

challenges

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Newsletter on progress towards the Millennium Development Goals from a child rights perspective

>> Adolescents and the right to education



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Adolescents and the right to education

The inalienable right of all people to education is enshrined in various international covenants, conventions and agreements, yet the actual fulfilment of this right varies in quantity and quality from one country to the other.

On average, the compulsory length of schooling in the countries of the region is 10 years. Half of these countries have already made all secondary education mandatory, which is eminently reasonable since it is commonly accepted as a minimum threshold for lifelong well-being and skills-building.

The main article in this edition of Challenges discusses this subject in depth, and shows how far behind we are in ensuring that all adolescents have access to the education to which they are entitled. It focuses on the low secondary school-completion rate and low level of learning acquisition, the strong socioeconomic and sociocultural stratification, the lack of citizenship skills, and the persistence of a relatively high dropout rate at all levels of secondary education. The main challenge in guaranteeing the right to education lies in reducing learning and attainment gaps by helping the groups that are presently lagging behind the most.

As is customary, there are also reports on relevant meetings and conferences held in the region over the past half-year, together with the opinions of experts and adolescents and success stories in promoting school attendance in Uruguay and the Dominican Republic.

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The semester in the region

>> First Latin American Congress on Childhood and Public Policies, Assessments, Challenges, and Commitments for a New Citizenry

This congress will be held in Santiago on 14–17 January, 2014, as a forum for political and academic dialogue and debate of public policies on children.

<http://gsia.blogspot.com/2013/05/primer-congreso-latinoamericano-sobre.html>

>> Sixth Ibero-American and Caribbean Seminar on Adolescents and Youth, and Third Cuban and Caribbean Congress on Comprehensive Adolescent Health

Held in Varadero, 16–18 October, 2013. Experiences were exchanged with a view to improving adolescent health care.

<http://www.codajic.org/node/383>

>> International Seminar on Child Poverty, Public Policies, and Democracy

This event will be held in Mexico City on 19–21 February 2014 to discuss the elimination of child poverty and the reduction of inequity in a context of democracy and social rights..

<http://www.equidadparalainfancia.org/seminario-internacional-pobreza-infantil-politicas-publicas-y-democracia/>

Key documents



>> ECLAC and UNICEF 2012

Pautassi, Laura y Laura Royo (2012), "Enfoque de derechos en las políticas de infancia: indicadores para su medición." Project document (LC/W.513), Santiago, December 2012.

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>> UNICEF, 2011

The state of the world's children 2011. Adolescence: An age of opportunity, New York, February 2011.

http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/SOWC-2011-Main-Report_EN_02092011.pdf



>> Child Helpline International, 2013

The voices of children and youth in the Americas and Caribbean, Amsterdam, August. 2013

http://www.childhelplineinternational.org/media/65117/voices_of_children_and_youth_in_americas_caribbean_spanish.pdf



>> UNDP, 2013

Larrañaga, Osvaldo, Gustavo Cabezas and Francisca Dussailant, "Estudio de la educación técnico profesional.", Santiago, June 2013.

http://www.pnud.cl/areas/ReduccionPobreza/2013/pdf_EMTP/Estudio_EMTP_PNUD.pdf

Why do governments ignore adolescents?



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"Because they don't care what we say."

"Because they think we're too young and can't understand what is happening."

"It's hard to talk to them. They won't meet us and don't listen to us."

"Because they would listen to us just to create a good impression then they forget what we said."

"Because they make decisions based on what's good for them, not for us."

"Because they use the time for discussions and not to listen to adolescents."

