

# CEPAL

## Review

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# CEPAL

## Review

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## Erroneous theses on youth in the 1990s

*John Durston\**

Recent proposals aimed at furthering equality of opportunities for young people are often not backed up by detailed empirical information. This article takes issue with some contentions made in diagnoses on this subject, especially regarding formal education and integration into work, and contrasts them with recent information in this respect.

Consideration of the heterogeneous situations and characteristics of young people in the countries of the region shows how serious the lack of opportunities continues to be for a large number of poor and under-educated young people. At the same time, it gives grounds for cautious optimism over the future possibilities of offering better options to these young people and thus contributing to greater equity in the societies concerned.

Policies for improving opportunities for marginalized young people, rather than being attempted through specific programmes, should be carried out as part of the overall strategy of changing production patterns with equity in the urban and rural, formal and informal, and modern and traditional sectors. Their inner logic should consist of a virtuous circle made up of three elements: increasing the productivity of young peoples' labour, increasing the productivity of the units of production in which they work, and improving the organization and social integration of young people.

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## Introduction

Equity, which is the great central objective of social development (ECLAC 1990a), largely depends on the successful application of the principle of equal opportunities for people of equal merits. The failure of past attempts to put into practice absolutely equalitarian utopias, and the general recognition that the "spontaneous" social phenomena linked with the market economy include the perpetuation of marginalization and the inheritance of privileges, have caused this aspect of equity to be recognized as a legitimate priority object of planning and public intervention.<sup>1</sup>

The skewed "intergenerational transmission of lifetime opportunities" (ECLAC, 1990b) begins before a child is even born, with such factors as the nutrition of the mother and the economic and social characteristics of the parents and the home into which the child is born. It is the fleeting period of youth, however, which is the stage in life in which most of the important opportunities are concentrated and in which the channels of social mobility are definitively opened for some and closed for others. Just as the psychological experiences of the adolescent play a decisive role in forming the definitive personality of the adult, it is the greater or lesser degree of success achieved in the passage through the stage of youth—in terms of education, social interaction and the first ventures into the labour market—which defines the range of possible socio-occupational identities for the adult.

Since youth is a transitional stage between the home in which the child is socialized and the formation of a new home and a new social identity for the adult, it is a particularly valuable indicator of the relative rigidity or flexibility of the structures of socio-occupational stratification: an aspect of fundamental importance as regards the question of equity in the process of economic and social development. The intergenerational transmission of lifetime opportunities is one of the main processes—if not the main process—whereby a rigid social stratification is perpetuated (Weber, 1958). In poor homes where the adults have a low level of formal education and were brought up in cultures very different

<sup>1</sup> The other aspect of equity—income redistribution—reduces the most extreme manifestations of inequality more rapidly. This reduction of the extremes is also a prior requisite for achieving true equality of opportunities (see Gurrieri and Torres-Rivas, 1990; ECLAC/UNESCO, 1991; and ECLAC, 1992).

from the dominant one, the possibility that education will be able to provide the children with real equality of opportunities to attain jobs which are more productive, have better status and are better paid than those of the parents will be extremely small unless strong compensatory measures are applied.<sup>2</sup>

There are two basic conditions for overcoming these barriers standing in the way of equity in the period of youth: firstly, that each young person should be able to realize his full educational potential –to form his “capabilities” (Sen, 1989)– in accordance with his inborn intelligence and his efforts to learn, and secondly, that there should be equality of access to the same occupations and equal income for all young adults with similar levels of educational achievement. The aim of the present article is to see, on the basis of recent statistical information, to what extent these two conditions have been fulfilled in Latin America.

Every policy proposal must be based on a diagnosis and a projection. However, many of the strategies proposed in recent years for moving towards equality of opportunities for the young people of Latin America have been based on subjective impressions, with little detailed empirical information or with a superficial and sketchy analysis of such information. This article will take issue, on the basis of recent empirical data, with some contentions which are frequently found in diagnoses on Latin American youth, particularly with regard to formal education and the process of integration of young people into the adult working world. It will conclude with some reflections on what this “revisionist” diagnosis means for the formulation of policies aimed at giving greater equality of opportunity to the young people who will become adults in the 1990s.

## I

### Parameters and definitions

The age stratum analysed is that of adolescents, youths and young adults between 15 and 29 years of age. The definition of youth used here distinguishes between the abstract concept of youth as a phase in the life of human beings, and the concrete concept of the young people of today: the cohort of real persons who are at this moment in the stage of youth.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we will deal mainly with the prospects of the real youth of today, in the light of the trends observed in household surveys of the

1980s, and with policies designed to promote equity among subgroups of young people of this “generation of the 1990s”.

There are two main prior considerations which guide this analysis: firstly, the heterogeneity of the various national situations in Latin America and the Caribbean means that it is difficult to make an analysis at the regional level. Every analyst must struggle against the unconscious tendency to impose on such widely varying countries an image similar to that of the situation in the country he knows best. The very different possibilities of achieving a high degree of equality of opportunity in education and employment for the whole of youth in the medium term give rise to a range of national situations which are structurally very different from each other. These structural differences reduce the usefulness of standard proposals for the whole region and for all the countries composing it. In order to simplify the analysis, however, it is useful to consider the phase reached by each country in its demographic, occupational and economic transition from an agricultural society to a modern urban industrial and services society. We shall concentrate on the two extremes of this continuum: on the highly urbanized countries of

