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Education and the Dimensions of Human Development in Latin America



Since two decades ago, the Human Development Index has been measuring the level of welfare of a country based on its GDP, life expectancy, literacy and education. A study in Latin America highlights the close relationship of education with other dimensions of development, such as persistent poverty, poor health, unsanitary housing conditions and insecurity in areas where most of the population lives.

Two decades ago, the United Nations Development Programme broadened the classical measure of development in terms of the gross domestic product per capita of a given country. In fact, in the nineties a growing concern with social and educational goals triggered interest in new dimensions such as education, public health, housing, access to water and poverty alleviation. In accordance, the Index for Human Development has into account taken domestic product, literacy, school enrolment and life expectancy. Moreover, in 2000 two ambitious worldwide initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All Programme were launched in order to achieve significant advances in an array of economic and extra-economic dimensions of development by 2015. Therefore, in two years' time the balance of those high political, global expectations will be publicly assessed and discussed.

While the bulk of the monitoring reports watching these initiatives have focused on the world regions with lowest human development, mostly located in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, a rich strand of research and political debate is also raising challenging questions about the circumstances of development in intermediate and emergent countries. This is the case of many Latin American countries, not least due to the inclusion of Brazil in the list of the so-called BRICS

economies (namely, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Certainly, average indexes score relatively higher in these countries, whose economies have been thriving for a decade or even longer periods despite their initial conditions being extremely weak, in some cases quite analogous to the poorest world regions today. Here, average population avails of a better situation compared to other countries, but inequalities between the wealthiest and the worst-off compromise the potential for improvement. In fact, the effects of social division on human development are currently a crucial debate in both governmental summits and international organisations focusing on Latin America and international forum about the potential of the whole world to improve towards more equitable conditions.

These debates cast doubts on the hypothesis that education may be a crucial driver of human development on its own. Although the undeniable contribution of education to family planning, economic productivity, public health and legitimization of democracy has been widely documented in these countries, research also reports on significant constraints to the very development of education due to noticeable shortcomings in the other faces of development. If inequalities normally pattern educational outcomes even in the most affluent countries, their perverse effects may be deleterious in middle-income countries, because a substantial share of people live in urban slums where income poverty, illiteracy, urban slums and crime are pervasive. Although school enrolment has undergone a dramatic expansion in countries like Brazil or Chile, the negative consequences of persisting poverty are still ruining the potential of students to get the most out of their stay at school.

A state of the art perspective on the research on middle-income countries was recently published in the Mexican journal *Papeles de Población*. According to the studies collected for this review, income poverty harms educational conditions by means of material and psychological stress, and the labour market may have a terrible impact by means of informal (parental) labour and many types of child labour. Fortunately, social policies are succeeding in tackling the latter, but inequality and income poverty remain very high despite economic growth. Furthermore, the perverse effects of poor health, poor dwelling and crime have also been documented in several countries. This review points at new research questions and underpins the need of integral, cross-sectoral reforms addressing economic, educational, social and fiscal policies which can eventually overcome this challenge.

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References

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