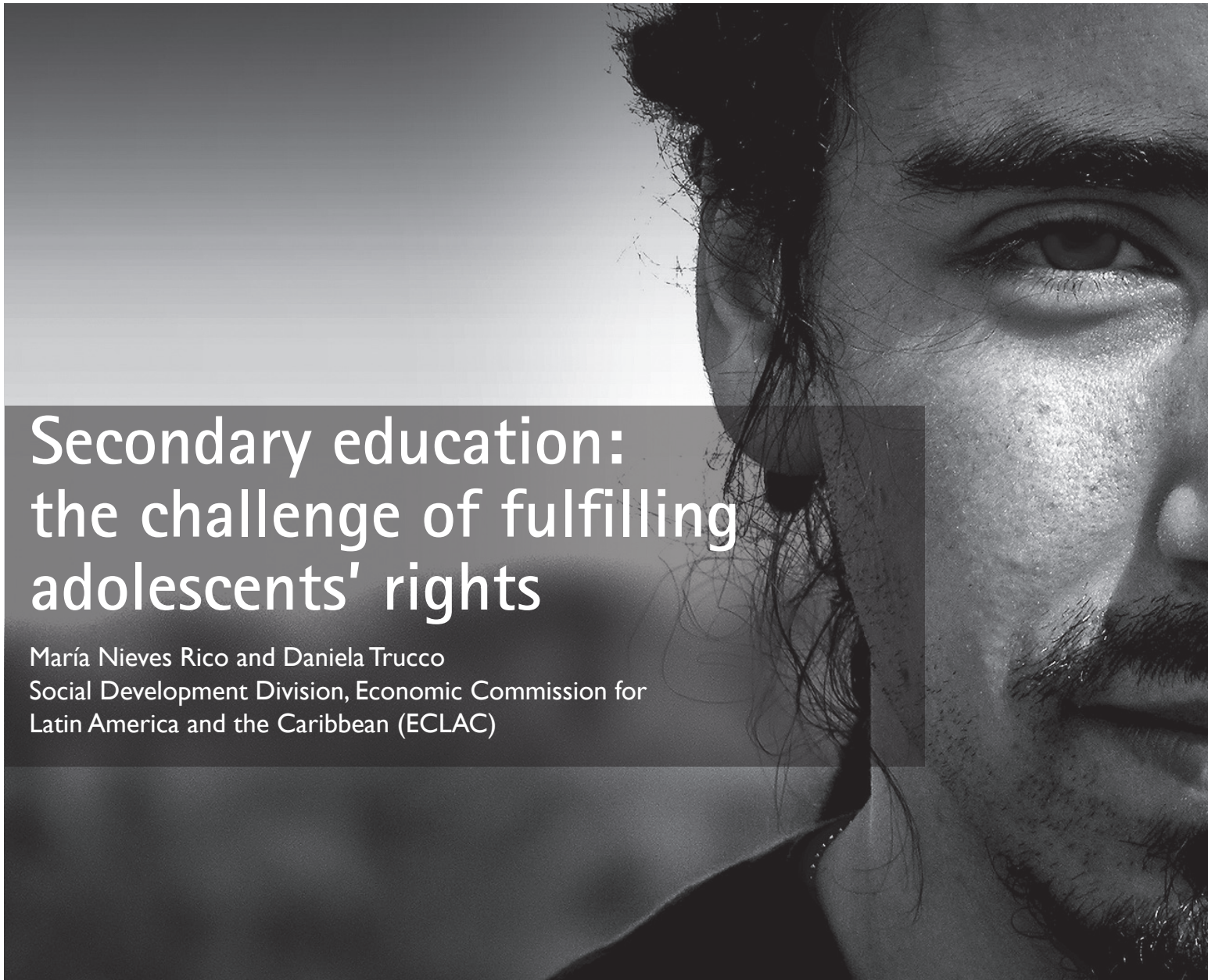
"Because they think it is a waste of time to talk to us."

"Because they don't know how to listen to young people."

"Because they're the only ones able to make choices."

"Because they're only interested in the present and not in the future of the country, which is us."

Source: Paula Baleato (2008), "Percepciones adolescentes 2003–2008. Sistematización de producciones escritas que relevaron opinión de adolescentes uruguayos y uruguayas entre los años 2003 y 2008" [on line], <http://basedp.mec.gub.uy/Documentos/Bibliodigi/ENIA%20Cuaderno%204%20b-%20Percepciones%20adolescentes.pdf>



Secondary education: the challenge of fulfilling adolescents' rights

María Nieves Rico and Daniela Trucco
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Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

I. Education as a right in Latin America and the Caribbean

The universal right to an education, without distinction of nationality, sex, race, or ethnicity is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1976. This Covenant stipulates that primary education must be compulsory and free for everyone and that secondary education, including technical and vocational education, must be provided to all and progressively made free of charge (Article 13).

