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Canada's Spotlight on the Americas

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A NEW LATIN AMERICAN TRADE GROUP?

Alan Garcia, president of Peru, and Michelle Bachelet, president of Chile, are proposing a new trade bloc of like-minded Latin American countries that would include Peru, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and possibly Canada. Representatives from the "Pacific Arc" countries are due to meet in March 2008 to discuss the potential of such a relationship. If Canada is formally invited, its membership in the group would be a significant step forward to increased Canadian involvement in the region. Mr. Harper met with the leaders of Peru, Mexico and Chile at the end of the recent APEC summit, but Canada has not yet been formally invited to join the potential group.

How Competitive are Latin America's Schools?

Tamara Ortega Goodspeed and Jeffrey Puryear

Few people dispute that high quality schools are a key element of competitive economies. Good education prepares people to work and lays the foundation for stronger institutions, greater transparency and good governance—all of which allow economies to function smoothly.

Unfortunately, Latin American schools are not very competitive—with major failings in quantity, quality and equity. True, more children are going to school, and the vast majority finishes primary school. But high school graduation rates are low, making it difficult for countries to move into knowledge-intensive industries.

Moreover, the quality of the region's primary and secondary schools is poor. In the most recent OECD (PISA) exam, around half of 15-year-olds in the participating Latin American countries (Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay) had trouble applying basic reading and math skills to real world situations. Even the best Latin American students tested scored at or below the OECD average, and well below the OECD top-performers.

Few Latin American students master the advanced math, science and English skills that allow countries to take advantage of new technology and attract investment. Ten per cent or less scored at the highest three levels of the PISA math test, compared to around half of all students in Korea, Finland and Hong Kong, and nearly a quarter of students from Latvia and Russia (which have GDPs similar to Latin America). Science scores were between 60 to 100 points below the international average. Since many experts agree that student learning (particularly in math and science) is more important to economic growth than just getting kids in school, these low levels of learning are particularly worrisome.

Constraints are similar at the university level. Although around 25 per cent

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New public-private initiatives are changing Haitian education and improving the country's development potential.

Despite increased investments in public education, the Peruvian education system is failing to reduce income equality.

Children and youth in situations of armed conflict need more than just desks and pencils. Can education adapt to their needs?

Youth from Colombia speak out about alternative education that teaches peacemaking and non-violent conflict resolution.

Note from the Editor

With the recent election debates in Ontario regarding faith-based schools, along with private sector collaboration in Haitian education and drastic changes in Venezuela regarding the ideology taught in public schools, we decided that it was the perfect time for a FOCALPoint issue on education. While alarm bells may be ringing about the Ontario Conservatives' election promise to extend government funding to all faith-based schools (instead of just Catholic ones), the province of British Columbia has given 50 per cent funding to any faith-based schools that meet its criteria since 1977.

Similarly, as Paul Sigmund from Princeton University has pointed out, many Latin American governments provide funding for Catholic universities, and Catholic instruction used to be mandatory throughout the region. Catholic education is now offered primarily on a volunteer basis, and Colombia and Chile have provisions to offer Protestant education as well. In addition, Chile funds all types of non-profit schools at the primary and secondary levels.

Diversity is what makes education flourish. Indeed, critical thinking and exposure to multiple world views are vital to student development. But children and young people can get this diversity in both private and public schools, whether they are secular or religious, if the schools are run properly with adequate funding and trained teachers. As Canada is a mostly secular country, Canadians sometimes forget that secularism is also a world view, and not the predominant one in many parts of the world.

A religious school does not necessarily indoctrinate students if the teachers are qualified and the curriculum

is well-designed. In fact, there are many non-Catholics who currently attend Ontario's Catholic schools simply because their parents believe that the quality of education is higher and the environment is beneficial to their children.

The problems emerge when parents lack choices about where their children are educated, if their children are educated at all. Additional problems arise when children are not taught to think for themselves. Beyond basic literacy and mathematical skills, education is supposed to teach children to think about and evaluate what they are learning, rather than just feed information to them. Education can also teach children about societal expectations and how to interact with others.

But if there is no public accountability, education can become an effective tool of ideological indoctrination. Take Venezuela, for example. Hugo Chávez has now mandated that Venezuelan schools teach Marxist-Leninist ideology at the secondary levels, warning that any private schools that do not adopt this mandate will be taken over by the state or shut down.

This new "Bolivarian Education System" will not teach Marxism as one of many legitimate or semi-legitimate theories; it will teach it as the only true theory. Freedom of thought and expression is lost when children are not allowed to question what they learn. Whatever someone may think about capitalism, it is difficult to argue that the concept should not be taught at all, or that it should be taught as inarguably wrong.

Other problems surface when children and youth do not see their education as relevant to their daily lives. It is difficult for a child to see the importance of geometry or literature when he or she is only thinking of how to survive that day. Whether that means picking up a gun or working ten hours in a factory depends on the situation. In every case, education must be flexible to adapt to children's real needs.

Many of the pieces in this month's issue indicate the political value of education, and they also point out the repercussions of an education system that does not function properly. Effective education goes beyond mathematics and spelling to include skills and knowledge that children and youth themselves find valuable and compelling. In the end, education needs to train students not only to cope with their world, but also to thrive in it.

Rachel Schmidt

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Latin American Schools *(continued from page 1)*

of Latin American young people enroll in higher education — about the same as the world average and more than in East Asia and the Pacific — only a quarter to a half graduate. No Latin American university made the top 100 in a 2005 ranking of the world's universities. Only seven made the top 500.

By contrast, South Korea had eight universities in the top 500, Hong Kong and Taiwan had five and South Africa had four. On average, less than one in five university students in the region study science and engineering. Rates in Korea, Ireland and Finland are 10 to 20 per centage points higher. And Latin America produces fewer scientific and engineering articles and patents than Asia or Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

In addition, by not providing poor, rural and minority groups with high quality education, the region is failing to develop its potential workforce. Young adults (ages 21-30) from the poorest families have five to seven years less schooling than their wealthier peers, and the gaps are not improving. Students from poorer families scored 80 to 100 points (almost two proficiency levels) lower than those from higher income families on the 2003 PISA math exam.

