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Educación de Calidad
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The State of
Education in
Latin America
and the
Caribbean

Towards Education for All by

2015

Executive summary

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1. Introduction and summary

“Education for all” and the right to education

This report gauges the state of advance of the countries that make up Latin America and the Caribbean with regard to compliance with the six goals specified in the 2000 Dakar framework for action. It also identifies a suite of challenges and relevant issues that should be part of the agenda for discussion in the post-2015 landscape – after the deadline that the countries set themselves for achieving the goals of the framework for action.

In general terms, the report identifies a number of significant advances made in the region towards achieving the education for all goals; indeed, a number of criteria have been applied in a systematic manner that is even more stringent than the goals explicitly stipulated at Dakar, as a means of suggesting that the region can and should set its sights ever higher. Additionally, our analyses comparing the region with other parts of the world tend to show that, taken as a whole, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have achieved more than most in the basic aspects of education, taking into account differences in the contexts of different countries. However, the report strongly urges action in three critical areas. First, the achievements that have been made are not universal across all countries: differences within the region are significant, and some countries are still a long way from achieving even the basic Dakar goals. Secondly, almost all countries in the region show acute internal inequalities, perpetuated mainly through the variables of social class, differences between members of indigenous groups vis a vis the population at large, and gaps between residents of different zones. Even when progress has been made by the most disadvantaged when assessed in absolute terms, these groups have gained no significant advance in their situation with regard to the most privileged. Finally, the new criteria that are being applied to judge advances in education are increasingly linked to quality, rather than simply expanding enrolment. Here, we adopt a wide-ranging conceptualization of quality, which includes not only achievements but also situations and processes; not only academic aspects, but also issues of psychosocial development and citizenship. It is without a doubt in this area that the region is plagued by chronic underachievement.

Historically, international commitment to Education For All stands as the current phase of a lengthy movement among governments and the international community to extend the right to education among individuals, to endow this right with real substance, and to make it ever more realisable. Over the course of this process, the very concept of the right to education has continued to evolve - from the idea of compulsory education, through to a more ambitious and multidimensional concept (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2008).

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “Everyone has the right to education”. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”. A similar concept is reiterated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), article 13 of which states that “The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right [education]: (a) Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all; (b) Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate

means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education; (c) Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity [...]. Finally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) reiterates a requirement effectively equivalent to that stated in the 1966 Covenant, that education should be accessible, free of charge, and compulsory, as applicable for different education levels.

The concept of the right to education has been closely linked to the idea of guaranteeing universal access to schools, through compulsory attendance laws. This basic vision of the right to education as a right to attend school and obtain a graduation certificate has been shown to be lacking. Education policies and the international community have evolved towards a redefinition of the right to education, coming to see it as the right to learn. One of the implications of this sea change is that a quality education is now seen as part of the right to education. International texts such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child provide a trinity of 'permanent' criteria to define the right to learn, or the right to a quality education: i) the fullest possible development of the capacities of each individual; ii) the promotion of the values set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: equality between persons, respect for diversity, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the promotion of the common good; and iii) providing students with the tools, skills, and knowledge necessary to become socially competent persons.

The gradually shifting nature of the concept of the right to education means that there will always be a level of academic debate and political conflict regarding how to define its practical scope for each period and each society. In particular, today's view of the right to education is built on three pillars: the right to attend school (access, progression, and graduation from the grades that are considered fundamental); the right to learn (in a socially relevant manner, and in accordance with each individual's capacities); and the right to be treated in a dignified manner, under conditions of equal opportunities (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2008).

