

Main challenges faced by young people in Latin America and the Caribbean¹

The more than 162 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in Latin America and the Caribbean have an essential role to play in productive change and sustainable development. In a context of economic growth and widespread reductions in poverty and inequality, the situation of youth in Latin America and the Caribbean in areas critical for their social inclusion has improved in recent decades. For example, the percent of youth 20 to 24 years of age who completed secondary **education** in the region rose from 39.9% to 55.6% for young men between 2002 and 2014, and from 44.1% to 61.2% for young women in those years (ECLAC, 2017). While this is positive, as education is a social right and is vital to build skills and capabilities for the world of paid work and life in general, there are persistent disparities in secondary school completion rates by place of residence and race/ethnicity as well as concerns about the quality of the education and its pertinence in preparing young people for their entry into the labour market and their active participation in society more broadly speaking.

A major challenge for young people in the region, and an obstacle to their emancipation, is the **transition from school to the labour market** - it is estimated that over 1 in 5 young people in the region are not in education, employment or training. This passage from education to work is obstructed both by the difficulties young people face in completing their education and acquiring the skills needed in the labour market and by the barriers that prevent them from entering the labour market on the right terms. A group of special concern, not just in Latin America and the Caribbean but worldwide, are young people who are neither studying nor employed in the labour market (ECLAC, 2016). It is a situation that is contributing to the reproduction of inequality across generations and preventing the region from taking advantage of the window of opportunity represented by the demographic dividend. However, it is important to recognize and underscore that this phenomenon presents great variations, being more structural in some cases and more temporary in others, and to avoid stigmatizing these young people. With this more nuanced approach, different policy paths can be found for integrating them into society on better terms. Research from the region has consistently shown that it is a group composed mainly of women, who are on the sidelines of education and the labour market due to unpaid domestic and care responsibilities (ECLAC, 2016).

Young people's **participation in the labour market** tends to be characterized by instability, segmentation and precarious conditions (ECLAC, 2015). Despite the fact that young people in Latin America currently have a higher level of education and socioeconomic status than in the past decade, they continue to experience higher unemployment levels than adults (ECLAC, 2016). This contradiction is especially acute for young women who, in spite of greater academic attainment than their male counterparts, are unable to translate this into success in the labour market. Moreover, youth are also at a disadvantage with respect to wages, as the percentages of workers with wages below the national minimum wage are higher among young men and women (in particular women) than persons at other ages (ECLAC, 2016).

Young people in the region tend to fall ill and die with less frequency than those in other stages of the life course, yet they are the group that faces the greatest **health risks** associated with external factors. It is also true that many of the unhealthy habits acquired during youth do not result in morbidity or mortality until later in life. For example, alcohol use among young people in the region has been found to be especially high (Ullmann, 2015). Another health-related challenge affecting youth in Latin America and the Caribbean are the persistently high rates of **adolescent fertility**. While there has been a dramatic

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reduction in fertility rates in Latin America and the Caribbean, they remain high among adolescent women. This is a worrying situation, because the consequences of adolescent motherhood are profound and generally negative, particularly when it occurs in early adolescence. The adverse impact of early motherhood also extends to the children born to adolescent mothers and to their families. In societal terms, early motherhood has been identified as a key factor in the intergenerational transmission of poverty in the region. While there is some diversity in the paths that can lead to an adolescent pregnancy (Rodríguez, 2012) and while this kind of motherhood involves both planned and unplanned pregnancies, it is a phenomenon with marked social stratification: it is most prevalent among indigenous youth (Rodríguez, 2014), young Afro-descendants (UNFPA/ ECLAC, 2011), young people in rural areas and, above all, poor youth. This clearly reflects a violation of young people's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Despite limited information about the **HIV epidemic among young people**, the available data paint an alarming picture. In Latin America, only 30% of young people correctly identify ways to prevent sexual transmission of HIV. This shows the shortcomings of prevention services targeting this population as well as of comprehensive sexuality education programmes. And it is estimated that a third of new infections in Latin America occurs in young people aged 15 to 24, highlighting the vulnerability of this age group (Ullmann, 2015).

The increase in **youth violence**, in which young people are both victims and perpetrators, is a critical topic in Latin America and the Caribbean and is closely related to problems of social cohesion and social inclusion. There are multiple and often inter-related expressions of violence that affect youth in the region, including domestic violence, violence in the school context and gang-related violence.

Examples of discrimination against young people in the exercise of their rights;

- Police aggression towards youth suspected of involvement in street gangs (see for example: <https://informatvx.com/jovenes-denuncian-discriminacion-por-parte-del-estado/>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/brazil-police-abuse-unabated>)
- Discrimination among migrant youth in the region
- Discrimination against afro-descendent youth (see for example: <https://nacoesunidas.org/vidasnegras/>)
- Discrimination against youth with disabilities, including forced sterilizations of young women with disabilities (see for example: <http://www.biobiochile.cl/noticias/opinion/entrevistas/2018/01/05/el-relato-de-jovenes-con-discapacidad-tras-ser-discriminados-en-el-mundo-laboral.shtml>; <http://www.eldinamo.cl/nacional/2016/10/26/denuncian-que-hospitales-publicos-esterilizan-a-mujeres-con-discapacidad-mental-sin-cumplir-normativa>)
- Youth denied access to sexual and reproductive health services, including HIV testing (see for example: https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/IHRLC/LGBT_Report_Spanish_Final_120705.pdf)
- Discrimination in the school context (see for example: https://www.unicef.org/elsalvador/Analisis_de_Situacion_de_la_Infancia_El_Salvador_UNICEF_2014.pdf)

Examples of policies and programmes aimed at supporting young people to realise their rights

Governments in the region have taken positive steps to advance the situation of young people by enacting national youth policies and youth-specific legislation, and other positive steps, such as the adoption of the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and its implementation guide, which has a strong focus on youth. The adoption in 2016 of the Iberoamerican Youth Pact during the XXV Iberoamerican Summit is also an important development. Finally, in October of 2017, rural youth of the region defined a regional agenda. However, challenges remain, including the effective implementation and follow up of these policies, and in particular how these policies are applied at the territorial level.

Information on how youth organisations or youth-led structures are involved in developing, implementing, monitoring and/or evaluating policies and programmes on youth;

All countries of the region have a public institution dedicated to advancing the rights of young people. One strategy pursued by these institutions to integrate the participation of youth-led civil society organizations in the decision-making processes is to include them formally in the institutional framework. Most of the countries have some formal structure for this purpose, be it a youth council, advisory network or assembly. The level of participation of these entities in the policy-making process is heterogeneous, ranging from being purely consultative (to collect opinions, proposals and interests of the youth groups that participate) to having greater influence in the decision-making process of the public youth institution (for example, having a direct and decisive role in policy design and implementation, such that their decisions are binding for the public institution). In some cases, the members of these councils are appointed, but in several they are elected by vote (Trucco, 2017).

Measures that can be taken at international level to facilitate/support the realisation of young people's rights

- Organize campaigns to raise awareness on the rights of youth or, conversely, to draw attention to the glaring violation of youth rights. For example, the *Vidas Negras* campaign of the UN Brazil office should be highlighted <https://nacoesunidas.org/vidasnegras/>
- Conduct research to underscore the areas where improvements have been made with respect to youth rights and areas where further progress is needed.
- Provide technical cooperation and guidance to national-level counterparts so that they may design, implement and follow-up on policies and programmes to support the realization of young people's rights.

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