Children from indigenous and Afro-Latino communities are twice as likely to have an incomplete primary education and tend to do worse on national tests. For example,

indigenous fifth graders in Ecuador scored 20 per cent below non-indigenous children in language and math.

What keeps Latin American schools from providing a globally competitive education? A variety of factors stand in the way:

1. Lack of world-class learning standards and rigorous student assessment — Most countries lack clear, measurable objectives for

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learning and mechanisms for monitoring progress. National student assessment systems are weak and not well-used. Few Latin American countries participate in global tests that show how they stack up with the rest of the world.

2. Poor teaching — Teaching does not attract the best and brightest, in part because of inadequate training, poor working conditions, low prestige and poor management. Good teachers are rarely rewarded, bad teachers are almost never fired, and the least experienced teachers

are assigned to serve poor and rural populations facing the most challenges.

3. Little accountability — Few Latin American countries set clear goals for their schools, nor do they hold students, parents, principals and ministries responsible for results. Reliable information on school performance is scarce, there are few consequences for meeting (or failing to meet) education standards (where these exist), and schools often lack both the resources and authority to organize their activities so as to best meet the needs of their students. Links between schools, employers and the community are tenuous.

4. Inadequate investment — Latin American governments have increased education spending as a per cent of GDP. Spending per pupil, however — which ranges from around \$1500 in Chile to around \$190 in Nicaragua — is still well below

the \$4200 per primary pupil average in developed countries. Many of these funds are lost to repetition (estimated to cost over \$11 billion a year) or to paying absent teachers. Many governments shortchange the poor by over-investing in higher education (which few poor students attend) and under-investing in primary and secondary education.

5. Weak demand — Political leaders are reluctant to anger powerful interest groups (such as teachers' unions or university students) who can mobilize protests or shut down

schools. Parents, teachers and employers, who should have the strongest interest in improving school performance, have traditionally remained silent and have virtually no role in shaping education policy.

The challenges are clear. What is less clear is whether the region's leaders are willing and able to take on the economic and political costs necessary to meet them. 🌐

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Public-Private Collaboration in Education: A New Development Model for Haiti

Leslie Fillion-Wilkinson and Carlo Dade

Contrary to the perception that Haiti is a development "basket case," groundbreaking developments have recently occurred in Haitian education. In the fall of 2005, leaders of the progressive Haitian private sector, NGOs and international development officials met in Canada at Willson House, the official Canadian cabinet retreat at Meech Lake, for a meeting co-chaired by former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark and former Inter-American Development President Enrique Iglesias. Organized by FOCAL and the Inter-American Dialogue and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Inter-American Development Bank, the meeting revolved around the role of the private sector

in Haitian development and identified key priorities for action. In early 2007, the participants reconvened in Atlanta to hold focused discussions on education, which was identified at Meech Lake as a priority for public-private collaboration.

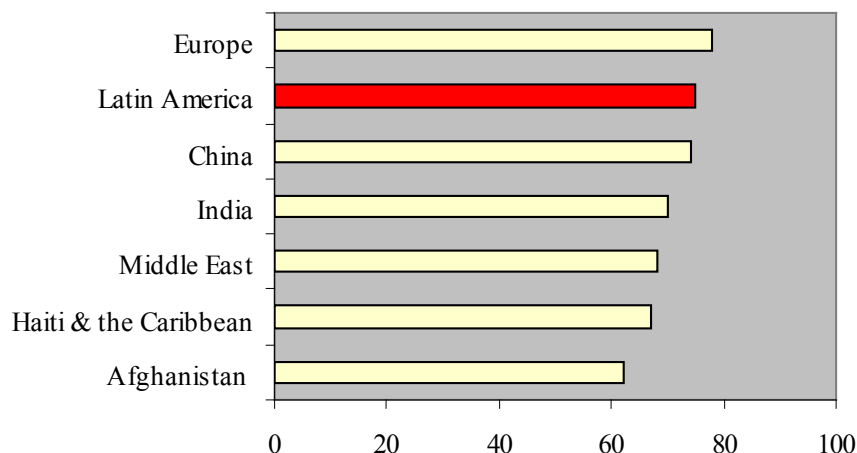
As opposed to elsewhere in the hemisphere, education in Haiti is already predominantly provided by the private sector. Approximately 85 per cent of schools are private, and the Ministry of Education has only 300 employees – including teachers – for a population of over 8.5 million people. Beyond this, most mid- and large-size enterprises in Haiti make substantial investments in education to supplement the lack of state resources. This engagement ranges from scholarships and build-

Is Latin America a Development Priority for Canadians?

In August 2007, FOCAL and the Association of Canadian Studies sponsored a poll by Léger Marketing that asked Canadians about their perspectives on Latin America. Latin America was ranked high as a development priority, placing ahead of Haiti and Afghanistan. (Margin of error is 3.1% 19 times out of 20.)

When it comes to enhancing Canada's national interests, how much of a priority should be given to the following areas of the developing world?

(percentage that thought the area was very or somewhat important)



ing schools to providing school lunches and donating text books. While important, these idiosyncratic efforts have failed to have significant impact, partially due to lack of coordination and partially from the limited resources of the Haitian private sector.

Under what is now called the Willson House process, the Haitian private sector, donors and aid agencies came together to examine how the groups can co-operate to enhance the “development” investments being made by the private sector. As a result of the Atlanta Willson House meeting earlier this year, the most influential companies in Haiti agreed to focus their education work under the auspices of the UniBank Foundation and its president, Carl Braun.

This is the first time that the private sector has formally come together to examine what it can jointly contribute to Haitian development. In addition, this grouping of companies has reached out to involve other important private actors such as the Federation of Protestant Schools, the Catholic Community and the teachers’ union in discussing a consolidated effort towards specific targets.