Likewise, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, stresses that states must ensure universal access to a free primary education and reiterates the right to secondary education. It further states that the objective of education is to ensure the development of children's personality and mental

and physical abilities, recognizing their values and culture, and to help prepare them for adult life within a framework of respect for human rights (Articles 28 and 29).

Other global and regional initiatives (Millennium Development Goals, United Nations Education for All Goals and Education Goals 2021 of the Organization of Ibero-American States) have stressed the importance of the policies implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean in the last decades, which have achieved important advances in educational coverage.

The average length of compulsory education in the region is of ten years, meaning that the State is obliged to ensure the universal provision of education during that period. In only seven of the 40 Latin American and Caribbean countries



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In recent decades, mass access to and completion of primary education as well as the generalization of secondary education and the growing demands for training and technical expertise in the labour market have led to the creeping relative devaluation of education. Despite the considerable social and economic benefits of having a well-educated population, completing primary education no longer offers a guaranteed escape route from poverty, let alone an above-average income (ECLAC, 2010).

ECLAC has argued that completing secondary level is the minimum educational threshold in the region for a future free of poverty (ECLAC, 2002; ECLAC and the Ibero-American Youth Organization (OIJ), 2004 and 2008). Not only is it crucial to acquire the basic skills needed for development and lifelong learning in a globalized, democratic world, it is also a determining factor in the attainment of a baseline well-being that will shatter the mechanisms that reproduce inequality and poverty (ECLAC, 2010).

In an ever more complex and globalized society, increasingly sophisticated skills are required for social inclusion; this is the case not only in the world of work, but also in respect of other development factors such as social mobility, poverty reduction, citizenship-building and, ultimately, strengthening social cohesion. In this regard, the attention secondary education deserves currently for its coverage, access, and quality is central to the fulfilment of the right to education, and to contribute to the future well-being of adolescent boys and girls.

3. Educational attainment among adolescents

Most adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean have completed primary education. The situation varies from country to country, but reaches 91% of adolescents between the ages of 15 to 19 (see figure 3). Despite these great strides, progress has stagnated in the last decade since it is becoming increasingly difficult to find policies able to reach the most marginalized groups of children who make up the 9% that fails to complete primary schooling. What is more, the regional average hides the actual situations of, and inequalities amongst, various social groups. Girls tend to complete more years of education than their male peers, but in rural zones and countries with large indigenous populations, the situation is reversed. Likewise, socioeconomic disparities between households are determining factors in the educational attainment of adolescents.

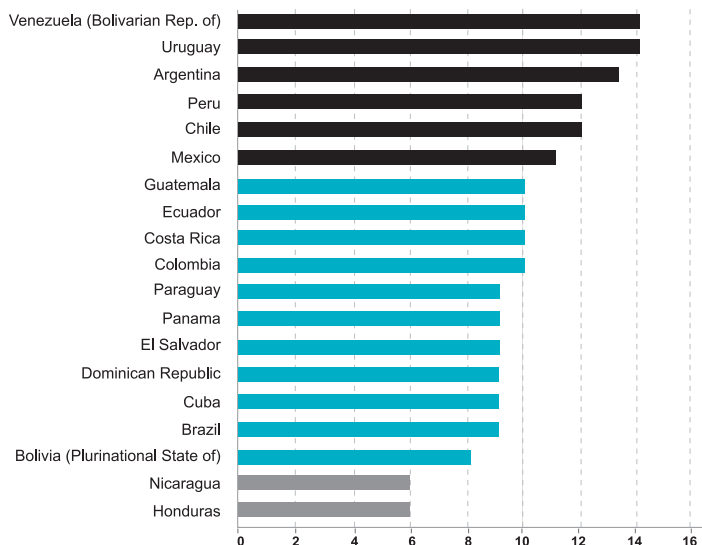
When access to primary education is widespread, the investment needed to promote enrolment among disadvantaged groups (the extremely poor, inhabitants of rural areas, indigenous and afro-descendent groups) is substantial and should focus not only on increasing the supply of education but also on ensuring decent living conditions —such as salubrious housing— that are prerequisites for effective access to these services. This often involves action in multiple sectors (ECLAC, 2010, and Kaztman, 2011).

