Remarks by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), at the award ceremony of the doctorate honoris causa by the University of Oslo

Oslo, Norway

2 September 2014

Good afternoon

Excellency Mr. Ole Petter Ottersen, President (Rector) of the University of Oslo,

Authorities, academics and students of the University of Oslo,

Fellow awardees of the honorary doctorate,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am truly honored and privileged to be here today to receive this Honorary Doctorate award together with 16 distinguished men and women from different disciplines and nationalities.
We come to this prestigious centre of knowledge that has deservedly earned its reputation among universities and academic institutions worldwide.

Since it was founded, the University of Oslo has been one of the key pillars of Nordic identity, underpinning the unique model of society based on the collective well-being—built by the Norwegian people, and a true reflection of their aspiration and resolve to forge original pathways towards more equal and cohesive societies.

The intellectual foundations produced within the walls of this University have, over the last 203 years, positioned the University at the forefront of knowledge. It has nurtured movements that have defied the conventional thinking of each era, by expanding the frontiers of science, politics, economics, human rights, paving the road towards freedom and equality.

The University of Oslo first opened its classrooms to women, 132 years ago and had its first female lecturer some 102 years ago, even before
the recognition of women’s full citizenship. Moreover for the last three
decades more women than men have received their education here.

Within these walls, Norway witnessed great episodes of dignity and
resistance. No external forces have been able to subjugate the spirit of
the University.

In 1943, hundreds of teachers and students sacrificed their freedom
when the Nazis occupied the University, and with dignified defiance
more than 900 of its members defended, in this very place where we
are today, the free quest for knowledge and ideals.

Within these walls, brave Norwegians conceived ideas of intellectual
boldness and audacity. Generations of students were educated and
trained here, among them the Nobel laureates Ragnar Frisch, Ivar
Giaever, Odd Hassel and Trygve Haavelmo.

And within these walls, Norway moved beyond the frontiers of
knowledge, forging its capacities to overcome technological
dependence, to escape from the constraints of its geography, from the
classical syndrome of abundance of natural-resources by building a society committed to full employment with rights through a visionary political pact.

This was and is the tradition that nurtures the outstanding work of this University that is more than a place to develop skills, and which is actually weaving the social fabric of a national vision with a universalistic mission.

Today you are opening the doors of this center of excellence to seventeen of us. Among us today, are men and women who have distinguished themselves at the cutting edge of their respective fields in academia and research. Through us you are conferring recognition to an array of dimensions that reflect the interdisciplinary soul of this university. On human sciences, the faculties are awarding: philosophy, theology, ethics, sustainable development, economics, literature, multidimensional education, psychology, journalism, law, linguistics, and philanthropy. Whereas on natural sciences, some are devoting
work on chemistry, physics, microbiology, global health, medicine, and genetics.

It is especially significant for us to receive recognition for our efforts here in Norway. It tells us that despite the distances geography imposes, we are brought close together within a community of ideas and values such as freedom of thought, freedom of speech, social justice and shared aspirations to achieve knowledge with excellence, at the service of society.

And, in the words of one of the University’s most well remembered alumni, Fridtjof Nansen, the fact is that and I quote “The history of the human race is a continual struggle from darkness into light. It is, therefore, to no purpose to discuss the use of knowledge; man wants to know, and when he ceases to do so, is no longer a man”.

The honor that you are granting us today is both inspiring and intimidating.
Historically, since 1902, the University of Oslo has awarded honorary doctorates to individuals of the stature of Winston Churchill, John Maynard Keynes, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Niels Bohr, Max Born, and a prominent Norwegian woman, Gro Harlem Brundtland who crafted the concept of sustainable development.

She has been an inspiration throughout my career and to the international community as a whole during the normative decade of the United Nations in the nineties.

The Nordic model of development has influenced the world in the quest for a new development paradigm. Since the Conference of Human Development in Stockholm in 1972 to Rio + 20 in 2012, the nations of the world have accorded the foundations for a universal, progressive development agenda that places equality and sustainability at the center. These principles should guide the up-coming global deal for the Post 2015 development agenda and for acting opportunely and collectively in relation to climate change and global health challenges.
I come as voice from Latin America and the Caribbean which despite its recent efforts to reduce poverty in the past decades, remains as the most unequal region in the world. This honor, though it be in my name, acclaims the role of the hundreds of men and women who strive each day to further rights, justice and equality in my region, under the banner of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. We are striving to place equality as the ultimate goal, structural change towards sustainability as the path and the art of politics as the instrument.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I graduated with a biology degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in the seventies, I would never have dared to dream that one day I would become the first Latin American woman to obtain this distinction.
My own aspiration is to achieve equality based on rights and dignity for all. My own aspiration is to build a sustainable world while protecting and respecting our diversity and our planetary boundaries.

This is why to be here today, in one of the most egalitarian societies of the world means to me that these goals can be reached.

Thank you very much.