In this regard, the private sector members of the consortium are working to develop three or four large-scale initiatives that the com-

panies will agree to support and which will be presented to donors, most notably the Inter-American Development Bank, for joint financing and implementation. The larger grouping of participants in the consortium is meeting to discuss general issues of education policy and responses to government initiatives and new laws. In terms of influenc-

enges in Haiti, the foremost being the issue of access. The cost of education is prohibitive for families. Most households spend upwards of 40 per cent of their annual income on school fees, a strain further compounded by the lost income incurred while children are in school.

Beyond the provision of education, the system is confronted by an obstacle of another order. The number of post-secondary graduates outstrips the supply of jobs requiring learned employees. In fact, what the existing market and growing industry need are specialized employees, but Haiti has very few institutions that provide the necessary vocational training.

Opinions diverge, however, as to the order in which these priorities must be tackled, and by whom. The public and private sectors each have their own resources,

responsibilities and authority. Yet it is clear that both are indispensable in this undertaking to ensure access, equity and quality of education in Haiti. The Willson House process has proven extremely useful in allowing donors and the private sector to identify four priority areas for public-private collaboration. First, in recognition of its role in education, the private sector must be able to participate in policy making to act as a liaison between curriculum

In terms of influencing education reform in Haiti, this new coalition has the potential to make significant contributions. In a country that stands alone in the hemisphere for its scarcity of local development resources, including human and financial capital, the outcome of the Willson House process with education will be very important for Haiti.

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There is certainly consensus among the dialogue’s participants regarding current education chal-

design and the needs of the job market.

Second, the state must increase its regulatory capacity in order to lend a strong, institutionalized framework to the education sector. Next, the parties must enhance the infrastructure for and amount of vocational training.

Ultimately, resources must be combined and coordinated efficiently. In this vein, participants at the Atlanta meeting suggested a centrally-administered national fund to pool and distribute contributions from the private sector.

At present, the process that began in 2005 is now firmly in the hands of the Haitian private sector. It is a considerable breakthrough that the private sector has united behind the UniBank Foundation to concentrate their efforts on a few specific large-scale projects in education.

A final meeting is planned in the Haitian capital in 2008, where proposals will be presented for key programs to be co-funded with the Inter-American Development Bank. FOCAL, the Inter-American Dialogue and other key partners hope that the Willson House process will carry on and produce new development initiatives beyond education.



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Public Education Investments and Inequality Reduction in Peru

Gustavo Yamada and Juan Francisco Castro

Has investment in public education in Peru produced a more educated labour force over the past few decades? If we consider the standard measurement of human capital (i.e., years of education achieved by the labour force), the answer is yes. In 1985, the average years of schooling in the Peruvian labour force (those age 14 or higher) was 7.13 years. In 2004, the same indicator was 8.77 years. Has this same public investment also helped reduce the inequality of education levels in the labour force? The answer, again, is yes. In the Peruvian labour force, the Gini coefficient* of inequality in schooling years fell from 0.343 in 1985 to 0.290 in 2004.

Why, then, have these positive results failed to reduce income inequality?

We argue that increased educational coverage and achievements across Peru, financed with the same relative amount of spending, means

lower spending per pupil and potentially lower education quality. One indication of the deterioration in the quality of public education is a substantial reduction in the effective number of teaching hours. Up to the 1960s, Peruvian public schools had full day schedules from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, as well as Saturday mornings. In order to accommodate all potential students within the limited physical and human infrastructure, there are currently three daily shifts averaging less than five hours per day.

National results of school performance from 2004 show that only 12 per cent of Peruvian students complete primary school with an appropriate level of reading comprehension, and only eight per cent of the same group can correctly solve basic logical and mathematical problems. Peruvian students also ranked last in reading comprehension results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which

Upset in Jamaican Elections

In a surprising upset this month, Jamaica's opposition Labour Party (JLP) won the general election, defeating the 18-year reign of the People's National Party (PNP). Portia Simpson Miller, the incumbent and Jamaica's first female Prime Minister, did not initially acknowledge defeat, arguing that the results were "too close to call." The leader of the JLP, Bruce Golding, was officially sworn in on September 11. The JLP has a reputation of being ideologically hostile to the Caribbean integration process, as the party's previous leader, Edward Seaga, was highly critical of the economic integration of the 15 countries forming CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market). Other Caribbean governments and the international community now wait to see what policies the JLP will adopt toward the region.

studied 41 developed and developing countries in 2002.

We have found that the average rate of return on education (i.e., the financial profit or loss from investments in education) has been relatively constant in the last twenty years in Peru. This should imply a neutral effect in terms of changing income inequality.

Yet, linear returns on education are not the best way to illustrate earning potential in Peru. In fact, an additional year of schooling at basic education levels has a much smaller pay-off (in terms of increased earnings) than an additional year of schooling at higher levels. This difference has also increased over time.

In explanation, we propose that while demand for qualified workers has increased, education quality has decreased at the basic levels. As a consequence, individuals must now

