challenges in that context were to achieve social inclusion of vulnerable groups and to reincorporate those who had been abandoned by targeted policies. The meeting was an opportunity to join efforts and boost synergies among all those working for development, focusing on the human dimension and on promoting South-South cooperation. A plan of work urgently needed to be formulated for 2021, based on the Agenda's axes, focusing on the development of more cross-cutting, universal and sustainable social policies.

Presentation by the secretariat on the social situation in the region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (agenda item 2)

14. The Executive Secretary of ECLAC gave a presentation on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean. She said that the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development was key to addressing the crisis and building a new future. When the pandemic hit, the region was in a very complex socioeconomic and political situation, and the repercussions had led to the largest drop in regional GDP in 120 years. Caribbean countries were particularly vulnerable to various factors, such as climate change, declining tourism and dependence on imports of food and other goods. Countries had implemented a variety of measures, such as cash and in-kind transfers, subsidies, support for the health sector, tax exemptions and grace periods. Since the beginning of the pandemic, those measures had reached half of the region's population and many informal workers, partially mitigating the impact of the crisis.

15. She continued by saying that initiatives had been undertaken to increase access to the vaccine in the region and to improve production and distribution processes. Various factors could help connect the crisis response with the recovery and the decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals, such as vaccination processes, extension of emergency basic income and hunger relief, job creation, fiscal policies, financial support for middle-income countries, strengthened regional integration and South-South cooperation, and concerted support from United Nations system agencies. It was essential to move towards a welfare state that guaranteed rights and allowed for the development of capacities, strengthening the comprehensiveness of supply, interlinking simultaneous strategies for social and labour inclusion, promoting intersectoral cooperation, proposing new ways of recording and measuring, and establishing dialogue between the different ministries, such as those of finance, labour and women's affairs. Lastly, it was important to strengthen regional cooperation and integration, to foster inclusive social development for the good of all.

Presentation by the Chair on progress in the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development (agenda item 3)

16. The presentation was given by the Secretary of Welfare of Mexico, in his capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, who described the activities carried out since the third session of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Mexico City in October 2019. He said that in January 2020 the Presiding Officers had held a coordination meeting, with the participation of Barbados, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay, where there was discussion regarding the creation of working groups and the subjects to be addressed in relation to the four axes of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development. A special meeting of the ministries of social development had been held in March to discuss the effects of the pandemic, at which information had been shared on the strategies they were implementing. At that meeting, participants had raised issues relating to records of recipients, increased use of banking services, social security, social protection and psychosocial support, and the representative of Mexico had emphasized the importance of supporting vulnerable groups, such as older persons and persons with disabilities. Other technical meetings were held to discuss specific issues related to the pandemic. ECLAC facilitated spaces for interaction and delivery of information through the Observatory on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the recently launched Social Development and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean website and the Social Development Community of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Presentation by the secretariat on advances by the technical working groups and the draft plan of work for the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development (agenda item 4)

17. Under this agenda item, the representative of the secretariat spoke about the thematic working groups in the proposed plan of work for implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development, which had been shared with the delegations, and invited the countries to join the working groups and subgroups to move forward with implementation of the Agenda and activities, looking ahead to the next Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

18. The representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela expressed his appreciation for the effort made to present the indicators on pandemic containment measures. He said competition for supplies during the pandemic had demonstrated that the prevailing system in the region did not perform well in that type of crisis. His country was suffering from the consequences of United States sanctions, which had made it difficult to prevent coronavirus infections and deaths and to pay the fee for vaccines through the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility. The COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics could only be overcome with States that were proactive, with active policies, connected to the reality of the countries.

19. The representative of Chile said it was important to face challenges together and share experiences. Just as the health-related crisis generated by the pandemic was profoundly social, the economic recovery also needed to be profoundly social. In Chile, the pandemic had made “the invisible” —people living on the street, persons with disabilities, children and adolescents, migrants and indigenous people— visible to other ministries. Ministries had also had to address challenges that they had not previously properly considered, such as digital access gaps, literacy, connectivity and care systems. The new relationship with civil society enabled faster responses to the needs of the population and the private sector was participating in actions to pursue the Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Chile was undertaking a process of constitutional reform, which would be key to redefining the concept of law, as it would provide an opportunity to discuss whether it was possible to exercise civil and political rights without basic social rights.

20. The representative of Argentina emphasized the social dimension of post-pandemic development. He said that in his country, there were three issues that were considered fundamental. The first issue was a basic income, which needed to be discussed at the regional level. Measures to alleviate the effects of the pandemic had prioritized the informal sector, establishing a basic income (half of the minimum wage in exchange for four hours a day), which at that time had reached 700,000 people. The second issue was labour inclusion based on five labour-intensive industries (construction, textiles, food production, care systems and recycling), creating interlinking mechanisms and ties with the private sector and fostering urbanization in neighbourhoods that did not have access to basic services and were overcrowded. Social protection policies had focused on two groups: children and youth. Levels of poverty were higher in early childhood, so the goal was to get all children into community nurseries. For youth, the age limit for receiving benefits had been extended, accompanied by grants for productive projects and cultural and community programmes for youth.