schooling is mandatory until the end of primary school (the first 6 school years); in the other countries mandatory schooling includes lower-secondary education (8 to 10 years of schooling), and in 50% of the countries it includes all levels of secondary education (lower and high) (see figures 1 and 2).

2. Secondary education as the minimum threshold

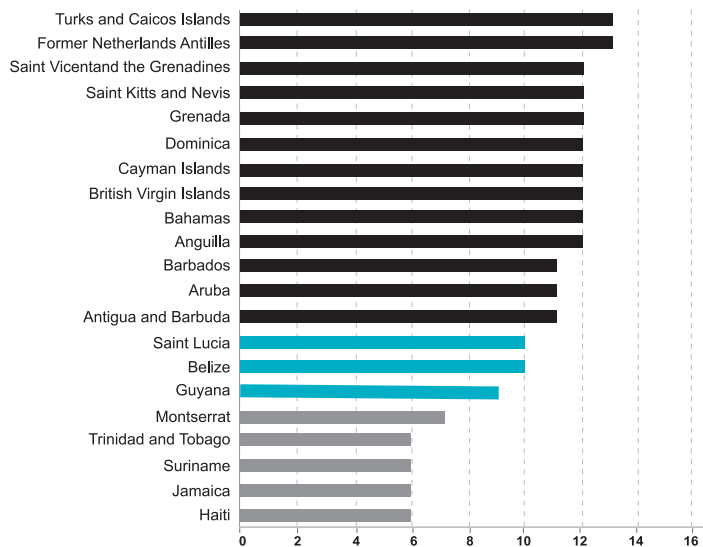
Some decades ago, a high percentage of the labour force had only a low level of education, which meant that workers, particularly men, could aspire to good jobs with only a low level of educational attainment. It was enough to have a primary education to have access to salaried and protected jobs, and families therefore expected that their children would have access to a higher level of education and better income.

Figure 1
Latin America (19 countries): years of compulsory education per country, 2012



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Base [on line], www.uis.unesco.org.

Figure 2
Caribbean (21 countries): years of compulsory education per country, 2012



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Base [on line], www.uis.unesco.org.

Although most adolescents begin secondary school, far fewer complete it, dropouts and students repeating years are rising problems during this education cycle. In 24 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, on average only 55% of young adults of 20 to 24 years have completed secondary school. In various countries in the region, such as Surinam, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, not even half of young people reach this level of schooling (see figure 3).

In addition to the differences between one country and the other, there is a significant degree of heterogeneity within each country, such as between urban and rural zones, poor and non-poor students, or students from different socioeconomic strata, as well as the indigenous and non-indigenous populations. These disparities lead to more fragmented societies and make it hard to achieve coherence between different development projects. For example, in 18 countries in Latin America in 2010, on average only one in four young people in the lowest income quintile finished secondary school, while four out of five from the highest quintile did so (ECLAC, 2010).