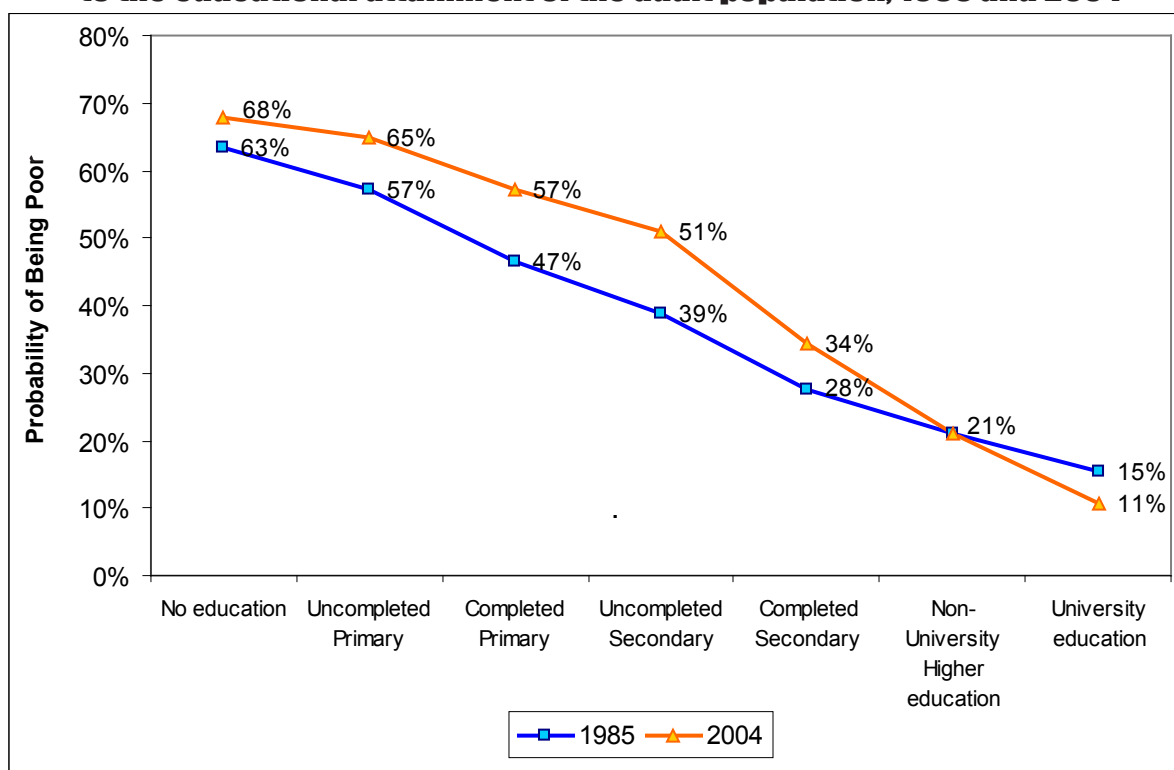
substitute quantity for quality in order to attain the same pay-off. That is, students must spend more years in school at post-secondary levels in order to compensate for poor quality at the lower levels. We argue that this process is a strong factor behind the rise in income inequality.

To shed light on this potential effect, we have computed an index of potential income based on the highest educational level achieved and the market returns on each year of schooling received. This potential income is simply the product of the two elements. Its average has decreased from 2.03 in 1985 to 1.70 in 2004, because the effects of lower returns in basic education levels have been stronger than the effects of increasing education for the whole population. More importantly, because of the increasing gap in the returns on different levels of education, inequality of potential income

has increased. The Gini coefficient of potential income has risen from 0.248 in 1985 to 0.264 in 2004. Education, which is supposed to be the most important social policy for improving opportunities and reducing inequalities in any society, has failed to deliver its goals in the last twenty years in Peru.

Additional support for this hypothesis is presented in Figure 1, which shows the probability of being poor for different levels of educational attainment (predicted via a probit regression estimated using household surveys for 1985 and 2004). Clearly, and besides the expected downward slope, the striking result is that the 2004 curve falls above the 1985 schedule for all basic levels of education. This means that the contribution of education to poverty reduction has declined in the last two decades, with the exception of post-secondary education.

Figure 1: Peru — Predicted probability of being poor according to the educational attainment of the adult population, 1985 and 2004



To complement this, it is worth noticing that publicly provided primary and secondary education is concentrated in the poor population (e.g., 72 per cent of the population with access to publicly provided primary education can be classified as extreme-poor or poor, while 60 per cent of the population with access to publicly provided secondary education fall in the same category).


The opposite occurs with post-secondary education (e.g., two out of every three students enrolled in publicly provided non-university higher education come from non-poor households, while almost eight out of every ten students enrolled in a public university are non-poor).

As a result, intervention in the education sector has delivered an asset that is barely valuable to those with poor initial resources. Yet the same intervention promises increased future earnings to those that already

have significant financial resources. This seems to be a perverse combination if the overall goal is to reduce income inequality.

These results illustrate why Peru, a country where approximately half the population lives in poverty, needs to embark upon a profound institutional reform to boost the quality of its public education system. The Peruvian economy has been growing in the last six years at an average rate of six per cent per year, due in part to macroeconomic stability and a good international environment.

Yet, educational reform has become a matter of national urgency in order to sustain a competitive economy and an equitable society. The current government has begun to tackle part of the problem with mandatory performance assessments of students and teachers nationwide, as well as a performance-based tenure system for teachers,

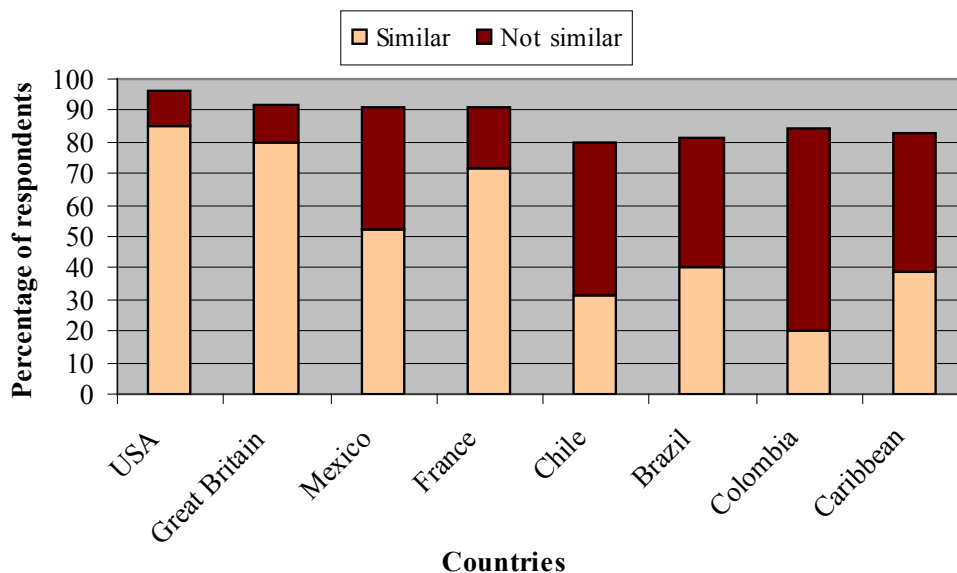
but these changes are insufficient. Increased resources and a more comprehensive reform approach are still needed. Public investment in education should be the primary intervention for reducing inequalities in the long run. 

