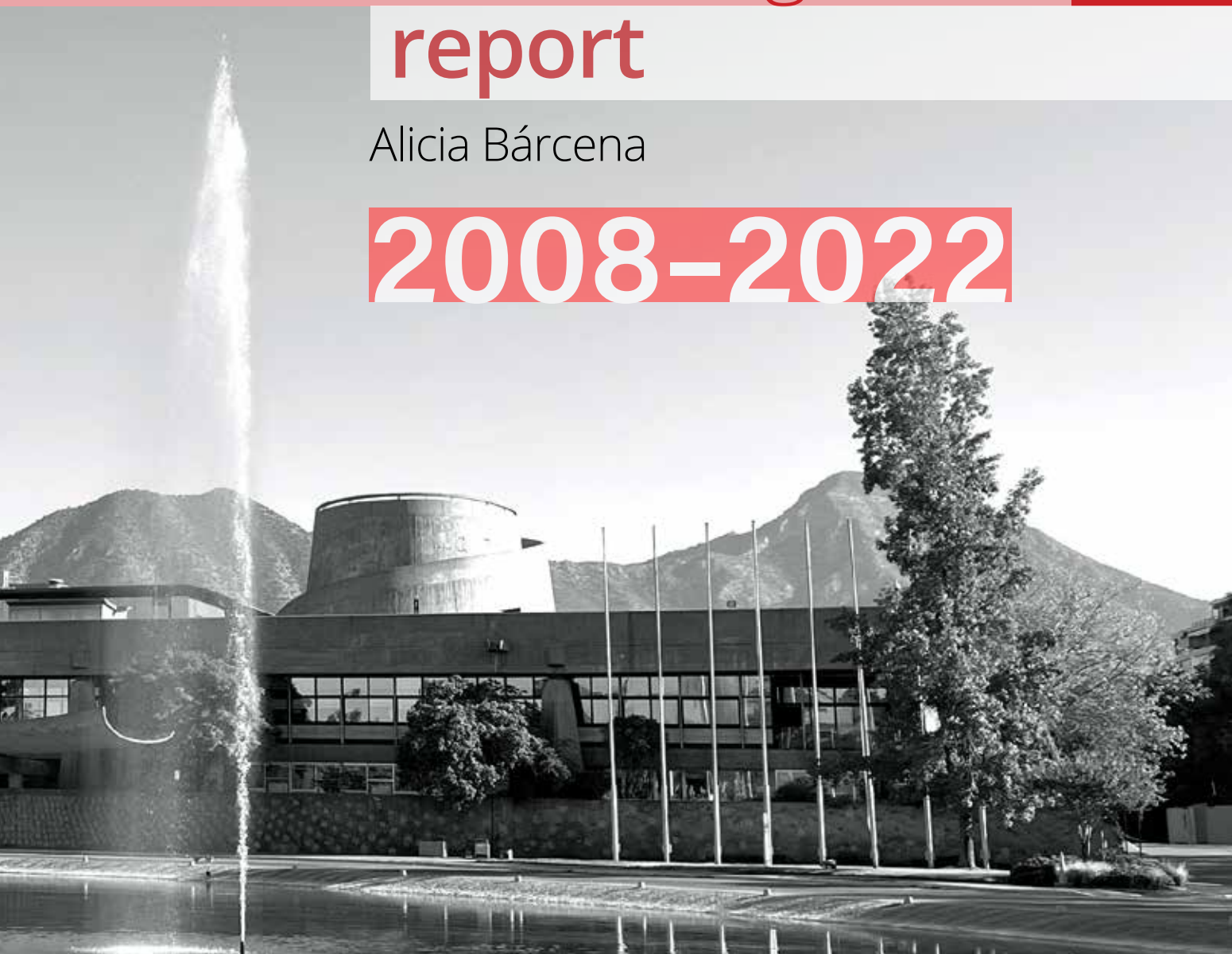


# End of assignment report

Alicia Bárcena

## 2008–2022



UNITED NATIONS

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# Contents

Valedictory.....	5
Organigram.....	9
Office of the Secretary of the Commission (subsidiary bodies and intergovernmental meetings).....	11
International Trade and Integration Division.....	17
Division of Production, Productivity and Management.....	21
Economic Development Division.....	25
Social Development Division.....	29
Division for Gender Affairs.....	33
Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC.....	37
Sustainable Development and Human Settlements Division.....	41
Natural Resources Division.....	45
Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Economic and Social Planning (ILPES).....	51
Statistics Division.....	55
ECLAC subregional headquarters in Mexico.....	61
ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean.....	65
ECLAC office in Bogotá.....	69
ECLAC office in Brasilia.....	73
ECLAC office in Buenos Aires.....	77
ECLAC office in Montevideo.....	79
ECLAC office in Washington, D.C.....	81
Programme Planning and Operations Division, Division of Management and Office of the Deputy Executive Secretary for Management and Programme Analysis.....	85
Documents and Publications Division.....	103
<i>CEPAL Review</i> .....	107
Public Information Unit.....	109



# Valedictory

For almost 14 years at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), I have had the extraordinary opportunity and honour of leading the productive and dedicated work that hundreds of women and men carry out on a daily basis for fair development of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Today I mark the end of 26 years at the United Nations, in different capacities, under the leadership of Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres. In this document I retrace events and lessons on this journey within the Organization, and particularly in this last period, which has been the greatest honour of my career. I have walked this path with exceptional colleagues from all the ECLAC offices, who have enthusiastically and steadfastly contributed to our collective work.