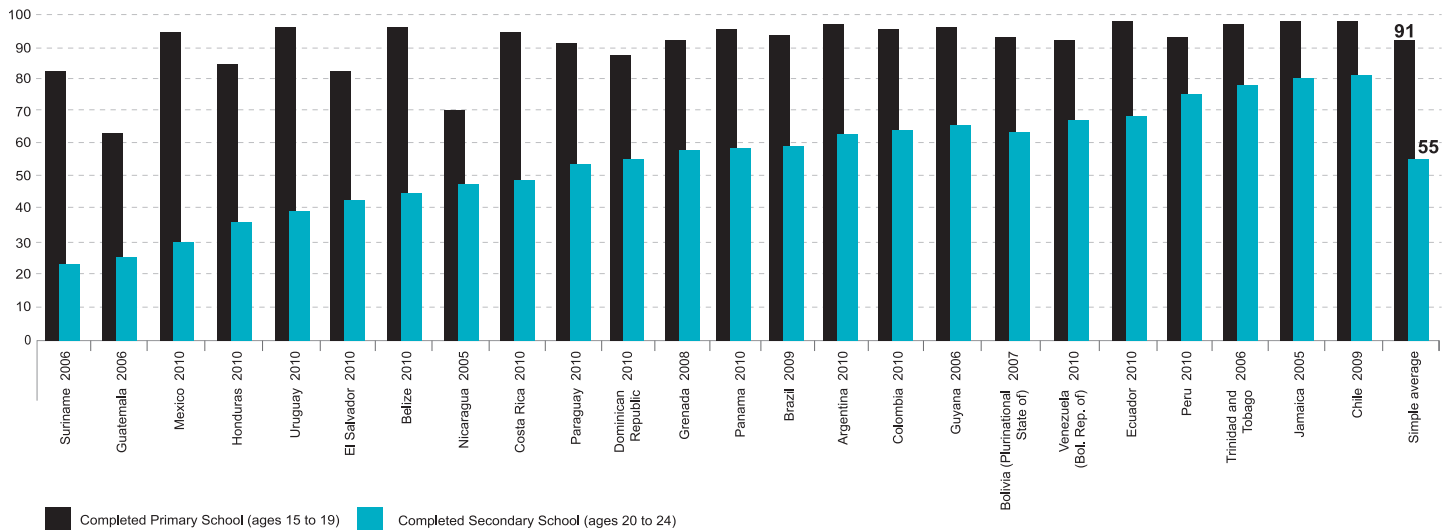
4. Inequalities in results

Other important factors aside from the length of schooling include the way in which pupils learn and their motivation for doing so. In this regard, the rapid expansion of compulsory schooling has caused endogenous inequalities in the system, as shown by disparities in educational achievement.

The 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) measured the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science. These areas are essential for the general education of students and their integration into society as productive citizens and are the key to a better life as adults. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay participated in this assessment. The results indicate that a large proportion of pupils are lacking in basic skills, and that the countries of the region are very seriously lagging behind the developed countries in the OECD. Learning gaps between the different social groups are also very evident in each country: the attainment level of most of the students in the first and second quartiles was below level 2 (they have not acquired basic reading skills), while 60% to 80% of pupils in the highest quartile reach the expected level (levels 2 and above).

Countries in which the bulk of the new generations is unable to master basic reading, writing, and arithmetic will not be able to develop their societies beyond their current state. Advancing towards uniformly high levels of educational achievement is a difficult social policy goal because it requires working on and investing in complex processes in which there is a high resistance to change in areas such as teaching and learning methods. With this progress, new generations of students are being educated

Figure 3
Latin America and the Caribbean (24 countries): percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 19 having completed primary school, and percentage of young people aged 20 to 24 having completed secondary school, circa 2010



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the special processing of household surveys.
Note: The Argentina data corresponds to Greater Buenos Aires, and in Uruguay, to urban zones.

that require additional efforts to reach the standards demanded by today's world and the objective of equality and universality in the exercise of the right to education (Trucco and Rico, 2013).

Levels of educational achievement are a barometer of the quality of the education, in question today due to the fact that, among other issues, despite the increasing number of young women completing their education, gender inequalities persist in academic results. On average, boys perform better in mathematics and girls do better in reading skills, with similar gaps seen from country to country. The differences affect educational and work expectations and contribute to gender inequalities in the job market. For example, given the greater recognition and economic value of engineering and new technologies, the trends show a clear gender gap favouring men over women (Trucco and Rico, 2013).