Gustavo Yamada and Juan Francisco Castro are Professors of Economics at the Universidad del Pacífico in Lima, Peru. This article has been adapted from "Poverty, Inequality and Social Policies in Peru: As Poor as it Gets," a Working Paper available at www.up.edu.pe/ciup.

**Editor's note: The Gini coefficient measures the inequality of income distribution, with 0 corresponding to perfect equality while 1 corresponds to perfect inequality.*

Who Shares Canadian Values?

In seeking partners for collaboration on international issues, how closely does Canada share values and goals with the following countries?



This question was part of a national poll conducted by Léger Marketing for FOCAL and the Association of Canadian Studies. (Margin of error is 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.)

Education as Protection in Contexts of Armed Conflict: The Case of Colombia

Eleanor Douglas

The international community is increasingly concerned in honouring the right to education, especially in contexts of armed conflict and fragile, failing and failed states. Launched in 1990 by representatives of the international community, the movement “Education for All” is a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults.

Likewise, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is a global, open network of non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, donors, practitioners, researchers and individuals working together to ensure the right to education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction.

Despite these laudable efforts, the image of six-year-old Jairo swinging a spiked, three-foot pole at his best friend outside a ramshackle school building in Medellín indicates that more than a desk is required for education to protect children and youth. This concept is also reflected in a recent workshop held in a dangerous area outside Bogotá, where adolescent participants claimed that their biggest fear was loneliness and their greatest challenge was to love and be loved.

This raises poignant questions about the role of schools and edu-

cation in contexts of armed conflict. Does Colombia’s education system respond to the challenges represented by these young people? Can education play a role in breaking the inter-generational cycles of violence?

Context of the Armed Conflict

For the past 50 years, Colombia has been engulfed in an armed conflict in which illegal armed actors, from both the right and left of the

recruitment by illegal armed actors and unscrupulous entrepreneurs associated with the drug trade. They continue to be exposed to the horrors of war through territorial confinement, attacks and occupation of schools, and militarization, authoritarianism, and degrading punishment. Social organizations, economic networks, and family support systems are destroyed. Fear and the inability to speak out cause psycho-social problems and diminish individual capacity to formulate personal life plans. Boys and girls are exposed to domestic violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, and many are obliged to contribute to family incomes through informal income-generation activities.

Access to Education

A holistic vision informs us that education is a process for increasing human potential through the construction of values and knowledge for peaceful coexistence and democratic formation; it is a permanent process of personal,

social, and cultural development; and it is a fundamental human right rather than a service.

While Colombia has constructed a significant legal framework for ensuring access to basic education for both girls and boys, serious challenges remain. State oversight bodies and the Constitutional Court remind national, departmental and municipal governments of their duty to protect vulnerable children and youth, especially indigenous youth, Afro-Colombians, and the displaced. However, the demand for

The image of six-year-old Jairo swinging a spiked, three-foot pole at his best friend outside a ramshackle school building in Medellín indicates that more than a desk is required for education to protect children and youth.

political spectrum, battle with State Security Forces for control over territory. Illicit drug trafficking fuels the conflict and increases levels of violence and corruption, while “easy money” profoundly transforms values. According to CODHES (Consultancy for Displacement and Human Rights) nearly 3.7 million people were forcefully displaced from their homes between 1995 and 2005, with women and children making up nearly 80 per cent of this total. Young people living in high-risk conditions are easy prey for

quality education outstrips government responses.

Access is but one limited indicator for measuring the impact of education as a factor in protection. A study by the Prosecutor General's Office in 2006 revealed that out of nearly 12 million boys and girls between five and 17 years of age who should be registered in basic and middle level education, 22.6 per cent did not attend, and among those who did, 9.1 per cent did not pass their year, reducing the effective rate of educational coverage to 68.3 per cent. This is four percentage points lower than that obtained in 1998.

According to government sources, 54 per cent of the total displaced population is under 17 years of age, meaning that between 800,000 and 1,600,000 displaced children and youth require education. Most significantly, it is the enormous drop-off in educational access after the obligatory six years of primary education that causes greatest concern. The age group between 11 and 18 is extremely vulnerable to recruitment by illegal armed actors, prostitution, sexual exploitation, involvement in the illicit narcotics trade, or dangerous and undignified employment.

Quality and Relevance of Education

The effects of the war are not always visible — uncertainty, fear, and silence permeate young peo-

ples' lives. In addition, Colombian schools may be attacked or occupied for military purposes. In some areas, teachers are replaced by members of the Armed Forces and schools can be used to develop civic-military programs such as "Soldiers for a Day."

Schools that are attacked can

In a war-torn country where the social fabric has been ripped apart and extreme polarization precludes dialogue, the quality of education is just as important as access. The social and emotional makeup of young people has been wounded, and silence related to fear means unattended scars remain unhealed.

be totally or partially destroyed; schools occupied by Armed Forces personnel expose girls to sexual harassment; threats to teachers force them to flee; and finally, schools may simply be closed.

In a war-torn country where the social fabric has been ripped apart and extreme polarization precludes dialogue, the quality of education is just as important as access. The social and emotional makeup of young people has been wounded, and silence related to fear means unattended scars remain unhealed. Colombian adolescents are particularly vulnerable, and many opt to leave school due to discrimination;

cultural, social and economic differences; irrelevant and low-quality education; and education that is disconnected from social realities and contexts.

