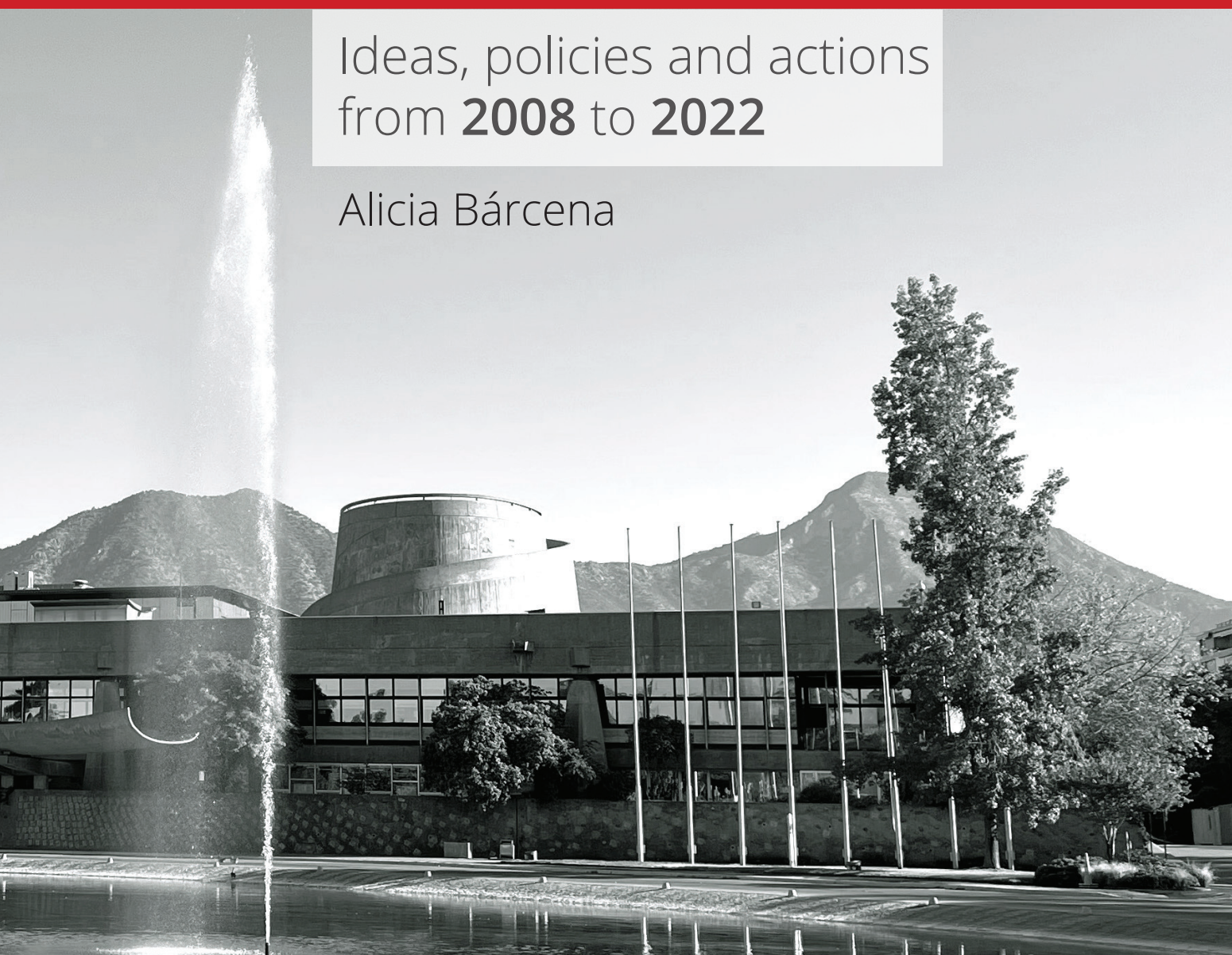


# Equality at the heart of **ECLAC** thinking

Ideas, policies and actions  
from **2008** to **2022**

Alicia Bárcena



UNITED NATIONS

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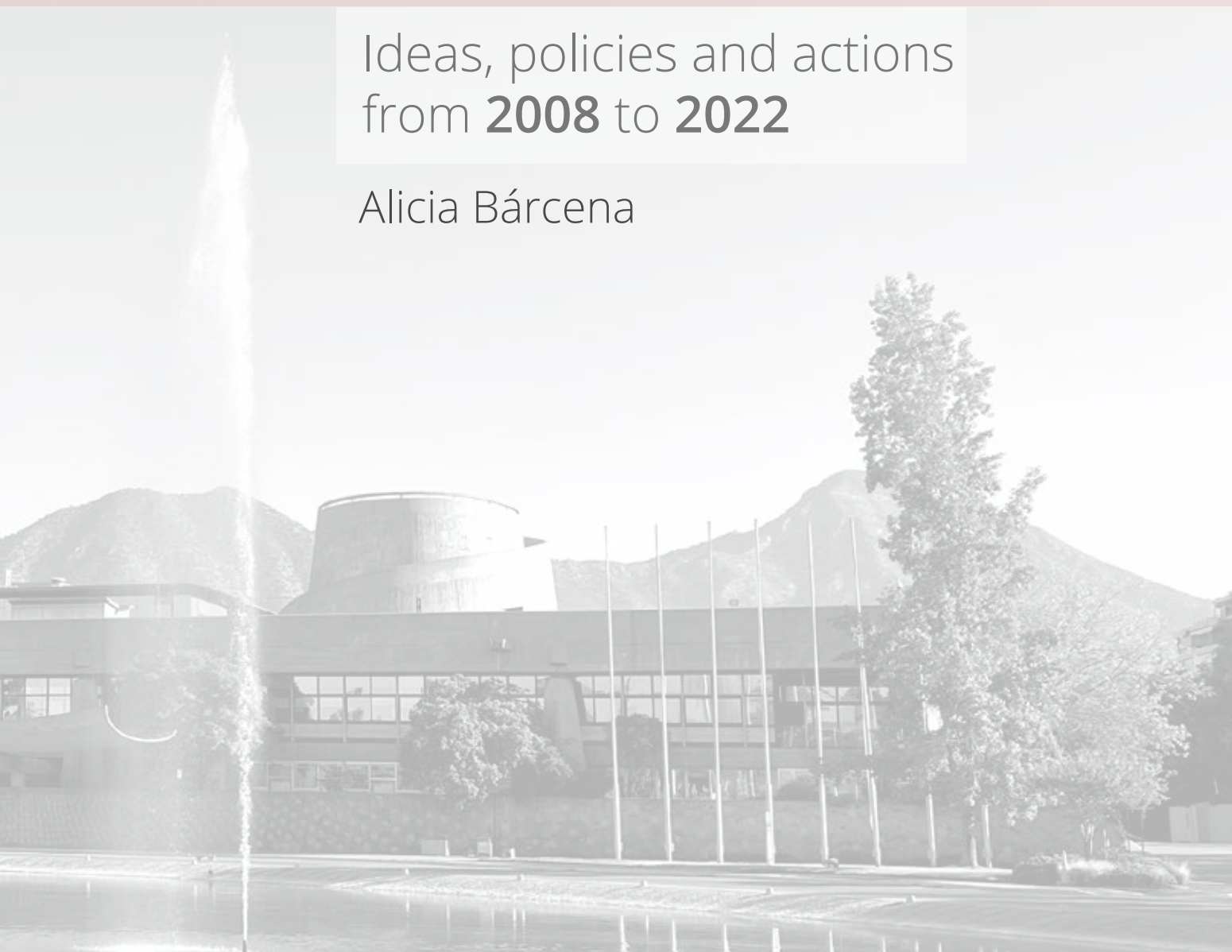


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## A. Time for equality

When the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) published *Time for Equality: Closing Gaps, Opening Trails*, the document presented at its thirty-third session in 2010, the issue of equality was far from occupying the prominent place in regional and international discussions that it enjoys today. In fact, it was still heavily weighed down by the strong ideological preconception expressed with great clarity by Lucas (2004): “Of the tendencies that are harmful to sound economics, the most seductive, and in my opinion the most poisonous, is to focus on questions of distribution”.

It was a time when public policy textbooks held that one of the main challenges facing policymakers was to strike the right balance between the competing forces of efficiency and equality (what Okun (1975) called “the big trade-off”). The landmark books by Piketty (2013) and Bowles (2012) were still in the future. The more orthodox analysts remained oblivious to the growing empirical evidence—identified by Cornia and Court (2001), among others—that challenged the conventional assumption of a trade-off between equality and efficiency. In short: bringing inequality to the heart of the development debate was, in 2010, a risky proposition.