<sup>2</sup> There are various other mechanisms for the reproduction of the social status of the parents in the children, such as the inheritance of wealth, the transmission of subcultural codes, introduction into informal networks of social contacts, etc. In this study, however, we are only interested in the role that public policy can play in ensuring that the educational system and the labour market function on terms of authentic equality of occupational opportunities. In this article the subject is restricted to the prospects of the present cohorts of young people in the 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> Like other researchers in the region, we have preferred to add the 25-29 age group (“young adults”) to the usual statistical definition of youth, since at present between 10% and 20% of urban young people between these ages have not yet become fully integrated into productive employment (ECLAC, 1990a).

the Southern Cone, and on the poorest and most rural countries of the region (the Andean, some Caribbean, and the Central American countries). All the other countries occupy intermediate positions in this range of levels of demographic transition, urbanization and modernization, which is also related to variables such as employment structure and average levels of education. Ordering the countries in this way is no more than a heuristic tool, however, and there are clear limits on the validity of its use. On the one hand, it does not mean that all countries must necessarily follow the same path of modernization, and on the other hand several large countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, rather than occupying "intermediate" positions in

the continuum, are seen to be more or less polarized nations with a developed part and a poor part coexisting and interacting within the same territory.

The second main consideration in our analysis arises naturally from the way in which recent statistical data shed new light on eight frequently repeated assertions which have served to guide some diagnoses and proposals on policies for youth but which, when compared with the empirical evidence, seem to us to be erroneous.<sup>4</sup> This exercise is carried out as a way of leading up to conclusions which in many cases contradict these commonplaces and make it necessary for us to modify our working hypotheses, diagnoses and policy recommendations.

## II

### Eight erroneous contentions on youth in the region

The most common erroneous contentions on youth in Latin America cover a wide variety of topics. An effort has been made here to order them in line with a simple typology of these topics: thus, the first contention concerns the growth rate of the young population, others concern education, and others employment.

*Erroneous contention No. 1: The growth rate of the number of young people is going down steadily all over Latin America.*

*Observations.* The number of young people in the region as a whole is indeed growing more and more slowly, but what is true for the region as a whole is not necessarily so for each of the countries composing it. Various poor and predominantly rural countries, such as Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti, are in fact now registering peak youth growth rates as part of their processes of structural demographic transition (table 1). Moreover, the growth rates of limited age groups (such as young people) are more sensitive than the growth rate of the population as a whole to earlier changes in fertility and infant mortality. In countries such as Argentina and Chile, which are at a more advanced stage of demographic transition and have had low growth rates for years, there may nevertheless be sharp fluctuations in the growth rates of the young population. Because of

an earlier increase in fertility, Argentina is currently registering a temporary speeding up of the growth rate of its young cohorts, but the rate will go down again before the end of the century (table 1). In Chile in contrast, the number of young people is going down in absolute terms at this moment, but it will rise again with the cohorts of the second half of the 1990s.

In a recent exercise to project employment and income trends in the formal and informal sectors up to the year 2000, a striking feature—although this was not highlighted in the analysis—is that the factor determining the prospects of productive employment and income is not so much the stage reached in the transformation of production patterns as the growth rate of the working-age population in each type of country studied (ILO/PREALC, 1990). For this reason, the great heterogeneity of the various national situations with regard to the growth rates of the new cohorts of young people reaching working age each year is of particular importance.

<sup>4</sup>Contentions 1, 3 and 6 are expressly or implicitly contained, for example, in UNOV/CSDHA/SDD, 1991; contentions 7 and 8 are to be found in ECLAC, 1990a, and contention 5 is in ILO/PREALC, 1990. Contentions 2 and 4 have appeared in various national diagnoses of the impacts of the crisis on youth, in proposals for development strategies, etc. All of them are frequently heard in meetings and seminars on these subjects, both in academic circles and within the United Nations system.

Table 1

**SELECTED LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES:  
GROWTH OF YOUTH POPULATION,  
1990-1995 AND 1995-2000**  
(Average annual percentage rates)

	Age group	1990-1995	1995-2000
Argentina	15-19	2.99	0.01
	20-24	2.50	3.00
	25-29	0.96	2.51
Bolivia	15-19	3.08	3.09
	20-24	3.06	3.19
	25-29	2.95	3.18
Chile	15-19	-0.74	2.55
	20-24	-1.29	-0.18
	25-29	-0.10	-0.18
Cuba	15-19	-7.83	0.32
	20-24	-1.29	-7.96
	25-29	0.81	-1.30
Guatemala	15-19	3.48	2.79
	20-24	3.40	3.66
	25-29	3.12	3.59
Haiti	15-19	1.07	1.63
	20-24	1.40	1.15
	25-29	3.13	1.49
Honduras	15-19	1.83	3.19
	20-24	3.99	1.86
	25-29	4.42	4.02

Source: ECLAC, on the basis of data from CELADE, 1991.

There are no grounds, then, for expecting the problems of young people and of equity in the region as a whole to be relieved merely by the gradual reduction of the number of those requiring education and taking up their first jobs. The heterogeneity of the growth rates of the number of young people –not only in different countries but also at different times and in different strata of a given country– must be taken into account in formulating public policies. Strategies designed to ensure greater equality of opportunity with regard to education and productive employment must above all be flexible in time and capable of being modified to suit young populations from different social sectors, and from the very start they must take account of the estimated probable demand for access.

*Erroneous contention No. 2: The demand for primary education has already been satisfied or almost satisfied in the great majority of the countries of Latin America.*

*Observations.* The idea that the problem of primary education has already been “settled” in Latin America may stem from the widely disseminated figures on gross rates of enrolment. The statistics provided by governments indicate that gross enrolment of children of primary school age has been close to 100% for several years now in most of the countries of the region (ECLAC, 1991a). However, these figures suffer from intrinsic weaknesses because they come from two very disparate sources: the enrolment figures collected by Ministries of Education, and the information on the population of primary school age derived from population censuses. Official data from household censuses, which are methodologically stricter, have in various cases indicated that around 1980 there were significant percentages of children (who are now young people) who were not attending school, and some of these figures came from countries where the gross enrolment rate for the year in question was close to or over 100% (table 2).