Education Must and Can Protect

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children as the bearers of rights, thereby breaking with traditions based on an understanding of children as needing assistance or as being incapable and immature. Children need to be recognized for their abilities, for what they are and for what they may become, instead of for what they are not. Such concepts need to be reflected in the formulation of public educational policy, understanding that childhood and adolescence are more


than preparatory stages for adulthood.

From a perspective of "active pedagogy" and human rights, education must be directed towards healing emotional wounds, resolving conflicts, reconstructing social networks and facilitating community development. An integrated transformation of schools is required where interdisciplinary teams made up of teachers, artists, psycho-therapists and psychologists, among others, respond to the individual needs of boys and girls.

Not only should children and youth be conscious of their rights; they need to develop a sense of dig-

nity that they are deserving of rights. Parents need to be brought into the equation and assisted with life skills training in order to increase their own self-esteem and capacity to act as duty-bearers. Schools must allow for the real, active and intentional participation of children and young people, generating democratic spaces where paternalist roles are transformed and where creative solutions to everyday problems are stimulated.

The innate resilience of children and young people needs to be fostered, and schools must transmit a sense of hope and optimism. Children and young people need to be helped to believe and confide in their individual strength and capacity to make positive changes in their lives based on interpersonal relationships grounded in affection, comprehension, respect and love for each other. They need to be able to communicate with ease and demonstrate empathy and affection, in addition to acquiring cognitive knowledge.

Finally, the idea of “educability” from a systems approach should frame our analysis. Children cannot learn if they are hungry, fearful and unhelpful. If education is not accompanied by integrated and focused policies and programs, protection will be minimal, and children and young people will continue to be drawn into the circles of illegal armed actors and illicit business. 

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Informal Education and Peacebuilding by Colombian Youth

Linda Dale

Education can mean many things, but most would agree that its core purpose is to equip young people to function effectively as citizens in their world. Though basic literacy skills are essential, it is equally important to develop students' capacity for critical thinking. What kind of society do they want to have? What is the meaning of truth, justice and equality?

If all educational systems should engage their young people in these debates, it is even more important in countries that have experienced war. We cannot expect young people to automatically understand the meaning of human rights in a world where they have not existed. Youth who have survived by the power of the gun do not necessarily appreciate the merits of equality and tolerance for others.

As part of the transition towards peace, the school system can be a critical institution to replace this lack of lived experience. With some exceptions, this approach to education is absent in Colombia's formal school curriculum. Instead, schools seem to operate inside a vacuum, divorced from the realities of community life shaped by over 50 years of violence.

Working against this reality are youth leaders dedicated to addressing this major omission in the education of Colombian young people. They use different terms for their work such as peacebuilding, promotion of human rights, and reconciliation. Based largely on the tenets of

civil obedience, they maintain that they do not want to participate in a world that “has taken away [their] ability to love, to be human.” Indigenous youth insist that the values and traditions of their culture must be actively reinstated as part of their definition of what it means to be a human being.

Gender issues and combating sexual violence are also a major priority. Young men speak of the high levels of sexual violence which have marked women's bodies and created a barrier of distrust between males and females. One adolescent described their work this way: “Peacebuilding means thinking: How can I work with others? What do I have to do to have the future I dream of, and not just the one they are giving us?”

The methods of these youth advocates reflect good educational practices and address the need for methods that relate to both “the head and the heart.” Rather than providing information, they engage other children and youth in debate and reflection on their situations. At a recent meeting of youth activists in Colombia, the young people discussed their work and situations. The following are excerpts from that discussion:

Adolescents from Cartagena:

It is very difficult for us to talk about human rights. Lots of people don't even realize what rights they have. It is also a paradox to live in a democracy where to talk about human rights makes us afraid.

We as young people need training and preparation. My situation is not the same as that of the indigenous youth of Cauca who are prepared to die for their culture and their territory. We don't have the same cultural identity.

Adolescents from Putumayo:

Feelings no longer exist. People have become familiar with this situation — there is nothing strange about this for them. Despite the fact that the media tell us that over a 110 bodies were located in common graves this week, people hardly reacted. And that is the end of the story.

What we are learning as young people is that we can work with ecological projects — if we protect trees, birds, plants, and animals, why would we not protect human beings? But there is no way we as young people could openly program a human rights course, for example.

Another way for us to work is through art, and we can get out messages about the need for peace and non-violence. Through music on the community radio transmitter we also try to express our protest about the situation.

Adolescent from Pereira:

Fear is a huge factor in young people's lives — the fear of naming things as they are and the fear of loneliness, of being left on one's own. Our spirit of resilience is not as clear as say for indigenous youth in their communities; we need to work carefully. We also use art and theatre in Pereira to make our points about peace, human rights, non-violence, etc. We work on ecological issues — we help children to look after nature and therefore,

also to look after human beings.

Adolescent from Soacha:

The best way I see to work on themes like justice, truth, and reparation is to associate them with cultural activities. This is a safer way to work and it reaches more people. We need to change people's states of mind about, and their attitudes towards, themes



Drawing by a Colombian youth participant in a recent peacebuilding workshop.

like this that have not been dealt with very openly.

Adolescents from Villavicencio and Meta:

Many young people feel that education is not very useful in getting ahead in life. Young girls are more and more willing to sell their bodies for money. Their self-esteem has been destroyed.

Why should we get involved in social and political activities, if we may get killed?

In the rural communities, silence is the golden rule for preserving

life. However, this area also has a rich history of social and community organizing, and Children/Youth as Peacebuilders (CAP) still works with young people in their communities. CAP uses art, theatre, games, and recreation to explore issues of truth, justice, reparation, and reconciliation. In one workshop with children, facilitators asked what "justice" meant. One 12-year-old replied: "A man killed my dad. So I would like that man's son to be killed so he knows what it feels like. And if he doesn't have a son, then a nephew. And if he doesn't have anybody who loves him, then he should be tortured."