5. Citizenship skills and the voices of adolescents

The right of adolescent boys and girls to be heard, to have their opinions taken into account, and to be empowered as citizens goes hand in hand with the right to be informed and educated in various areas. The purpose of secondary schooling is to produce citizens who take a full and active role in society and to lay the bases for a democratic coexistence. Latin American pupils have little citizenship skills and scant knowledge of citizenship issues. This was the conclusion of

the International Civics and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 2008 and 2009 in 38 countries. The participating Latin American countries were Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic, where more than half of the young people polled had the lowest level of knowledge on the subject, meaning that they were unaware of concepts underpinning participative democracy such as political systems, and of key facts about civic institutions, systems, or concepts (Schultz and others, 2010).

At global and regional level, girls scored better in citizenship skills than boys, and girls in Paraguay and the Dominican Republic did slightly better than the international average. Unlike the situation with basic learning skills, pupils' socioeconomic background had a moderate impact on their citizenship skills; the most important differentiating indicator was the occupation of their parents.

It is vital that educational systems invest in the quality of education beyond the most basic subjects, and that they strengthen their pupils' participation skills, respect for human rights, and citizenship (starting with coexistence in establishments). These skills are all the more relevant in the current context of student uprisings in the various countries of the region.

6. Why do adolescents drop out of school?

Despite advances in educational coverage, on average, half of young people do not complete secondary education, and approximately 20% of adolescents do not attend any educational establishment. In Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru, 30% to 40% of this age group is currently outside the formal education system.

Early dropout from the school system brings costs for individuals and families, and incurs economic and social costs for the country. Low levels of educational attainment lead to poor work productivity, slow economic growth and higher government spending in financing social programmes and transfers of resources to sectors that cannot fund themselves. Other social costs include the perpetuation of inequality and poverty across generations and the resultant impact on social integration, which makes it difficult to strengthen democracy (Espindola and Leon, 2002).

The main reasons for pupils dropping out are financial pressures, although their impact differs along gender lines since girls often drop out to do unpaid housework. These differences and their particular nature should be taken into account when addressing this issue (see figure 4) (Trucco and Rico, 2013).

Boys are more likely to drop out of school to join the labour market. Many boys, however, leave school because they are dissatisfied with the system and see it as lacking in relevance for their future: 24% of dropouts state that they “are not interested” in school (see figure 4). Dropouts who do not work take to public spaces –mainly the streets, parks, and squares– are marginalized from society and often adopt risky behaviour, violence, and exclusion.

Girls also drop out for economic reasons (26%), but the need for care and domestic work in the home falls on them. Girls also leave school to have children, which tends to offer some sort of social validation and closes the circle of poverty for the mother and opens a new one for her child.

7. Challenges in fulfilling adolescents’ right to education

A major challenge in the region today lies in how to ensure that the most vulnerable groups in society achieve basic levels of educational attainment, to reduce inequalities in access to education and to encourage adolescents in countries with the highest urban-rural and ethnical segmentation to complete their education.

Box 1

New skills for an information society

In all countries and all spheres of society, the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has made a certain level of digital literacy a prerequisite for social inclusion. In Latin America, the digital gap creates inequalities in access to ICTs –which is contingent on the availability of equipment– and to the benefits they confer, i.e., the ability to use ICTs productively and thereby hone their skills (Sunkel and Trucco, 2010).