Indeed, the Dakar framework for action expresses a more ambitious concept of the right to education. As long ago as 1990, the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien established the need for all children, young people, and adults to have access to education, seeing it as a fundamental right that allows the basic requirements of learning and participation in society to be satisfied. This was confirmed in 2000 with the Dakar framework for action, in which countries reaffirmed their collective commitment to ensuring Education For All. To that end, they established 6 Education For All goals, to be achieved by 2015 (Dakar, 2000):

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

UNESCO has been conducting a programme monitoring progress in and compliance with these goals, both worldwide and in the different regions of the world, publishing the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) on an annual basis since 2002. Each of these reports shows advances made in the Education For All goals, and discusses a particular central issue of relevance to the achievement of these goals by 2015¹. This report was prepared with reference to the GMRs from 2002 through to 2012, as well as other documents published by a range of UN agencies on different topics related to the Education For All goals. This background research was complemented with academic literature on specific issues, particularly in identifying and analysing challenges for the post-2015 period. Wherever statistics are mentioned, the most up to date databases available have been used, making particular reference to UNESCO figures but also using information from other international agencies - principally ECLAC and the World Bank.

In order to assess the situation of the countries that make up Latin America and the Caribbean in terms of compliance with the six Education For All goals, as specified in the 2000 Dakar framework for action, the logic behind UNESCO's regular monitoring processes has been used as a general guideline. The most up to date information available has been used. Additionally, in a number of cases attention has been paid to changes since 2000, when the Dakar covenant was signed, and statistical analyses have been conducted addressing all countries in the world, for the dual purposes of identifying factors associated with achieving certain basic Education For All goals, and providing context for the situation of the countries that make up the Latin American and Caribbean region. However, it must be borne in mind that information is incomplete for many countries.

Following this introduction, which concludes with a brief summary of its principal content, this report is structured into a number of main sections. First, basic information is provided on the socioeconomic context of the region's countries, and the financial efforts that governments have made in the field of education. There follows an analysis of eight topics that have been identified as key issues for education in the region: early childhood, primary education, secondary education, education quality, tertiary education, gender equity, bilingual inter-cultural education, and lifelong education. Examples and analyses of particular education policies or trends have been included in these sections, followed by case studies from certain countries over recent years. The Dakar goals linked to these topics are analysed within the corresponding sections, but it must be borne in mind that there is not always a direct relationship: some goals are addressed in multiple sections, and all sections address topics that are broader in scope than the strict stipulations set forth in the

¹ The central issues discussed in these reports over the past ten years have been gender parity (2003-2004), education quality (2005), literacy (2006), early childhood (2007), governance (2009), marginalisation (2010), conflict (2011), and youth and skills. The 2002 and 2008 reports centred on reviewing progress towards achieving the education for all goals.

goals. It is our hope that this particular style of analysis will allow discussion surrounding the permanent objectives of education to be extended into the post-2015 time frame, going beyond the specific conceptualization adopted at Dakar, and forming an expression of the changing and multi-dimensional perspective adopted regarding the right to education.

General vision of the report

1. Introduction and summary

The concept of the right to education has evolved, and grown in complexity. It is now widely recognised that the right to education includes the right to attend school, the right to learn, and the right to be treated in a dignified manner under conditions of equality of opportunities. The Education for All goals, as expressed in the Dakar framework for action in 2000, adopt a multidimensional perspective on the right to education. However, this perspective must be assessed and adjusted with a view to defining an agenda of commitments regarding the right to education for the period after 2015.

2. Development trends in Latin American and Caribbean countries

Between 2000 and 2009 (and in some cases going back to the 1990s), most countries in the region experienced significant progress in key areas such as global development, economic growth, and - to a lesser extent - poverty reduction. These factors created a favourable context for advances in education. Some countries in the region have also benefited from a change in demographics, reducing potential demand for education. However, the persistence of high levels of inequity and poverty, combined with the large proportion of the region's population living in rural areas, have added to the difficulty of expanding quality education coverage in many areas.

3. Public investment in education in Latin America and the Caribbean

There has been a general slight upward trend in public expenditure on education in the region over the past ten years (moving from approximately 4.5% of GDP to 5.2%, on average), albeit without a major increase in the priority assigned to education in state budgets. This increase in expenditure seems to be principally due to an expansion in education services, as the proportion of public expenditure per pupil tended to remain stable or increase slightly for primary and secondary education, while showing a significant drop for higher education. Across the region, this field generally shows very significant differences between countries. Analyses tend to indicate that public expenditure on education was a relevant factor in explaining differences between countries in levels of achievement of the education for all goals. Information available on private expenditure on education in the region shows generally higher proportions than in OECD countries, across all levels of education.