ECLAC is a vital component of the economic and social history of Latin America and the Caribbean, with a 74-year tradition of rigorous, avant-garde thinking, from the South and for the South. Over these years, we have put equality at the centre of the development agenda; because inequality is a defining feature of our region—the most unequal in the world—where the wealthiest 10% receive 55% of income and wealth equivalent to 11% of regional GDP is in the hands of a mere 104 people. Over the period, we have analysed all aspects of inequality, exploring all the ways to close the gaps that afflict our people.

ECLAC is a singular institution within the United Nations system. Firstly, because it is based in the south of our continent. It is an institution of member States that works for member States, dedicated to the foremost progressive causes, working to bring effective, timely and relevant ideas that reflect our realities. Secondly, because it conducts research using its own methods, produces data and statistics based on official sources and designs innovative comparative indicators. And thirdly, because it proposes data-based policies, boldly, but with respect for the sovereignty of countries.

When I arrived at ECLAC, we challenged the prevailing conventional conviction that there was a choice to be made between economic efficiency and equality. Equality was reduced to equity. The seminal works of Thomas Piketty and Samuel Bowles did not yet exist. The more orthodox analysts continued to disregard the evidence that inequality is inefficient, and that growth requires equality, and equality requires growth.

In 2010, when we presented in Brasilia the first position paper under my leadership, *Time for Equality: Closing Gaps, Opening Trails*, we put the issue of equality at the heart of the development debate, which was a pioneering and daring venture at that time.

From this starting point, we built a progressive set of ideas for our region, given the pressing need for a change in the pattern of development. This was undertaken with a realistic vision, because as the globalization of technology, finance and trade intensified, the global economy was struck more and more frequently by economic crises that exacerbated gaps between developed and developing countries, inequality within and between countries, political tensions and the threats of environmental destruction and climate change.

We proposed an agenda of equality, based on regulatory framework that provides for universal enjoyment of rights, and of development, because equality contributes to sustainable development. We set out the content of this strategy for development, with proposals for progressive structural change, highlighting the need to forge comprehensive development compacts relating to issues such as taxation, production policy, the advancement of women, social cohesion and environmentally sustainable development. We demonstrated with hard data that inequality is economically inefficient and formulated proposals for a transformative recovery with equality and sustainability, taking into account the effects of the pandemic. We proposed eight sectors to drive growth-supporting investment, create jobs and reduce environmental footprints. Employment with rights is the key to closing social and productive gaps, not only between sectors, but also between territories.

We proposed fiscal measures, including combating tax evasion and avoidance, and stressed the urgent need to interlink economic policy with social, technological, environmental and—as proposed by Mariana Mazzucato—mission-oriented industrial policy, changing profitability among sectors,

internalizing externalities and exercising stewardship of non-renewable resources. Our big push for sustainability strategy calls for environmental Keynesianism, proposing fiscal stimulus packages that sustain activity while promoting low-carbon pathways, with an increase of at least 10 percentage points of GDP in the rate of investment, geared to a just transition and social inclusion.

Because of my academic background in biology and ecological struggles, I understood early on that in economic circles these issues were viewed as externalities and not as an integral part of development policies. We now know that environmental degradation takes an irreversible toll, and that climate action is urgent.

It was not by chance that equality was placed at the centre; it was chosen because of the region's painful history. ECLAC has argued that inequality is inefficient. Inefficiency and inequality are not opposing forces, but they do fuel each other when the creative impulse of society, its institutions and the interactions of a multitude of stakeholders clash with monopolistic power and the control of dissemination of knowledge by a small group in society. At ECLAC, we assess the economic costs of inequality in education and health, which impairs productivity throughout people's lives.

This led to another core element that we introduced over the past 14 years: the relationships between economic structure and power and their ties to a history of privilege and exploitation. As Raúl Prebisch noted, economic power mutates into political power. What is more, political and economic inequalities become ingrained and incorporated into the rules of the game of society, often unwritten, and even as de facto behavioural rules that contradict written rules. We have called this "the culture of privilege", which perpetuates class, gender and ethnicity gaps in access to assets and capital, the appropriation of natural resources and the dominance of the elite over institutions, including advantages in tax systems. It is a legacy of the colonial period, entrenched and perpetuated by mechanisms of political and economic domination and patriarchy, and a determining force in the history of Latin American and the Caribbean.

Building alternative pathways through conceptions of society in which citizens are active rather than passive subjects in the transformations that improve their situation, making politics a tool for collective development, is the greatest challenge in generations: expanding freedoms, building equality, deepening democracy, re forging the solidarity between the middle and working classes and safeguarding public safety, in short, creating hope.

But we must be vigilant, because if political action fails to bring about meaningful change in society, some will become dissatisfied, and others disconcerted. When expectations of well-being are not met, when the promise of more and better public goods clashes with the constraints of austerity, when it becomes clear that we live in a world in which political institutions have no control over the key drivers of economic performance, that income levels are more dependent on the outcome of global speculative gambles than on the course called for at the ballot box, then the institutions of

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