21. The representative of the British Virgin Islands thanked the Secretary of Welfare of Mexico for his leadership and said that the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development programme of work was a path towards the Sustainable Development Goals. He encouraged representatives to actively participate in the working groups; specifically, he encouraged participation in the group Leaving no one behind in the Caribbean, as all could benefit from sharing experiences and ideas, and in the fourth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development in March 2021. Lastly, he applauded Antigua and Barbuda for offering to host the next meeting of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean and said that his country would provide full support.

22. The representative of Panama said that the pandemic had reversed the progress made in previous years and had exacerbated the structural problems of the region. Panama had implemented policies aimed at poor or vulnerable people, such as food packages, digital vouchers and tax moratoriums. Priority was being given to timely care in partnership with private entities, through domestic violence programmes, shelters for older persons and for children and adolescents, mental health awareness campaigns, and implementation of virtual platforms and discussions on early childhood development, as well as virtual educational platforms. Panama was in a national dialogue (Bicentenary Pact) that sought to close gaps through a transparent and democratic dialogue, supported by technologies. Partnerships, subregional and international multilateralism, cooperation and ties among the different countries were all vital and important.

23. The representative of Costa Rica said that consideration needed to be given to a social pact focused on the Goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development. Fiscal spaces were also required that contributed to universalizing social protection and improving connectivity for the social and economic inclusion of all population groups. He welcomed the proposed plan of work and sharing of experiences, and said there was a need to focus Conference activities over the coming years on building initiatives to accelerate recovery, reconstruction and resilience. A tool was needed to establish and systematize the necessary dialogue processes, so that in 2022 the new priorities that needed to be pursued could be reviewed, along with actions to meet any new needs.

24. The representative of Ecuador said that the initiatives his country had implemented in response to the pandemic included a family protection grant for families that did not previously received any support, a nutritional support grant and a Galapagos solidarity grant to provide support in the absence of income from tourism, as well as implementation of the purple economy policy, which aimed to mainstream gender. That work had been carried out collaboratively by all ministries and levels of government, with the support of international cooperation, United Nations agencies, autonomous governments and civil society.

25. The representative of Uruguay said that the work carried out in his country had focused on informal workers who were not registered with any social protection systems (such as unemployment insurance) and on providing food vouchers. The focus had been on meeting those needs in a prudent manner, as they would be long-term. New social protection systems were needed, financed from the national budget through transfers, with strengthened foresight and savings to enable citizens to be prepared for the future.

26. The representative of Nicaragua said that in his country there had been no lockdowns and no classes were suspended because 40% of the population lived in rural areas with subsistence economies, in cities informal workers could not afford to lose their sources of income, and students did not have the means for distance learning. The pandemic had hit the country when its health system was strengthened (with increased investment in the area) and information and home follow-up strategies had been implemented for positive test results. A vaccination campaign against influenza and pneumonia had been carried out in April and May, which had prevented health services from collapsing in relation to those diseases.

27. The representative of Antigua and Barbuda expressed gratitude, on behalf of the Minister of Social Transformation and the Blue Economy, for the opportunity to participate in the meeting. She said that in her country, GDP, economic activity and employment had all declined, and requirements in health and education had increased. The measures implemented in response to the crisis included cash transfers. The Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development was an opportune tool to address the pandemic and to go further, working together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

28. The representative of Peru conveyed the greetings of the Minister of Development and Social Inclusion of Peru. He said that the health situation was hindering implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development, as the related efforts added to the pending tasks of the country, which was in a stage of political transition. Measures implemented in Peru in response to the crisis included subsidies for vulnerable populations (persons with disabilities, older persons, children in early childhood) and the strengthening of networks and services provided in the territories, as well as the inclusion of those who previously had no access to such services.

29. The representative of Brazil then reiterated his Government's willingness to work together to implement the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development. He said that his country's Emergency Aid programme had been successful in reducing extreme poverty. Through intensive use of technology, 35 million Brazilians had been included in the banking system, identification of recipients of assistance had been improved, and databases and exit strategies had been enhanced, as much more efficient ways of working with social policies. Lastly, he congratulated the participants on the draft agreements and the plan of work that had been agreed.

30. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of UN-Habitat commended the leadership shown by the Conference in social development, as well as the many references during the meetings to territorialization and the impact on cities. He said there was a need to focus on the populations living in the most precarious neighbourhoods. Lastly, he expressed his organization's support for the initiatives implemented at the local level, with a focus on neighbourhoods through the resident coordinators, who were the main interlocutors in the countries. The representative of UN-Women said that she hoped that in the 19 electoral processes that would take place in that year in the region, women would participate and contribute to a recovery with resilience, because the social contract would improve through inclusion and parity democracy. Care systems were vital to overcoming barriers to women's political participation. Lastly, to end violence against women it was crucial to have essential services and greater investment in plans and programmes to combat such violence.

Other matters (agenda item 5)

31. Under this agenda item, the representative of the British Virgin Islands described a programme being implemented by the country together with Antigua and Barbuda and Barbados to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and support the multisectoral response in the Eastern Caribbean, and expressed thanks for the technical assistance provided by ILO, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP). The representative of Antigua and Barbuda said her country was ready to host the next session of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Consideration and adoption of agreements (agenda item 6)

32. The representatives adopted the agreements contained in annex 1 of this report.

Closing session

33. In the closing session, statements were made by Javier May Rodríguez, Secretary of Welfare of Mexico; Luis Felipe López-Calva, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of UNDP; and Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC.

34. The Secretary of Welfare of Mexico said that it had been an honour to chair the Presiding Officers of the Conference. He highlighted the work carried out by every one of the participants and said he firmly believed that working together would make it possible to forge a new pact that left no one behind, moving towards a universal social protection system that would prioritize vulnerable persons (women heads of household, rural areas, youth, children and adolescents, Afrodescendants, indigenous persons and older persons). Lastly, he noted that the only bad proposal was the one that was not made.

35. The Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of UNDP commended and thanked the participants for the richness of the session and the coordinated work at the regional level. He welcomed the clarity of the messages on the importance of protecting the most vulnerable, expanding opportunities, fiscal responsibility and innovation.

36. Lastly, the Executive Secretary of ECLAC thanked all the participants for attending and emphasized the value of the collective space. She said it was important to reach everyone, to go beyond focused measures, with a view to developing universal systems, with social measures and support for workers, women, youth and girls; to strengthen systems of care; to close digital divides by developing a digital welfare state with a basic basket to achieve full inclusion; to guarantee vaccines for all; to make all population groups visible; and to consider the new paradigms that set a path to social cohesion that would guarantee rights and employment. The representative of Argentina had made important points on how to manage the sectors in which work would be essential following the recovery, on the importance of achieving collective solidarity with support for neighbourhoods, communities and households, and of the value of interlinking social policy actions with productive activities such as construction and the industrial sector, the care system and agriculture. Costa Rica had conveyed key messages on the importance of a social pact and of governance and cooperation, as had Uruguay on the structural form of social protection, which would require sustainable fiscal policy. She welcomed Antigua and Barbuda's offer to host the next session of the Regional Conference on Social Development in November 2021 and invited countries to participate in the fourth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, which would be held as a virtual meeting in March 2021. Lastly, she said that the United Nations' support for the development of the countries of the region was of great importance.

Annex 1

AGREEMENTS

At their fourth meeting, held in virtual format on 13 January, on the occasion of the XII Ministerial Forum for Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, agreed to:

1. *Emphasize* the importance of putting people and their rights at the heart of development and protecting the population from the economic and social impacts occurring as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic;

2. *Reiterate* the conviction that multilateralism and cooperation are essential means for progressing with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the region, including its social dimension, and that the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development can contribute to this process;

3. *Welcome* the presentation by the Chair of the Presiding Officers on progress regarding the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development in 2020 and request the secretariat to strengthen processes of maintaining and updating the information contained in the Observatory on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, including the systematization of social protection measures in response to the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic;

4. *Also welcome* the draft plan of work for implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development, presented by the secretariat, and request the Chair of the Presiding Officers to advance with its implementation, jointly with the secretariat;

5. *Commend* the commitment to collaborative work and active participation by all the member countries of the Conference in the challenge of addressing the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to moving forward with the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development, to leave no one behind in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;

6. *Strengthen* the development of the working groups regarding social inclusion in a post-COVID-19 environment, particularly in relation to job creation, sustained improvement in basic income and support of the solidary rural economy;

7. *Reiterate* their thanks to the Government of Mexico, in its capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers, for its role in carrying out the activities of the Conference;

8. *Thank* the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, in its capacity as secretariat of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, for the support provided in relation to the implementation of the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development and the response to the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic;

9. *Thank* the Government of Antigua and Barbuda for its kind offer to host the fourth session of the Regional Conference on Social Development of Latin America and the Caribbean, which will be held in virtual format in the second half of 2021, and request the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to convene that session on dates to be established in consultation with the host country.

Annex 2

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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United Nations agencies, funds and programmes

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