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## Inequality Grows As Education Falters

by LADB Staff

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For the fourth year in a row, the thread between Costa Rica's richest and its poorest has stretched. Each year for the past eight, the country has tracked its progress toward equality, or lack of it, with a State of the Nation Report (see NotiCen, 2001-11-30). The State of the Nation project is supported and financed by the state universities, Defensoria de los Habitantes, Banco Popular, Infocoop, Convenio Costa Rica-Holanda, Fundecooperacion, World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Labor Organization (ILO). This year's edition finds that the best-off 10% of the population earned 23 times the income of the worst-off 10%.

In 1997 the multiplier was 15.5%. Costa Rica still stands as the country in Central America with the smallest income disparity, but Isabel Roman, research coordinator for the State of the Nation project, is more concerned with the potential undesirable political consequences of a growing breach. "We have the other countries of Latin America as a mirror," she says. The research identifies three broad areas inadequate coordination among economic sectors, social investment that does not improve income levels of the poorest, and deterioration in the educational system as principal reasons for the spread. There is a disconnect whereby the most dynamic sectors of the economy paying the highest salaries have little positive influence upon the small and medium-sized local enterprises that pay the least.

The report refers to this phenomenon as "lack of linkage." Another lack of linkage occurs between the growth of businesses in the free-trade zones and levels of public finance. "We are a country in which, if there is economic growth, public finances remain the same," said project coordinator Miguel Gutierrez. Despite this, Costa Rican governments since 1995 have made investment in health, education, pensions, and housing. But these expenditures have not resulted in reductions in poverty.

The research shows that spending in health benefits the poor, education and housing spending helps a broad economic spectrum, and spending on pensions and culture favors the richest. Where the lack of linkage shows up most dramatically is in education. Only about half the eligible children attend school at the secondary levels, despite a strong correlation between years of education and levels of income.

Longitudinally, the population of 30-year-olds does not surpass that of people aged 40 in years of education, but those in their 40s have more education than those in their 50s, who in turn have more than those aged 60. Gutierrez commented on the figures, "During the 1980s, we experienced a reduction in educational coverage, or more specifically in secondary education, especially at the junior-high level, that was approximately 15 to 20 percentage points and which is now having its effect on increasing poverty levels and also on inequity in income distribution."

Ombudsman Jose Echandi, who also participated in the presentation of the State of the Nation report, said that to keep the income inequity gap from widening, the government must continue to prioritize social spending. "Both the Costa Rican state and the government should look at social programs as investments, not as expenses (see NotiCen, 2001-07-19). They shouldn't cut the school year back from 200 days, nor should they cut back support for the social field, nor the field of health." But the cutback against which Echandi cautions is precisely what the government intends.

Costa Rica committed itself to a 200-day school year during the government of Jorge Mario Figueres (1994-1997). To fund that commitment, spending on education was raised from 4.1% of GNP to 6%, and a constitutional amendment was passed to prevent spending from ever falling below that level. But that was then, and this is now A month ago the Ministry of Education decided to cut back the number of days because officials said a budget shortfall would not support a 200- day school year.

Professors in the Education Department at the Universidad de Costa Rica came out forcefully against the decision, saying that a reduction in the education budget is not negotiable. The faculty produced a document of protest reading in part, "The Convenio Centroamericano is a reality with which we must comply. It is unacceptable to break this obligation using an economic argument, and worse yet, that it be Costa Rica that does so, being the bastion and example of economic development [in Central America]." The Convenio Centroamericano is an agreement among the five nations of the region spelling out their commitment to educate the youth of the isthmus. It was signed June 22, 1962.

The protest, signed by 60 professors, called for a national dialogue on the 200-day issue, to be directed by the country's state universities. Teacher organizations, on the other hand, support the cutback. In a hearing on the matter before the Sala Constitucional, the Asociacion Nacional de Educadores (ANDE) presented a list of justifications for reverting to a 174-day school year in accordance with the Education Ministry's target. The union's list mentioned the lack of restructured study plans and that there has not been a higher quality of instruction.

"Polls have shown that parents and students have never been consulted on whether they were in favor of the 200 days; also, teachers and students waste a lot of time," said Eduardo Rojas, ANDE president. After presenting the list, Rojas and Floribeth Lopez, president of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Educacion Costarricense (SEC), met with the president of the Sala Constitucional Luis Fernando Solano. "Judge Solano told us that they were at a crossroads; on one hand, respect for the law the 200 days, on the other, pressure from parents who support 174 days," Lopez recounted.

Not all teachers support the cut. Back where the chalk hits the blackboard, some are concerned about other links between days of instruction and social welfare. In the Province of Limon, for instance, Limoncito School is bulging at the seams with students. The building cannot hold one more than the 1,057 who regularly attend. The student's main interest, beyond quality of instruction, is the lunchroom. The dire economic situation in the area means that the only meal these children get during the day is at school. For teachers there, the lesson is: fewer days equal fewer meals. The same is true in Coto Brus.

A study by the Catholic University showed that local unemployment left families unable to feed children, leaving schools a major source of nutrition. This unanticipated linkage led Minister of Education Astrid Fischel to consider contingency plans. "We have two options: that the school cafeterias keep functioning a month longer, or that a nutritional bonus be given to the parents. These measures would only apply to the children who really need it, those who qualify by necessity," said the minister. The ministry has found undernourishment and malnutrition to be high among students, ranging between 18% and about 12% in rural areas. Fischel has yet to do the math to determine how many kids can be fed with the money saved by cutting back on their education.

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