Even more important is the high and growing rate of repetition in the early years of schooling (Schiefelbein, 1989 and ECLAC, 1991b), which reflects the enormous qualitative insufficiency and lack of adaptation to the needs of poor children which is displayed by public education in almost all the countries of the region. Repetition is often a vicious circle in which the child remains bogged down until adolescence and eventual expulsion or “dropping out” from the formal educational system.<sup>5</sup> As might be expected, the rates of absenteeism and especially of low educational achievement among children from the poorest 25% of households are significantly higher than the average rates for all children (ECLAC, 1991b, tables 12 and 13).

<sup>5</sup> Hardly any young person “drops out” simply because he wants to. Both repetition and dropping out are felt by the young people concerned to be signs of personal failure, but from the educational point of view, it is the educational system which has failed in the vast majority of these cases.

Table 2

**BRAZIL, URUGUAY AND VENEZUELA:  
FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY IN ONE COHORT,  
ABSENCE FROM SCHOOL A DECADE AGO,  
AND YEARS OF SCHOOLING OF YOUNG  
PEOPLE OF TODAY**

	Children between 6 and 14 who do not go to school (%)		Young people between 15 and 19 with 0-3 years of completed schooling
<i>Brazil</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1987</i>	<i>1987</i>
Urban sector	17.3	6	19
Rural sector	39.8	13	51.8
<i>Uruguay</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1986</i>
Urban sector	5	5.5	2.4
<i>Venezuela</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1986</i>
Urban sector	6.9	6	5.3
Rural sector	17.3	17	21.2

Source: School attendance: ECLAC, 1991b; Completed schooling: ECLAC, 1991c.

The proportions of young people with 0 to 3 years of schooling –an indirect indicator of functional illiteracy, since most people with these levels of education cannot read even simple texts– are an eloquent illustration of the consequences of dropping out from primary education among the young people of today (table 2). In 1986, the rates of functional illiteracy ranged from 2.4% of the urban population between 15 and 19 in Uruguay to 51% of rural youth in Brazil (table 2) and to as much as 72% of young rural women in Guatemala (ECLAC, 1991c).

In other words, there continue to be young illiterates in all the countries of the region. In most of the countries the problem of under-educated young people continues to be serious, especially among those who live in rural areas or are of rural origin, and it demands effective responses through programmes to remedy deficient learning processes at the primary school level. In many countries of the region (Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti and Honduras) the main current challenge in education from the point of view of equity is still that of eliminating functional illiteracy among the young people of today. Without qualitatively adequate primary education for all, secondary and higher education has no role to play in an equity strategy, at least in

countries where most young people lack a learning base which is sufficiently solid to enable them to benefit from secondary education.

*Erroneous contention No. 3: In Latin America, young men have more years of schooling than young women.*

*Observations:* Latin America differs from the other developing regions (and in this sense is more similar to the developed countries) in that in the great majority of the countries in the region young men do not have more schooling than young women (Eichelbaum, 1988; ECLAC, 1989; ECLAC, 1991c; Schiefelbein and Peruzzi, 1991). Except in a small number of countries at the least urbanized and most predominantly peasant and indigenous extremes of the region, girls go to school more than boys. In a number of countries, the present generation is the first one in which this new relation of educational privilege between the sexes is registered, even in higher education, according to data from official surveys in six countries from 1986 onwards (ECLAC, 1991c; Parada, 1991). The disadvantages of young university-level women begin to be observed more in the type of studies in which they are concentrated, since these tend to be intended to prepare for occupations defined by the predominant culture as “women’s work”, of lower status and income than the tertiary level studies in which men are concentrated.<sup>6</sup>

It is only in societies which are still markedly agricultural that young women have gone to school less, especially in rural areas. The most pronounced and serious educational disparity, however, is that which persists in all countries between

<sup>6</sup> Most of the occupations reserved for educated women are, on the one hand, non-manual, and on the other hand, a reflection of the traditional stereotype of women as “servers” of men and children. An aspect of the situation of young women in these areas of education and occupation which has been little studied is that of their proximity to men in occupations of higher status and income. At least in past decades, women of the lower-class strata saw a “good marriage” as an important means of social mobility (Gurrieri, 1971, p. 53).

rural young people of both sexes and their urban peers (ECLAC, 1991b and 1991c).<sup>7</sup>

*Erroneous contention No. 4:* *The crisis has led to massive and generalized dropping out from school, because of the reduction of income suffered in the homes of lower-class young people*

*Observations:* Although there has been some tendency towards greater early dropping out among some subgroups of young people in some countries, such as Costa Rica and Brazil, this has not been on a very large scale. Moreover, there have been two other reactions to the difficulties caused by the economic crisis of recent years. One has been the increase in young people (especially males) who study and work at the same time: in 1987 in Brazil, for example, 46% of the young men between 15 and 19 who were studying were also working or seeking work. The other is the tendency towards longer studies, partly due to the persistent demand in all social strata for more education for their children, and partly representing a reaction to a depressed labour market which cannot, in the short term, provide all young people with jobs in keeping with their expectations. Thus, it would appear that many young people stay out of the market and continue to study with the hope of entering a more buoyant future labour market with better qualifications.<sup>8</sup> This latter strategy, however, is not open to young people from households with very few resources, and instead of studying they have to work in order to live, at great personal sacrifice and to the detriment of their academic performance (Braslavsky, 1991). Work in itself is of course also a useful way of acquiring

<sup>7</sup> This disadvantage is largely explained by the fact that there is a higher proportion of poor people in the rural population than in urban areas. In this context, another "erroneous contention" is the idea that the rural poverty of yesterday has been transferred to the urban centres. What has actually happened is that today most of the *total* population of the region lives in cities, and this partly explains why a slight majority of poor people also live there. In addition to the fact that the proportion of poor people continues to be very high in rural areas, however, there is also the fact that "indigents" – the poorest of the poor – mostly continue to live in rural areas (ECLAC, 1990). Among poor young people, the indices of rurality are probably even higher, since they include potential migrants.

