

Equal opportunities to reduce the various dimensions of poverty



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Joaquín Gonzalez Aleman, UNICEF's Social Policy Advisor in Latin América, visited Lima to participate in the thirty-fifth session of the Economic Commission for Latin America. In the following interview, he comments on the situation of Latin American children.

What are the main problems that are faced by children in Latin America?

I think it is the multidimensional poverty that expresses itself by various deprivations and relates to the inability to exercise one's human rights. A person is not poor solely because of a lack of money. Poorness is also experienced by an incapacity to access education, health,

housing, sanitation and protection services. Additionally, 40% of the people suffering from poverty in the region are between the age of 0 and 17. In other words, they are boys, girls and adolescents. We are talking about a very serious problem here.

In recent years, countries like Peru have experienced a sustained growth that has allowed them to reduce their level of financial poverty. Some argue that this has only exacerbated inequalities.

Definitively, various countries in the region are growing and this improvement is reflected in the diminution of monetary poverty. This poverty is nevertheless just measured through families' income and expenditure. If we take a look at multidimensional poverty - which refers to improvements in housing, access to water and sanitation, education and quality health - we would realise that there is still an important percentage of families that have not been able to overcome it.

In November, the Convention on the Rights of the Child will celebrate its 25th year anniversary. How much are the States doing in the region to find a solution to the multidimensional poverty which particularly affects children?

According to UNICEF, the majority of States measures their level of multidimensional poverty. This allows to visualize the magnitude of the deprivation suffered by children and

it helps to guide public policies and social programmes that are set systematically according to the cycle of life.

It is important to understand that these social policies depend on economic resources and hence require a fair tax policy, which imposes higher tax level to the one's that earn more and ultimately better distribute the wealth. Paying taxes is part of the solidarity contract within society. In general, the public budget for social interventions is growing in Latin America. Nonetheless, there are still countries that experience lower growth. Those are countries that have a pending tax reform due to their current direct tax system affecting more individuals with lower income.

Latin America is a region rich in natural resources. The corporate taxes that businesses pay to exploit those resources constitute an important income for the States. They should allocate this income, for example, to protect their citizens and to build human capital. This has to do with the quality of local governance and of invested resources. As we know, resources normally reach productive regions. Nevertheless, the distribution between regions rich of and deprived of natural resources depend on the degree of decentralization of each State.

Were there any important progresses in the last 25 years?

Yes, there is definitively a lot of progress that has been made. The region has significantly progressed in the reduction of infant and maternal mortality rate and the level school coverage. In reality there is a series of indicators confirming that the situation of children has considerably improved. The problems that we are still facing are inequality, infant chronic malnutrition, violence, discrimination towards indigenous and African decent populations and quality education. Those are problems that Latin American societies experience.

During the ECLAC meeting a few days ago, we saw that it is primordial to 'grow to be equal' and to 'be equal to grow'. A society that grows at a similar rate as Peru requires a solid social foundation on which this growth rests. This strong basis results from equality.

We have to remember that inequality creates discontent in society. We have observed that in various countries in the region. For example, despite the fact that economic figures have showed an increased in Brazil, demonstrations have taken place in the streets to express the discontent of individuals about the quality of public services. The same phenomenon happened in Chile before the privatization of education. Those are issues that cannot be forgotten.

What is the post-2015 agenda in Latin America?

I believe the number one goal is to reduce poverty. It is possible to reduce extreme poverty in countries in the region with the wealth that is being generated. To do so, it is important to invest in human capital. It is also very good to pay a special attention to early childhood development because it is the human stage where the most cognitive, emotional and physical developments are achieved.

I also think that more work needs to be done in health, education and nutrition. We must ensure that higher quality services are provided. For example, we need to focus on improving the quality of education. We cannot feel satisfied solely because of the augmentation of the school coverage. We need to direct our efforts towards better learning results and timely and successful completion of their education.

Finally, if there are economic resources and political influence, who controls them?

We need to understand that all individuals have the same rights and should have equal opportunities. We should acknowledge that if one studies, one's skin color or origin does not matter. Every individual should have an equal opportunity to a comprehensive development in our society.

We must be aware that there is a serious cultural problem that prevents the social mobility of individuals and the access to equal opportunities. It is an issue that cannot be resolved through laws or policies, but that requires a cultural change that cannot be achieved overnight. It is essential to break down prejudices. Equality is a great challenge.

For more information, please contact:

Joaquin Gonzalez Aleman by email at jgonzalezaleman@unicef.org