4. Early Childhood Care and Education

Basic conditions for survival, health, and wellbeing in early childhood have improved significantly in the region over the past ten years. A moderate increase has also been observed in access to pre-primary education (with net enrolment rates rising from 56% to 66% on average), placing the region in a favourable position in the global context. Nonetheless, the prevailing situations in different countries in the region differ widely, in line with major differences in the priority assigned to early childhood education. Critical inequities were also observed, the disadvantage of the poorest families, those who live in rural areas, and members of indigenous groups.

Although the agenda of expanding early childhood care and education programmes remains relevant, the greatest challenge facing the region's countries lies in achieving progress in guaranteeing a satisfactory level of quality in these services, as it has been shown that the positive effects observed in early childhood development can disappear - or even become negative - if the programmes in question lack sufficient quality.

5. Primary education: access and completion of studies.

By 2000, the region's countries already showed a high level of access to primary education, with a net enrolment rate of 94%; furthermore, the past ten years have shown encouraging trends in the areas of both grade repetition and school abandonment, making retention through to the end of the cycle and graduation levels show significant improvements in most countries - particularly those that were starting from less advantageous situations. This progress was particularly marked amongst the poorest families and those living in rural areas, with a general reduction in internal inequities. However, in 2000, an average of one child in ten aged between 15 and 19 had not completed primary education; in some countries, this proportion was as high as one in three.

The key challenge in the area of access and completion of studies for primary education lies in promoting improvements in conditions for children and young people living the most socially disadvantaged situations, helping to keep them in school. This will require social and financial support programmes for families (for example, towards the eradication of child labour), compensation programmes for the schools that serve the most disadvantaged, and improved conditions for teaching and learning (e.g. longer school days, better learning resources, reduced social segregation in schools).

6. Secondary education

Over the past decade, secondary education has shown mild expansion in the region (the average net enrolment rate has risen from 67% to 72%), and some indices suggest a drop off in the rate of increase in the proportion of young people completing this education level (although in 2000, almost half of those aged between 20 and 24 had not completed secondary education). This finding is believed to be due mainly not to problems of access or scarcity of supply, but rather to issues of grade repetition and school abandonment. The region's countries show extremely varied situations regarding levels of school attendance among young people: while some have gone a long way towards universal secondary education, in others this education level is still limited to a minority of the population. This disadvantage affects the poorest young people and those who live in rural areas to a

disproportionate extent across all countries, even though in some cases these very groups have benefited most from progress made over the past decade.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, secondary education faces the challenge of consolidating its expansion, particularly for the most disadvantaged, but this 'growth' agenda is inextricably linked to a parallel 'transformation' agenda for the identity, internal processes, and forms of organization of secondary education - without which the twin goals of equity and quality shall be severely compromised. Without comprehensive reform, the difficulties of moving towards mass secondary education that makes sense to young people may be insurmountable.

7. The challenge of education quality

The multidimensional vision of the right to education, which includes the right to learn and to receive fair treatment in the school system, places education quality at the centre of present concerns. Furthermore, in light of mayor advances made in coverage, the region's education for all agenda will increasingly be characterised by challenges relating to quality, including the issue of adopting a broad definition of the concept of education quality, avoiding reductionism.

7.1. Learning attainment and quality assurance

Pupils' learning achievement is a matter of concern in most countries in the region where information is available: on average, approximately one third of primary school pupils and almost half of those in secondary school appear not to have acquired basic literacy skills. The situation for numeracy is even less satisfactory. Furthermore, severe inequity exists in learning achievement to the detriment of the most disadvantaged students, particularly the poorest. Education policies should focus on ensuring that each school possesses the supplies, organizational conditions, and professional capacities to generate improved learning outcomes for all students, particularly those who face the greatest difficulties. Standardised external assessment systems and accountability - already nascent trends - should be conceived and validated in terms of their contribution towards improving these learning opportunities.