<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to determine exactly how much of the lengthening of studies is due to the attitude of seeing them as a refuge from a labour market which is in crisis, and how much is due to the long-standing general tendency to increase the number of years of schooling.

experience and background for seeking better jobs, but when it is only the poorest young people who follow this path, work diverts them from the competition for tertiary-level education. In practice, this helps to strengthen the stratified transmission of opportunities between generations.

*Erroneous contention No. 5:* *The size of the urban economically active population of young people is already fixed in advance for the period 1990-2000, because these cohorts of the new generation have already been born.*

*Observations:* The few projections of the urban economically active population (EAP) which have been made at the regional level assume, not unreasonably, that various important economic and social processes will follow in the future a similar pattern to that observed in recent decades. However, the youth portion of the urban EAP may vary in coming years in two ways. On the one hand, the proportion of the total youth population which is working or seeking work varies from one country to another, from one subgroup to another, and from one moment to another in line with the proportions which remain *inactive*: those who devote themselves exclusively to longer studies, young people engaged in domestic tasks, and those who neither study nor work and have lost all hope of finding work.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, rural-urban migration flows of young people may vary according to the perception that rural young people have of the relative advantages of *staying in rural areas* or migrating.<sup>10</sup> In countries where there is a majority of rural population, this perception is decisive in determining the growth rate of the cohorts of young people and young adults entering the urban economically active population each year.

<sup>9</sup> The numbers of young people who do not work or study and of young women engaged in domestic tasks have increased in recent years in some countries, in contrast with historical trends (ECLAC, 1991b).

<sup>10</sup> There are indications that migratory flows vary as a function of the difference between the urban minimum wage and average rural day-wages (Commander and Peek, 1983), and that the emigration of young people with complete primary education is lower in more prosperous areas where there is a higher level of agricultural technology (ECLAC, 1992). Moreover, there is evidence that rural-urban migratory flows are going down in some countries, possibly because some crops have become more profitable as a consequence of reforms in national price and subsidy policies.



*Erroneous contention No. 6: The main damage which the debt crisis has caused among adolescents is the high level of unemployment currently registered in the 15 to 19 age group.*

*Observations:* Unemployment is such a serious problem that, whatever the proportion of young people affected, governments must give high priority to its eradication. In order to deal with adolescent unemployment adequately, however, it must be seen in perspective. In the first place, the levels of unemployment of all age groups increased in the first years of the crisis, but then sank back in most of the countries to somewhere near their historical levels (ECLAC, 1990a), both for young people and for adults. In the second place, the young economically active population has historically tended to go down as a percentage of the total youth population in the process of modernization of production patterns, since a growing proportion spend a longer time studying. The corollary of this is that young people who give up their studies have less education and fewer production skills than the average, work in unskilled occupations, and register high rates of unemployment. All this has led to a growing distortion of perceptions regarding youth unemployment rates when these are calculated as a percentage of the young *economically active* population, rather than of the *total* youth population, and the greater the degree of modernization of the country, the greater this distortion is. To take an extreme example, in 1986 in Panama, 34% of the urban female adolescent EAP was unemployed, but this was only equivalent to 7% of the total urban population of that age group and sex, since the great majority were studying and did not form part of the economically active population (ECLAC, 1991c).

All the countries of the region have passed or are passing through the transition towards modern production patterns in which young men work less and study more and young women devote themselves less to traditional domestic tasks. In a first phase of this socio-occupational transition to modernity, many of these young women enter the wage-earning labour market, but a growing number also take up secondary and tertiary-level studies.

When measured with the more appropriate yardstick of the total youth population, there are no clear indications that youth unemployment rates, as a

percentage of the total youth population, have increased compared with the same rates for the total population (they remained at around double the latter rates both at the end of the 1970s and the end of the 1980s), nor that a major sector is being formed of people who, after being young unemployed, are becoming unemployable adults (ECLAC, 1991c, Statistical Annex, table 1). Rather than increased unemployment, the most serious and lasting damage done by the crisis has been the reduction of the time available for school work or early abandonment of studies in order to work, in some subgroups of young people from lower-income homes. Their lack of minimum qualifications will probably make it difficult for these young people to integrate themselves in a productive manner into the labour force, and many of them will be doomed to lifelong underemployment.

*Erroneous contention No. 7: New jobs for young adults (20 to 29 years of age) are only being created in the informal sector.*

*Observations:* It is quite true that in most of the countries of the region, employment in the urban informal sector has grown more than in other sectors, and the relative weight of that sector in the total economically active population has therefore increased. In many countries, however, employment in the formal sector has also grown in absolute numbers (table 3); in cases where the formal sector already covers a high percentage of the total labour force, this growth has in some periods exceeded that of the urban informal sector, once again in absolute terms.<sup>11</sup> In particular, many of the jobs recently occupied by young adults (20-29 years of age) with more education are in the formal sector (ECLAC, 1991b). Indeed, many employers in the formal sector have been benefitted by an abundant supply of young workers with a good education, willing to accept lower wages than before (ECLAC, 1991b and 1991c; ILO/PREALC, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> In the cases of Panama and Brazil, it has not been possible to separate the population employed in enterprises with one to five employees (urban informal sector) from the total number employed in private firms. It has been estimated that these micro-enterprises absorbed a large part of the increased number of people seeking work during the decade. This subsector is relatively small in both countries, and in the case of Costa Rica it did not grow in relative terms over the period 1982-1988.

