C O S T A R I C A

R E P O R T

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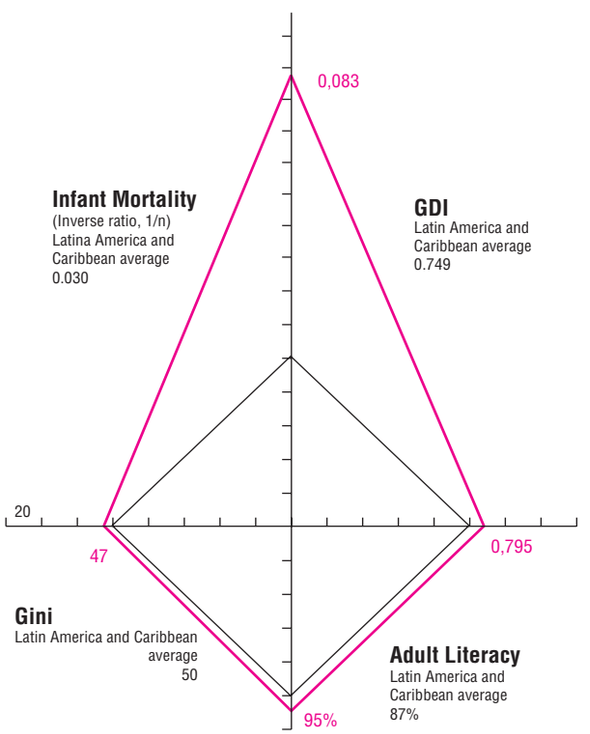

The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
Source: ***Infant mortality:*** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; ***Adult literacy:*** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; ***GDI*** (Gender Development index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*; ***GINI***: World Bank, *World Development indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

Although Costa Rica invests more in social development than other Central American countries, there is still a tendency toward reduced opportunities in both education and employment.

THE FUTURE ON HOLD

«In our country, it has been noted that only one out of ten people who enter primary education complete secondary school successfully and subsequently have the option of going on to higher education...»[1]

Until 1980, education at all levels was seen as the way to achieve social development in the country. ***In the last 20 years, however, education has become inaccessible to the majority of the population***. An indicator of this is the gap in quality that exists between public and private education systems, as well as between education in urban centres and rural areas.

Government efforts to resolve tensions between maintaining and expanding access to education coverage and raising the quality of education have been insufficient. Both are needed so that the population can equitably access the codes of modernity and enjoy the full exercise of citizenship.

The most dramatic imbalance is found in secondary education. Here we see the principal and most critical breakdown in the Costa Rican educational system.«Net high school enrolment rates reveal that nearly one out of two youngsters of school age are outside the educational system.» In addition to low enrolment rates, secondary education suffers from high dropout and poor academic performance rates. These problems are more common among male than female students.

Pre–school and primary education coverage has recently expanded significantly. Dropout rates in primary school have also fallen. There continue to be inequalities in the quality of education in both sectors, however. The indicators for academic performance and repeat rates at public schools differ from those at private schools. Fee–paying education continues to be regarded as a synonym for efficiency.

MAQUILAS[2]: THE «GREAT DEAL»

After a decade of adjustment programmes, employment has increased only in export sector activities, such as the *maquila*

1 *MIDEPLAN*, 1997. Cited in *Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano Sostenible*. Report No. 5. San José, Costa Rica, 1999, p. 83.
2 Free Trade Zones

sector. In 1997/1998, the formal labour market contracted and the unemployment rate rose to the highest level in the decade, 6.2%. This meant 23,034 jobs were cut in 1997. Open and hidden under–employment also rose, in particular among the female urban population.[3] Despite a small increase in minimum wage in 1997, the low quality of available employment has resulted in a low average monthly income.

The *maquila* had an immediate effect on job creation. The key problem today is the low quality of employment generated by the *maquila* and their minimal impact on national development.

Poverty levels are directly related to low levels of schooling and informal employment. According to figures of the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean's (ECLAC), poverty increased from 20% in 1994 to 21.6% in 1997. GNP did not increase substantively. The business sector considered the principal obstacles to increased productivity and investment to be economic uncertainty, high social costs, taxes and lack of personal and property security.[4]

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3 UNDP, 1996, pp. 64–100.
4 UNDP, 1996, p. 106.