7.2. Teachers and education quality

The fundamental pillar of education quality comprises the professional skills of teachers. If students attend class only to find teachers who are not capable of creating greater learning opportunities, there can be no genuine improvement in education quality. Although available information is incomplete, all indices suggest that the prevailing situation in the teaching profession in the region fails to show the characteristics of a high status profession. Salaries and working conditions are poor, teacher training is of low quality, and professional development opportunities are limited. Therefore, the challenge facing policies on teachers is monumental: a professional teaching career must be assembled that can attract talented young people into teaching, provide them with suitable training, keep competent teachers in the classroom (particularly in the most disadvantaged areas), and make professional development a need and a requirement. As these processes form part of a system, it is difficult to make progress in one without also progressing in the others.

7.3. The school environment and its relationship with education quality

Being well treated in the school is a vital component of the widened definition of the right to education. This throws concerns over the school environment into stark relief, in terms of promoting relationships that are respectful and non-discriminatory, based on healthy coexistence and non-violence between members of the school community. A good school environment is part of education quality. Additionally, information available in the region shows that an improved school environment is associated with enhanced academic achievement among pupils and reduced dropout rates. Furthermore, evidence exists suggesting that students from higher socioeconomic levels tend to attend schools with better indices of school environment, making this another inequity factor. The public policy challenge in this area is to promote healthy coexistence through - for example - student participation, respectful treatment with teachers, and the teaching of non-violent conflict resolution methods, moving beyond purely punitive approaches to controlling violence and supporting discipline.

7.4. Citizenship education and education quality

Historically, citizenship education has been defined as one of the essential goals of education. However, it has been of relatively low relevance for education policy, and therefore in practice it retains a traditional vision split between reinforcing national identity and passing on the basics of civic education. Furthermore, evidence collected in some of the region's countries shows that more than half of Latin American children have not acquired the most basic content regarding civic knowledge; it has also been found that a significant proportion of young people in the region tend to mistrust public institutions, and not to value democracy. It is indeed a paradox that a comparatively large proportion of young people in the region take a high level of interest in public affairs, social justice, and the inclusion of minority groups; indeed, recent years have seen the formation of student movements in a number of countries, reaffirming young people's willingness to participate, and their interest in the matters that affect them.

The greatest challenge in this field is to allow civic education to regain its position as a core component of education quality, and of the learning objectives that students are expected to achieve. However, in order to achieve this goal, a new approach to citizen education must be implemented, oriented towards the development of skills and attitudes for political and civic participation - complementing and making sense of academic learning, so that students will not only learn course contents, but will also improve their social relationships and their involvement in the society to which they belong. This will require not only changes in the curriculum, but also modifications of teaching techniques and school organization systems, as to acquire these skills students must have direct experience of participation - as applicable for their age - in both civic-political and civic-community matters.

7.5. Education and information and communications technologies

Providing students with digital skills is ever more important in the field of education, as a requirement for inclusion in the knowledge society: ICT provides not only powerful learning resources, but also a set of tools that are ever more relevant in life. The potential of ICT goes beyond digital literacy. Such technologies can be used to promote modern skills

and to improve students' performance in more general terms. In Latin America and the Caribbean, access to these technologies in the home depends strongly on families' socioeconomic condition, and so the school system has become the prime mover in reducing this technology divide - a divide that nonetheless remains highly significant in most countries. Alongside the continuation of programmes to supply ICT technologies to the schools that teach those who do not belong to privileged sectors, the key future challenge is to find a way cause Latin American students to use these technologies not just for recreation, but also in a manner that has educational potential. This will require improvements in teacher training, to incorporate these new technologies into classroom activities.