Unlike most educators, these young people are combining roles of teacher and student. They struggle with definitions of justice, gender equality and truth while promoting these ideas inside a world that is, at best passive and at worst hostile to their meaning.

They also are working inside dangerous situations that provide them with little protection. Their comments clearly illustrate the importance of alternative forms of education addressing issues of vengeance, abuse, and non-violent conflict resolution that cannot be adequately covered in the public school system. Otherwise, the cycle of violence continues. As one young Afro-Colombian pointed out: "If we look at our ideals, what we think, how we are, we can see it reflected as we act." 🌍

Linda Dale is the Director of Children/Youth as Peacebuilders International (CAP).

www.childrenyouthaspeacebuilders.ca

Chávez and the Bolivarian Education System

Mariano Herrera

Bolivarian schools are perhaps the only expression of education policy within the formal education system of Venezuela.

On September 17, Hugo Chávez announced a newly designed curriculum for Venezuela called the “Bolivarian Education System,” and the official documents reveal a drastic departure from the current curriculum.

The most extreme changes are arguably the emphasis on Marxism - Leninism starting in the third year of secondary school, and the militaristic ideology guiding the programs of the fourth and fifth years of secondary school (equivalent to Grades 10, 11 and 12 in Canada). This program reflects the socialist rhetoric that has characterized Chávez’s administration. If applied, the curriculum will be an attack against freedom of thought and against Venezuela’s own constitution.

Yet Bolivarian schools are not Chávez’s invention. Several school institutions submitted the proposal to previous governments, and the change was born out of a national consensus. But the consensus on education stopped there. First, the Ministry of Education (ME) generated considerable controversy after announcing both the National Education Project (PEN) and “Decree 1011” in 2000. The rejected PEN was written by Carlos Lanz, a radical leftist, and the openly Marx-

ist document did not achieve consensus even among the high officials of the ME.

Decree 1011 was a presidential decree enacted in October 2000

The most extreme changes to the curriculum are arguably the emphasis on Marxism - Leninism starting in the third year of secondary school, and the militaristic ideology guiding the programs of the fourth and fifth years of secondary school. This program reflects the socialist rhetoric that has characterized Chávez’s administration. If applied, the curriculum will be an attack against freedom of thought and against Venezuela’s own constitution.

that created an “itinerant supervisor” who was in charge of auditing public and private schools and had the authority to appoint and remove principals. In addition, supervisors were appointed by the Minister without being subjected to the legal regulations. This decree generated a strong opposition movement that mobilized tens of thousands of people who demonstrated all through the year 2000.

Massive demonstrations against

the education system continued until 2001, forming a strong foundation for the anti-Chávez movement. There was a nearly constant presence of demonstrators on the streets until April 11, 2002, and protests continued with the oil strike in December of the same year.

In 2003, the opposition collected signatures to call for a referendum that would revoke the Chávez administration. Public opinion indicated that if the referendum was carried out that year, Chávez would be defeated. As a result, Chávez manipulated the electoral system in order to postpone the referendum until August 2004. In November 2003 he started the education “missions” under direct advice from Cuban agents, who also implemented the projects.


These missions are social programs that benefit those sectors victimized by the institutional weakness of the Venezuelan State. They are special programs that address the real situations of marginalized groups, and all beneficiaries of education missions receive a monthly scholarship equivalent to US\$100. For these reasons, the missions have received widespread acceptance among Venezuelans and have increased Chávez’s popularity.

Chávez has achieved great political success with non-formal education, thanks to the electoral benefit provided by the missions. But he has faced a solid opposition in the formal education sector. Nevertheless, the formal education system was politically co-opted by the government

starting in 2004. In fact, the Minister of Education has single-handedly appointed 115,000 new teachers this year, representing 30 per cent of the total number of professors and teachers, and they have not been subjected to the legal requirements for public school teachers.

The results of Chávez's education policies are not flattering. The grade repetition and drop-out rates are identical to the last five years of the 1990s. Registration for first grade has been decreasing since 2005. The test results for reading comprehension and mathematics indicate stagnation in the level of learning at public schools.

In reality, the Bolivarian schools were the only real change in education policy that Chávez managed to implement in his first five years of government. The education policies implemented by the Chávez government have actually had a greater impact outside of the formal education system than within it. In fact, according to the official figures for 2007, only 5,000 out of approximately 24,000 public schools are officially Bolivarian.

Arguably, education has been a powerful political instrument for Chávez, especially because of the positive social impact of the "missions." But, for the time being, the impact of these missions as ideological instruments seems to be much lower. In the end, the quality of public schools, on which the poorest people rely for their education, is still far from being improved. 

Mariano Herrera is the Director of the Centre of Cultural and Education Investigation (CICE) in Venezuela.
www.cice.org.ve

Canada rejects UN Indigenous Rights Declaration

After 22 years of debate, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a non-binding declaration regarding the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passed with 143 countries in favour, four opposed, and 11 abstaining. The four nations opposing the declaration, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, all have large indigenous populations and common law legal systems. A primary concern of the opposing countries was that the declaration gives tribes' customary law precedence over national law, especially in regards to Article 26, which states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired." The concern is that this broad statement could be interpreted in multiple ways and could put current domestic treaties and previously settled land claims at risk. Canada said that while it supported the "spirit" of the idea, the government could not officially support the declaration because of provisions "that are fundamentally incompatible with Canada's constitutional framework." Canada is also concerned that the declaration does not recognize the need to balance indigenous rights with the rights of other Canadians.

Chávez y el sistema educativo bolivariano

Mariano Herrera

Las escuelas bolivarianas son quizás la única expresión de política educativa dentro del sistema educativo formal venezolano.