Table 3

**COSTA RICA, PANAMA AND BRAZIL: ABSORPTION OF INCREASE IN EMPLOYED  
POPULATION BETWEEN 25 AND 29 YEARS OF AGE BY THE FORMAL  
AND INFORMAL SECTORS**

	Increase		Urban formal sector (%)	Urban informal sector (%)	Domestic service (%)	Agricultural sector (%)
	(Thousands)	%				
<i>Costa Rica</i> <sup>a</sup> 1982-1988	35.5	100	29	31	15	25
<i>Panama</i> <sup>b</sup> 1979-1986	10.3	100	43	23	6	32
<i>Brazil</i> <sup>b</sup> 1979-1987	2 067.6	100	62	20	8	10

Source: ECLAC, on the basis of household surveys.

<sup>a</sup> In Costa Rica, the urban informal sector covers non-agricultural own-account workers (excluding professionals and technicians), unpaid family members, and persons employed in enterprises with between 1 and 5 workers.

<sup>b</sup> In Panama and Brazil, the urban informal sector covers own-account workers (excluding professionals and technicians) and unpaid family members ("Limited Definition"). Because of the lack of disaggregated data, persons employed in enterprises with 1 to 5 workers are included in the urban formal sector.

*Erroneous  
contention No. 8*

*The poorest economically active young adults are to be found in the urban informal sector, whose workers are those expelled or rejected by the formal sector because of their low levels of skills.*

**Observations:** When we speak of the urban informal sector, we are speaking of something which may be one of two different phenomena. In its theoretical definition, the urban informal sector is a part of the economy characterized by production units with very little capital, largely self-generated jobs, and a labour force with a low level of skills which has been expelled from the formal sector (where the jobs are more productive and better paid).

The second definition of the urban informal sector seeks to make this theoretical concept operational from the statistical point of view, in terms of the usual variables of the available official censuses and surveys. According to this *operational/statistical* definition, the urban informal sector is made up of persons working in non-agricultural occupations in own-account activities (excluding professionals and technicians), in

family production units, or in small enterprises with between one and five employees; sometimes, domestic servants are also included in this group. This same definition is used to estimate the magnitude of underemployment (usually by adding together the population employed in agriculture, own-account activities and in family production units).

Table 4 sticks to this definition as far as possible and applies it to the active population of young male adults in four countries in a recent year of the crisis period. It is immediately obvious that this table provides some useful data for analysing the employment opportunities open to young adults today. First of all, in the five types of jobs most frequently encountered in the informal sector, one country shows clear superiority of those employed in the formal sector in terms of income (and, in general, productivity). This country is Panama, the most "formalized"<sup>12</sup> and "modernized" of the four countries in table 4

<sup>12</sup> In Panama, 55% of the total employed population between 25 and 29 years of age was in the formal sector in 1986 (ECLAC, 1991b).

Table 4

**PANAMA, COSTA RICA, BRAZIL AND GUATEMALA: INCOMES OF MEN BETWEEN  
25 AND 29 IN THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL SECTORS<sup>a</sup>**

*(Average income of the total employed population = 100)*

	Panama, 1986		Costa Rica, 1988 <sup>b</sup>		Brazil, 1986		Guatemala, 1986	
	Formal sector	Informal sector	Formal sector	Informal sector	Formal sector	Informal sector	Formal sector	Informal sector
Industrial and craft workers	0.84	0.77	0.83	1.08	0.98	1.14	1.00	0.73
Transport drivers	0.87	0.84	0.98	1.15	0.83	2.19	1.15	0.83
Construction workers	0.70	0.59	0.78	0.91	0.55	0.81	0.98	1.01
Shop assistants, street traders	0.84	0.51	0.81	0.96	0.83	1.11	1.04	1.03
Agricultural workers	0.46	0.34	0.54	0.68	0.38	0.63	0.65	0.93

Source: ECLAC, on the basis of household surveys.

<sup>a</sup> In the most frequent occupations in the informal sector, according to the "limited" definition of the Regional Employment Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean (PREALC), wage-earners = formal sector and own-account = informal sector.

<sup>b</sup> Employed male population (any age).

(ECLAC, 1989). In two other countries, however, the income of these young adults in the urban informal sector is higher than that of their opposite numbers in the same occupations in the formal sector, and the same is true of those working in agriculture. These data coincide with the conclusions of other researchers, according to which in 26 of 28 household surveys analysed, the poorest 25% of households in the region receive most of their income in the form of wages and not through own-account activities (ECLAC, 1991b).

Secondly, it is worth noting that the differences in income between the two sectors are smaller than the differences between different occupations (in either of the two sectors). This suggests that the heterogeneity of the informal sector (ILO/PREALC, 1990) is due partly (ECLAC, 1989; Cacciamali, 1983) to voluntary mobility –and not just expulsion– of workers from the formal to the informal sector, which occurs when the real wages in the former deteriorate and the workers perceive the possibility of obtaining advantages by working on their own account. This information also suggests that the higher overall average

productivity of the formal sector is due largely to the weight of non-manual occupations (office workers, professionals, technicians, etc.) who require medium or high levels of qualifications.