At the same time, it was very much in keeping with ECLAC approach to economics. ECLAC has a long intellectual tradition of questioning models that claim to be timeless and universal but are based on assumptions that have scant connection to the region's reality, history and political, economic and cultural structures. Hirschman (1981) wrote most persuasively about the need for economic science to take those specificities on board and to adopt an open, pluralistic view of the diversity of economic development experiences.

The message of the pioneers of development theory was not to shut themselves off from the ideas of the world, but rather to reflect and build on them through empirical data, including the rich body of economic history studies.<sup>1</sup> The message was to take those data, the stylized facts, as a starting point for the analytical work. This is a key methodological lesson that Arthur Conan Doyle's immortal Sherlock Holmes warned of in “A Scandal in Bohemia” in 1891: “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts”.

This paper begins with a very summarized presentation of some stylized facts that an analysis relevant to our region should be able to explain; and it continues with an explanation of why inequality was chosen as an analytical and policy pillar and a discussion of some of its manifestations internationally and within countries. It identifies profound asymmetries, which are seen at the international level in a persistent and expanding centre-periphery dynamic, and at the national level in the presence of structural heterogeneity and high poverty rates, the product of interactions between the region's forms of international market participation, its productive structures and political power that combine to create a trap of inequality and inefficiency. Power and institutions, intertwined with lagging productive structures, have been central themes in ECLAC analyses since 2008.

It is in that context and from that perspective that equality must be seen as a pillar for analysing the problems of Latin American development. It was not chosen arbitrarily, but rather on the basis of the best data available and the region's painful history. The decision to place equality at the heart of development was the result of carefully considering many decades of reflection and accumulated knowledge about development problems in Latin America and the Caribbean. That choice has been confirmed by the ever-rising importance of equality in discussions of the topic and by its central place in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The approach is also a response to the SDGs and an indication of the Commission's commitment to them. The international community, through an open process and in consultation with governments and civil society, proposed the SDGs as a lodestar for

<sup>1</sup> Celso Furtado (1968) quotes Juan Ramón Jiménez in the introduction to his *Teoría y política del desarrollo económico*: “A foot in the homeland of happenstance or choice; a heart and head in the air of the world”.

international cooperation policies and for development policies in individual countries. ECLAC has embraced these ambitious objectives, and our focus has been to propose ways to advance towards the SDGs based on a careful and detailed analysis of our specificities and the barriers hindering that progress (ECLAC, 2016). Thus, we have resolutely supported actions to crystallize and monitor progress in that direction, complementing the efforts of the region's countries through institutional mechanisms such as the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development and the regional follow-up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Last but not least, the commitment to place equality at the forefront enabled the forging of a fluid dialogue with ideas that ECLAC had been formulating for many decades and the construction of new perspectives based on them. That continuity of reflection is rooted in a tradition that is not only theoretical but also ethical and political: one that understands democracy and civil, economic and political rights as inherent to the very concept of development. Distributive issues have always been very much present in the Commission's documents, as has been concern for their impact on policy dynamics; this may be seen in the contributions of Medina Echavarría (1964), Cardoso and Faletto (1969), Fajnzylber (1983) and Prebisch's last book, published in 1981. We have sought to recover and strengthen this tradition of thought, in which economics and policymaking evolve together and economic structures and policy dynamics mutually shape each other.

## B. Asymmetries in the centre-periphery system

There are three key stylized facts that the analysis must address. The first is the reality that Latin America and the Caribbean lags behind the rest of the world in technology and productivity. The second is the region's pronounced inequality, at the national and international levels: not only in income distribution, but also from a multidimensional perspective, including territory, gender, ethnicity and race. The third is its environmental asymmetries: that is, the difference between the proportion in which each country contributes to environmental destruction and the extent to which it suffers from the impacts. Each of these asymmetries is a barrier to achieving the SDGs: it is therefore necessary to understand them and propose policies to overcome them.

### 1. Negative externalities in an asymmetric global system

In dealing with the issue of international asymmetries, reducing the technology gap between the centre and the periphery —and, with it, the per capita income gap— is a key component of development strategy. In a world where the technological frontier is expanding rapidly, the risk

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