El 17 de septiembre Hugo Chávez anunció un nuevo diseño curricular para Venezuela que se llamará "sistema educativo bolivariano (SEB)." En el documento oficial puede apreciarse un drástico cambio en el currículo. Lo más radical es su énfasis en la enseñanza del marxismo - leninismo a partir del tercer año de secundaria y la filosofía militarista y belicista de los enunciados filosóficos que orientan los progra-

mas de cuarto y quinto de secundaria. Este programa parece traducir la retórica socialista que caracteriza la administración de Chávez. Si se aplicara, sería un atentado contra la libertad de pensamiento y contra la propia constitución venezolana.

Pero las escuelas bolivarianas no son un invento de Chávez. Varias instituciones escolares habían elevado la propuesta a gobiernos anteriores. De modo que se trata de un cambio que nacía de un consenso nacional.

Pero hasta ahí llegó la paz consensual en educación en Venezuela. A partir de 2000, el Ministerio de Educación (ME) generó mucha

polémica con la publicación del Proyecto Educativo Nacional (PEN) y del “decreto 1011.” El PEN fue redactado por Carlos Lanz, un izquierdista radical, y el documento, abiertamente marxista, no obtuvo el consenso ni siquiera entre altos funcionarios del ME y fue descartado.

El 1011 fue un decreto presidencial de octubre de 2000 que creaba la figura del supervisor itinerante, cuyas funciones eran las de intervenir en escuelas públicas y privadas, llegando su autoridad hasta el nombramiento y la remoción de sus directores. Los supervisores eran además nombrados por el ministro, sin someterse al reglamento legal. Este decreto generó un fuerte movimiento opositor que llegó a movilizar a decenas de miles de personas que manifestaron durante todo el año 2000.

Las manifestaciones masivas movilizadas por la educación continuaron hasta el 2001 y se convirtieron en la base del rechazo opositor a Chávez hasta el año 2002, con la casi permanente presencia de manifestantes en la calle hasta el 11 de abril de 2002 y luego con el paro petrolero en diciembre de ese mismo año.

En 2003, la oposición recogía firmas para convocar un referéndum revocatorio y todo indicaba que si dicho referéndum se realizaba ese mismo año, Chávez sería derrotado y su mandato revocado. De modo que manipuló el sistema electoral para posponer el referéndum para agosto de 2004 y, desde noviembre de 2003, puso en marcha las “misiones” con asesoría y ejecución directa de agentes cubanos.


Las misiones son pues programas

sociales que benefician a sectores víctimas de la debilidad institucional del Estado venezolano. Son programas especiales para situaciones reales de grupos excluidos. Además, los beneficiarios de las misiones educativas reciben una beca mensual equivalente a US\$100. Por esas razones, han gozado de amplia aceptación y lograron hacer repuntar la popularidad de Chávez.

Lo más radical es su énfasis en la enseñanza del marxismo-leninismo a partir del tercer año de secundaria y la filosofía militarista y belicista de los enunciados filosóficos que orientan los programas de cuarto y quinto de secundaria. Este programa parece traducir la retórica socialista que caracteriza la administración de Chávez.

Chávez ha logrado un gran éxito político con la educación no formal gracias al beneficio electoral que ha obtenido con las misiones, y, en cambio, en la educación formal ha enfrentado una sólida oposición que no le ha dado mucho margen de maniobra. No obstante, desde 2004 puede decirse que el sistema educativo formal ha sido también tomado políticamente por el gobierno. En efecto, ese año el Ministro de Educación nombró de manera arbitraria a 115,000 nuevos docentes, que representan 30 por ciento del total de profesores y maestros, y que no se sometieron a los requisitos legales para ser docente en una escuela pública.

Los resultados educativos de las políticas de Chávez no son halagadores. Los índices de deserción y repitencia son idénticos a la de los últimos cinco años de la década de los 90. La matrícula de primer grado viene descendiendo desde 2005. Los resultados en pruebas de comprensión de lectura y matemática muestran un estancamiento en el nivel de aprendizaje de los alumnos de las escuelas públicas. En realidad, el único verdadero cambio educativo que Chávez logró implantar en los primeros cinco años de su gobierno fueron las escuelas bolivarianas. Todavía, las escuelas bolivarianas son quizás la única expresión de política educativa dentro del sistema educativo formal venezolano. Vale aclarar que para este año 2007, según cifras oficiales, de cerca de 24,000 escuelas públicas, sólo 5,000 son bolivarianas. Las políticas educativas del gobierno de Chávez han tenido más impacto fuera del sistema de educación formal, con las “misiones.”

Puede afirmarse que la educación ha sido un potente instrumento político de Chávez, especialmente por el impacto social y electoral positivo de las “misiones.” Pero el impacto de las misiones como instrumento ideológico parece ser, por ahora, mucho menor. A fin de cuentas la calidad de las escuelas públicas, de las que dependen los más pobres para su educación, dista mucho de haber mejorado. 

Mariano Herrera es Director de Centro de Investigaciones Culturales y Educativas (CICE).

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EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

October 14-16, 2007

EDGE Network Annual General Meeting and 2nd Annual Conference

Vancouver, BC

Two FOCAL staff members have been invited to participate in workshops:

- Carlo Dade is participating in the workshop "Direct investments in social development by Canadian companies in the Americas".
- Vladimir Torres will participate in the workshop "The Rise of Regional Trade Alliances".

For more information, visit: www.edgenetwork.ca

October 29, 2007

Canada as the Emerging Energy Superpower: Testing the Case

Ottawa Congress Centre

Ottawa, ON

FOCAL staff will be attending and contributing to this conference put on by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. www.cdfai.org

November 6, 2007

Diasporas and Development in Conflict-Affected Countries — Migration Development Series

UN Institute for Training and Research, New York

Carlo Dade has been invited to chair a panel at this migration seminar in New York. Registration deadline: October 30. www.unitar.org

Write for FOCALPoint

Articles between 700-1000 words in English, French or Spanish are welcome. All submissions are on a volunteer basis and must be exclusive to FOCALPoint. For full submission guidelines, please contact rschmidt@focal.ca or visit www.focal.ca.

The views expressed in FOCALPoint are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of FOCAL or FOCAL staff.

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