In order to evaluate the equality of opportunity with regard to employment and income that the young people of today will encounter in the coming years, it seems necessary to formulate a new and modified model of formal/informal employment (see for example Tannen, 1991), in which expulsion or rejection of workers from the formal sector is not the only determining factor in the size of the urban informal sector. As well as taking into account voluntary movements in both directions between these sectors –and between them and the agricultural sector–, it also seems worth while evaluating the level of education or skills attained by various subgroups of young people, not so much in relation to a rigid formal/informal dichotomy, but in terms of the types of occupations which they can hope to enter, either in big firms or micro-enterprises, or working on their own account.

### III

## Equity policies for the generation of the 1990s

It is not disputed here –indeed, this is not the place to dispute such an assertion– that most of the countries of the region are far from reaching the degree of equity needed to achieve a change in production patterns which is cohesive and stable from the social point of view. Nor does it seem feasible that this generation of young people, whose capabilities are already very inequitably defined (ECLAC, 1991b), will be able to achieve real equality of opportunity with regard to employment and income. On the contrary, the tremendous shortcomings in training, and the vast number of young people today who are suffering from these shortcomings in all the countries of the region, give no grounds whatever for complacency nor for easy optimism that things will put themselves right automatically.

These realities make it necessary, in this decade of economic adjustment and restructuring and for this generation, to set the objectives with regard to equity at a more modest level. One of these objectives would be to increase as far as possible the opportunities for education, employment and better income for young people in the poorest rural and urban strata. Such a deliberately skewed increase in the opportunities for education, employment and reasonable income of young people of the poorest strata must be distinguished from the “structural mobility” which characterized the social changes in the three decades prior to the crisis in the region, and thanks to which a large part of the new generations in all strata improved their occupational and economic situation, albeit without really changing the great existing inequalities (ECLAC, 1989). In the 1990s, what we can reasonably propose is that the increases in the per capita gross domestic product (which may be quite modest, especially in the first part of the decade) must be reflected in increases of at least a similar amount in the support given to education of the marginalized young people of today and in the income they receive from their work. The analysis made in the preceding pages helps to place in perspective the trends already observed with regard to equity of access to education, employment and higher incomes. In order to take account of these trends in policies aimed at promoting equality of opportunity –using the restricted definition of equity applicable to this

generation of the 1990s– it is necessary to review in approximately reverse order some of the erroneous contentions and the observations made on them above.

With regard to a fundamental aspect –the feasibility of achieving greater equity in the midst of economic adjustments and restructuring– we should recall recent experiences such as those of Costa Rica and Mexico (García, 1991), which show that it is possible to carry out far-reaching processes of adjustment and restructuring of production with a minimal social cost (in both degree and duration) in terms of inequity, provided the political forces are agreed that it is necessary to give maximum support to levels of employment, minimum wages and essential social spending.

#### 1. *General considerations on education and income in the 1980s*

Generally speaking, “educational capital has continued to weigh heavily in determining the capacity to generate income from work” (ECLAC, 1991b, p. 35). In spite of the growing disparities between the quality of free public education and paid private education, this weight is reflected, in general terms, in the correlation between the number of years of study completed by young adults and their income. Clearly, the differences in the quality of the first years of education have a feedback effect –in terms of educational backwardness and more or less early abandonment of studies– on the number of years of studies successfully completed. In most of the countries of the region, where less than one-fifth of young people manage to continue studying after their secondary education and where another fifth or more consists of functional illiterates, the dispersion of the youth population in terms of number of years of studies successfully completed means that this variable continues to be useful for evaluating the educational capital of the youth labour force of today.

Another process which has affected equity in labour remuneration is a secondary effect of the relative stagnation in the creation of new jobs of higher productivity (ECLAC, 1991c). This has reduced the effect of education as a channel for social

mobility, since the difference in income between better educated young people and their less educated but better paid elders seems to have increased (ECLAC, 1991c). There has thus been a downward levelling of average incomes in various middle-class or white collar occupations; it was in these occupations which demanded higher levels of education that previous generations of young people had found their main channel of upward social mobility (ECLAC, 1991b and 1991c). Up to a certain point, because of the abundance of relatively well-qualified labour among young people in the 1980s, they have had to pay a good part of the social cost of the crisis and the adjustment.

Against this empirical background, various guidelines can be deduced for strategies aimed at achieving greater equity in employment. As the main problem posed by the more modest definition of equity is the absorption of young people with less education in productive jobs that give them sufficient income to escape from poverty, it is worth looking again at the observations on contention No. 8 on productivity in the informal sector and contention No. 7 on absorption in the formal sector at lower wages.

## *2. Productive employment for young people in the urban informal sector*

In the less developed countries (and also in recently industrialized countries which display social polarization), where there are relatively big urban informal sectors and a current high growth rate of the young cohorts, the need to reduce the prevailing inequality of opportunities calls in the medium term for the provision of support to those microenterprises in the informal sector which appear to be "viable candidates for modernization and expansion" (ILO/PREALC, 1990, p. 81). As it costs less to improve the productivity of the informal sector than to create (adequately remunerated) jobs in the formal sector, the informal sector can occupy a notably important place, especially in the countries where it is larger and is growing more rapidly.

The available information on the true magnitude of urban informal sector heterogeneity (see the observations on contention No. 8) lead to a further conclusion: that in order to improve the opportunities of productive employment for the less favoured young people it is necessary to reduce to the minimum that part of the urban informal sector which really does

correspond to its theoretical definition, that is to say, those microenterprises which do indeed have extremely low levels of capital, know-how and integration into formal markets. In other words, if a good proportion of informal sector jobs have levels of income which are higher than the average income in the same occupations in the formal sector (table 4), this part of the urban informal sector does not raise any problem of "underemployment". The formal sector is not always a synonym of modernity, while a substantial part of the empirical informal sector, in contrast with its theoretical abstract model, has modernized its activities in recent decades, raising its levels of capitalization, training and productivity to levels comparable with the same jobs in the formal sector (ECLAC, 1989).