8. Higher education

Access to higher education expanded rapidly in the region between 2000 and 2009, with an average growth rate of 40% - placing the region as a whole around the average of the global trend. Despite this extended growth trend, developing countries continue to show an extreme level of variability at this education level. Nonetheless, the higher education growth trend was highly inequitable, mainly favouring the highest income segments and those living in urban areas.

The region faces a wide range of challenges in the area of higher education. First, there is a need to revert the inequitable tendency of the growth trend, requiring greater state leadership in financial terms and in compensatory policies. Secondly, countries must strengthen their university institutions - particularly in the case of large public universities - in order to generate their own capacities in the fields of scientific and technological research; the region remains chronically underdeveloped in this area. Finally, universities should do much more to connect with their societies' development needs - a field in which the school system is fertile ground. They should investigate the education problems that affect large sectors of their societies, supporting improvement and reform of school systems, training better new teachers, and integrating vertically with the education system.

9. Gender equity in education

In general terms, the region has achieved primary and secondary school access rates for girls and young women that are comparatively highly satisfactory. Indeed, many countries exhibit gender parity rates for secondary education that show greater exclusion of males, who are more severely affected by child labour and by discipline and learning achievement problems that result in their deserting school. Available information regarding learning outcomes shows a generalised (albeit not universal) pattern of lower achievements among boys in literacy, and among girls in mathematics and the sciences.

In order to advance towards greater gender equity, education policies should take into account the specific nature of the factors that affect school desertion in secondary education: in broad strokes, paid work and behavioural problems for boys, and maternity and cooperation in domestic labour for girls. The causes behind systematic differences in learning achievement are harder to elucidate, but available information suggests that a combination of deeply rooted cultural stereotypes and the persistence of discriminatory practices in schools may be at play; these problems can only be solved through intensive work on school culture and teacher training.

10. Bilingual inter-cultural education: education and diversity

The inequity that affects pupils who belong to indigenous groups is intense and widely distributed across Latin America and the Caribbean, in terms of both access and progression and learning achievement, at different education levels. Those belonging to indigenous groups are systematically located amongst the most disadvantaged social categories in the field of education in the region - a situation that is often exacerbated as many such people also inhabit rural areas and live in conditions of poverty. This observation can be explained through discriminatory patterns in terms of the region's culture, teaching methods, linguistic characteristics, and institutional framework in education.

In order to move beyond this situation, first of all compensatory policies should be implemented addressing the most clear exclusion factors (e.g. lack of supply, resource shortages, child labour). However, such policies alone cannot be sufficient: cultural, institutional, and teaching methodology-related factors must also be addressed. Here, there is a need to promote inter-cultural education for all, in the sense of eliminating the bias against indigenous people that permeates the entire education system, which also finds an outlet in lack of awareness and prejudice on the part of those who are not indigenous. Finally, conditions should be created under which certain countries and areas are able to promote bilingual inter-cultural education, bringing indigenous languages into a system, drawing up suitable education materials and curriculum designs, and providing teacher training in bilingualism and interculturality.

11. Adult literacy education and lifelong learning

Taking a traditional definition of literacy, by 2000 the region had achieved comparatively satisfactory literacy levels that have continued to increase over the past ten years; the average literacy rate among adults rose from 90% to 93% during the period, with only four countries remaining below 90%. This rise appears to be linked more closely with the rhythm of expansion in the education system, rather than with specific policies; in fact, in 2010 the literacy rate among young people stood at 97%. However, there has been a trend towards adopting a more nuanced definition of literacy, taking into account the fact that the basic skills needed for citizenship in the modern world are more demanding than was previously the case.

Sadly, the region lacks satisfactory information examining the situation, rendering it hard to garner a general overview of the population's situation regarding '21st century literacy'; however, the information that is available suggests that a great deal remains to be done in most countries. Furthermore, a more ambitious vision must bring together the traditional challenge of literacy programmes with the concept of lifelong learning, forming institutional and policy mechanisms to offer relevant education opportunities for young people who are facing difficulties in transitioning from education to working life, and for the people as a whole needing perpetually to renew their skills - particularly with a view to moving on to better employment opportunities.