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Bolstering the resilience of Latin American and Caribbean societies, Key to implementing the 2030 Agenda



By Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC

The High-level Political Forum being held at the United Nations' headquarters in New York, from July 9 to 18, encourages member countries to present their progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, and to exchange experiences on building more resilient societies.

With this aim, the Forum this year is focused mainly on five of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the implementation of which contributes to strengthening economic, social and environmental resilience.

Moving toward more resilient societies is an even greater challenge for our region due to its high degree of vulnerability to natural disasters, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean, a vulnerability that is increasing as a result of climate change.

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Between 1990 and 2017, there were 345 climate-related disasters in the small island states of the Caribbean and their impact represents an additional burden on these countries, which cannot take advantage of economies of scale because of their size.

In addition, they have been characterized by high levels of indebtedness that have limited budget allocations toward prevention, mitigation and post-disaster reconstruction, to the detriment of investment in other sectors that are key to sustainable development.

For that reason, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in the framework of its strategy “The Caribbean First”, has highlighted the current context of environmental crisis and financial vulnerability as an opportunity to create a multilateral debt relief mechanism for Caribbean countries, with the aim of freeing up resources to create a fund for investment in low-carbon climate adaptation and mitigation.

Throughout the region, the ability to respond to climatic and environmental challenges is weakened by the persistence of inequality in its various dimensions, the effects of which are worsened by climate change.

This phenomenon implies a double inequity: the highest-income groups are the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions – since they are the biggest consumers of fossil fuels – while the poorest people are the most vulnerable to their effects, given their lower capacity for mitigation and adaptation.

The reduction in income inequality seen in the first decade of this century has halted in recent years, and the gap is still one of the biggest worldwide: on a regional scale, the income of the wealthiest quintile of the population represents about 45% of household income, while the average income of the poorest quintile accounts for just 6% of the total.

In Latin America and the Caribbean – given the high degree of urbanization which, according to UN data, will reach 83.6% in 2030 – cities emerge as one of the strategic and priority spaces for efforts to foster sustainable and resilient development with the contribution of multiple stakeholders.

On a global level, cities concentrate an ever higher percentage of the population and are responsible for the largest proportion of energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.

The transition toward greater participation of renewable and clean energy sources represents a priority opportunity, not just for urban sustainability, but to fuel the growth of productive sectors with the incorporation of technological progress.

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Changing the energy matrix of mobility in cities' energy strategy and ensuring its accessibility is key to sustainable investment and can be a significant contribution to the achievement of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda.

The second meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, held in April 2018 at ECLAC's headquarters in Santiago, Chile, was an opportunity to debate and exchange experiences about the priority issues for cooperation and sustainable investment and to involve diverse actors in the implementation of the global sustainability agendas.

Closing the multiple inequality gaps in cities and territories is a fundamental condition for achieving sustainable and resilient development in the region.

The strategy must be underpinned by more harmonious governance mechanisms among the different levels of government and by strengthening their financing.

These challenges call for a renewed conversation between the State, the market and society and an increased capacity to form coalitions and bolster institutions in order to foster sustainable policies that promote resilience on a global, regional, national and local scale.

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