In order for the "modernized" urban informal subsector to serve as a channel of mobility for marginalized youth, it will be necessary to improve and expand information systems on available jobs and local "labour exchanges", while at the same time providing assistance in the form of credit, technical assistance and marketing services to micro-production units which give employment to these young people.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, as suggested in the observations on contention No. 7, it would be wrong to discount out of hand the substantial capacity of the formal sector to absorb the increasingly well-trained youth labour force which is emerging in all the countries of the region (see observations on contention No. 4). It could be said, as a working hypothesis, that the countries which are still in the "easy phase" of the employment transition (ECLAC, 1989) require

<sup>13</sup>The supposed duality of the labour market disappears when the policy of "formalization of the informal" is applied. A novel way of generating jobs for unemployed young people in microenterprises which do not suffer from the stigma of being "informal" may emerge from another tendency which is also beginning to be a concern for planners: the rapid increase in the number of retirees and pensioners. During their working life, many pensioners accumulate experience, a small amount of capital (savings, pension funds, a house, or other real estate), and often also knowledge of supervision or management. In spite of the commonplaces about their "wage-earning mentality", many pensioners who are in the situation described are interested in beginning a second career of independent work, either on their own account or in partnership with their peers. Offering this type of person cheap credit, technical assistance and support in marketing, on condition that they hire and help to train unemployed young people, could be an effective way, in some countries, of integrating marginalized young people into productive jobs.

lower growth rates of the product than the more developed countries of the region, which have already exhausted this phase, in order to bring about a high growth rate of creation of new jobs in the formal sector. On the other hand, when the objective is to achieve more equitable conditions of productive work for young people in the countries with more formal production structures, the deterioration of wages in the formal sector is of crucial importance. It is obvious today that this deterioration constitutes one of the main costs of the adjustment (ILO/PREALC, 1990). Many enterprises have taken advantage of the oversupply of labour and other factors in order to achieve a spurious form of competitiveness based on excessively low wages which have no relation with the real productivity of the labour force (ECLAC, 1990a). There are substantial proportions of young people and young adults who are currently receiving lower incomes than those received by their peers in the period before the crisis (ECLAC, 1991c), and in quite a number of these cases (ECLAC, 1991b) these incomes are so low that they do not even cover the minimum needs of a small household. It is perfectly possible, and in fact often happens, that young people are occupying jobs in the formal sector yet at the same time living in a state of poverty. Combating the lack of reasonably paid jobs for working-class youth in the formal sector means creating a suitable climate for the strengthening of trade unions and collective negotiation, furthering the interest of young people in participating, and involving these collective actors of society in the concertation of national restructuring and economic and social development strategies.

### *3. Elements of educational strategies*

In the countries which are at the most modern end of the Latin American continuum, the adoption of measures to assist the majority of young people who have difficulties in completing their secondary education is a priority objective which is quite capable of being attained. If the forced abandonment of studies is the most serious aspect of the early entry of young people onto the labour market, as noted in the observations on contention No. 6, then the creation of jobs for young people must necessarily be accompanied by universal access to secondary education, support for the initiation and financing of university studies, and training in "modern" occupational techniques.

Giving support to young people with economic or academic difficulties in continuing their full time studies—in formal secondary education or specific occupational training programmes—is also a way of putting off, at least during the first and most difficult phase of the restructuring of production activities, the entry of part of the current cohorts pressuring the labour market each year. In order for this strategy to make an effective contribution to reducing the prevailing inequity in education, it is necessary to increase substantially the financial resources for programmes of positive discrimination in the poorest schools, through scholarships, food subsidies, bonuses on top of their salaries in order to attract the best teachers, reduction of the size of classes, and lengthening of the school day in these schools (Simmons and Alexander, 1978).

However, bearing in mind that a substantial proportion of the students who are today in secondary education have already suffered the drawbacks of an insufficient primary education and no longer aspire to university studies, it would appear to be necessary to combine formal studies with productive work which could give them more useful learning processes than those available to them in school. If it is desired to increase in this way the opportunities open to young people with few acquired capacities, it will be necessary to coordinate efforts with employers who really will provide training for these young people at work.

In the countries which are at the least urban-industrial end of the continuum, emphasis will have to be placed on the rescue of young people who are functional illiterates (see observations on contention No. 2), on the promotion of the equality in education still not attained by young women (see the observations on contention No. 3), and on the dual effort of training and support for the existing institutions in the urban informal sector and, above all, in rural areas.

Functional illiteracy among young people continues to be one of the most difficult challenges to the modernization of production activities, especially in the less developed countries (see the observations on contention No. 2). In these countries, young adult functional illiterates form more than half of the male and two-thirds of the female populations (ECLAC, 1991b), and they are doomed to pass their lives in lower-income jobs as peasants, agricultural labourers, domestic servants, construction workers, craft workers or day labourers (ECLAC, 1991c).

## IV

### Elements of educational and employment strategies for some subgroups of young people

#### 1. *Young women*

The adverse employment situation of young women in the less urban-industrial countries of the region explains why the school attendance of this group is greater in the remaining countries. In the latter, young women have some opportunities for social mobility through education. Unlike young men, who can enter some productive occupation with only a minimum of education, combined with physical strength and skills acquired informally, young women need secondary education in order to escape from unpaid domestic chores or the "underemployment" of being a domestic servant: around 80% of young adult women with 0 to 3 years of schooling are "inactive", and the great majority of them are engaged in these tasks (ECLAC, 1991c). Young women increasingly enter paid employment through the so-called modern female occupations –secretary, teacher, shop assistant–, and these require secondary levels of formal studies. In these countries and in the relevant social subgroups, they require special public support in order to attain the educational "privilege" of crossing the minimum threshold for entering paid women's occupations.

#### 2. *Working adolescents*

Policies directed at young people who are now between 15 and 19 years of age and who are working must be differentiated in order to take account of the capabilities and needs of the various subgroups of working young people. In all cases, however, it is essential to exercise increasing vigilance to ensure the fulfillment of their legal rights with regard to minimum wages, maximum working hours, dangerous jobs and social security coverage, since these rights are frequently violated.

For working young people of low educational attainments, work experience is often much more instructive and useful than a forced formal schooling of which they are not in a position to take advantage. Even for this group, however, education continues to be necessary in this stage of their lives, but it must

be adapted to their needs and it must give priority to the effective learning of the basic skills of reading and writing, the main arithmetical operations, and basic civics (ECLAC/UNESCO, 1991).

Even these young people with less educational background, however, must continue to be provided –as an optimum option– with the possibility of continuing their studies and obtaining their secondary school leaving certificate, which is a passport –not sufficient in itself, but increasingly necessary– to formal employment. For the great subgroup of young people who are working and are fully capable of deriving benefit from secondary and post-secondary studies, strategies for modernizing production patterns with equity should include the allocation of sufficient resources to enable these young people to optimize their educational activities (for example, through maintenance grants which permit those who wish to do so to devote themselves full-time to their secondary or post-secondary studies).

A separate subsector is that made up of young people who neither study, nor work, nor are looking for work: the number of these young people is increasing and they require special attention in public policies for youth (ECLAC, 1991b). At the same time, however, this aspect must be kept in proportion: the percentage of males<sup>14</sup> between 19 and 24 years of age who neither study nor are economically active varies from 2.3% in urban Uruguay to 5.3% in rural Costa Rica, whereas in the same two areas the figures for young people who are working are 77.5% and 86.6%, respectively (ECLAC, 1991c, Statistical Annex, tables 1 and 4). In other words, although both subgroups have been neglected in public policies, it would appear that because of their large number, the problems of young people who are working deserve greater priority on the part of the State in terms of the allocation of resources and the adoption of measures.

<sup>14</sup>Almost all females between 19 and 24 years of age who neither work nor study are engaged in domestic tasks. This is due mainly to the persistence of traditionally dominant cultural patterns with regard to the role of women, which continue to prevent many young women from studying or having paid employment.

### 3. Rural youth

In the strategy aimed at giving opportunities to marginalized young people in the less developed countries of the region, where indigence is still a mainly rural phenomenon (ECLAC, 1991b), a key element is the effort to transform the fact of living and working in rural areas from a depressing fate for young people into a valid and real option for personal progress. It is a key element largely because this is the only effective way to check the growth of the urban economically active population due to the migration of young people with little schooling, and above all because it represents the most direct way of attacking the worst forms of poverty. In particular, a strategy aimed at inducing young couples to stay in the rural areas where they now live and to give them support through training and participation in production programmes can make all the difference in their possibilities of setting up their own home in such areas.

It has been demonstrated that rural social development faces a dual problem: the need to have at least four years of formal studies in order to benefit from support programmes for peasant production, and the fact that rural young people who want more education must seek it in urban centres, yet if they return to rural areas they will not find any productive opportunities for using their skills (ECLAC, 1991c and 1992).

In this context, more than in any other, it is necessary to coordinate and synchronize programmes for the educational rescue or promotion of rural youth with measures to provide support for production units, whether they be agricultural, agroindustrial, or of some other type. In commercial agriculture, it is necessary to implement programmes to improve the productivity of the young rural labour force, while at the same time improving their position through trade union organization.

The gradual attainment of universal basic education does not of itself guarantee greater equality of opportunity in respect of this key tool. Some studies made in more developed countries indicate that although greater apparent equity is achieved by reducing the dispersion of educational attainments, at the same time there is a growing correlation between these attainments and the economic and social level of the students' homes (Mare, 1981). Indeed, such a correlation also seems to

have risen in Latin America in the 1980s (ECLAC, 1991b). It has also been noted that programmes of early stimulation and support providing "positive discrimination" in favour of poor children at the primary school level give more positive results in the long term if such support is maintained throughout the educational cycle. Thus, here too youth is a key phase for breaking the age-old mechanisms that reproduce the marked inequality of opportunities observed between the various strata making up Latin American societies.

To sum up, a close look at the heterogeneous situations and features of youth in the various types of Latin American countries makes it possible, first of all, to dispel some widespread myths. Secondly, it brings an awareness of the seriousness for the whole of society of the lack of opportunities suffered, in the Latin American economies of the end of this century, by a large number of poor and under-educated young people. However, there are grounds for viewing with cautious optimism the possibility of rescuing these young people and thus helping to further equity in these societies, provided the collective social actors are willing to give priority to this task by assigning public and private resources to it.

The question of which sector or sectors (urban formal, urban informal, rural peasant or rural wage-worker) should be given priority in policies to improve the opportunities of marginalized youth will depend on the type of country involved. Rather than taking the form of specific programmes, such policies should be part of the global strategy for changing production patterns with equity in each of these sectors. Their inner logic, for its part, should form a virtuous circle with three elements that mutually reinforce each other: i) increasing the labour productivity of young people through education and training; ii) increasing the productivity of the production units where they work through technical, credit and institutional assistance, and iii) promoting the collective self-enhancement of marginalized young people through support for trade union organizations, party organizations, grass-roots social movements, and the integration of young people in all of these. A prior condition for this very necessary participation in national consensus-building on economic policies is to ensure the access of all subgroups of young people, through education, to the basic cultural codes of modernity (ECLAC/UNESCO, 1991).



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