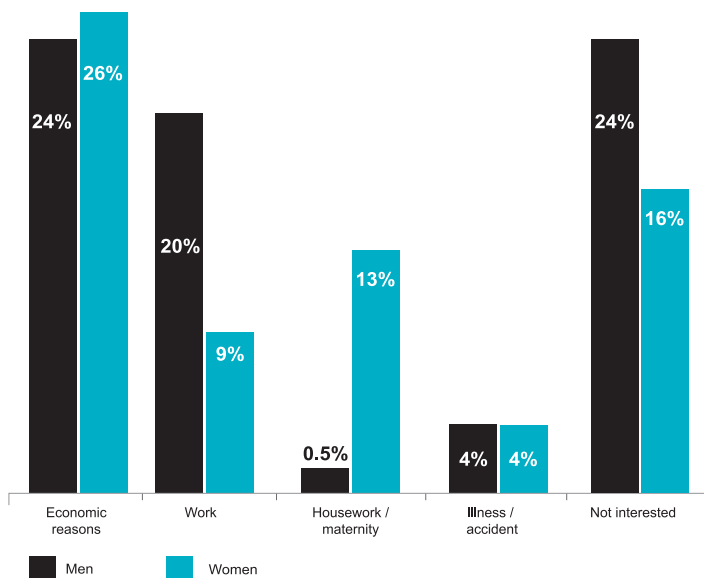
Despite the handicaps it suffers in terms of access and connectivity, Latin America has become a leader in the use of social networks, especially among young people. The opportunities and risks that widespread use of social networks brings are multiplying. These networks are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, but are tools that may be used for various purposes. The use that can be made of them is contingent on the user’s digital literacy, economic resources and cultural and social skills (Pavez, 2013).

The school system is key for mass access to and use of ICTs. The potential of introducing ICTs at school is not reduced to digital literacy, because it is expected that they will facilitate the development of modern skills and improve educational attainment (ECLAC, 2010).

Source: Guillermo Sunkel and Daniela Trucco, “Nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación para la educación en América Latina: riesgos y oportunidades” Políticas sociales series No. 167 (LC/L.3266-P), Santiago, Chile, November, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2010. United Nations Publication, Sales No. S.10.II.G.72; María Isabel Pavez, “Juventud latinoamericana y el uso y apropiación de redes sociales: desafíos e interrogantes,” unpublished.

In order to reduce dropout rates, action is needed to address the lack of opportunities, the absence of life projects, the educational segmentation, and the lack of personal and collective development among pupils leaving the school system. A society that includes adolescents and offers them education and training is certain to be rewarded in the future, and at the same time promotes the accumulation of experience and maturity as the cornerstone of the development of its citizens. Each pupil dropping out of secondary education is a sign that the system has failed to adapt or be flexible or relevant enough to accommodate the present and future needs of an adolescent. The system has also failed to realize that the differing dropout and grade repetition rates between boys and girls are a result of

Figure 4
Latin America (selected countries): main reasons for not attending school for adolescents of 12 to 18 years who have not completed secondary education, simple average



Source: Daniela Trucco and María Nieves Rico, "Adolescencia, derecho a la educación y al bienestar futuro", Políticas sociales series, Santiago, Chile, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), pending publication.

ingrained cultural expectations relative to gender socialization and a gender division for work that is instilled at home and affects the quality of learning (Trucco and Rico, 2013).

Pregnancy and maternity are factors that contribute to the interruption of the educational process and the perpetuation of poverty from one generation to the other. Public policies must seek to reduce teenage pregnancy by means of programmes on sexuality and reproductive rights in public education (ECLAC and OIJ, 2008), as well as policies for high-quality, universal, timely and relevant sexual and reproductive health care (ECLAC, 2013).

The results of studies on learning and signs of disaffection show that action must be taken to improve the quality and relevance of secondary education so it may address the educational needs and objectives of adolescents, with their diverse experiences and realities. It is important to understand quality in the widest sense, according to the relevant context, and to incorporate ethnic and sociocultural background as well as issues of citizenship into how education is assessed. The relevance and pertinence of the curriculum are major components in defining what high-quality education is, an education promoting equality and which motivates all pupils to complete their secondary education.

From a gender perspective, it can be concluded that the main barriers hindering the education of girls have been removed, but for indigenous and rural adolescents they remain very real. Changes must be made to the mechanisms that perpetuate the traditional socialization based on stereotypes that stand in the way of greater fairness in education and propagate discrimination and inequality (Trucco and Rico, 2013). This must be done by altering the curriculum and, especially, education processes, as well as by changing the ways in which administrative boards are trained and supported. Lastly, a useful way of assessing the quality of education is by making use of qualitative standards with rights and equality as their guiding principles, as the basis on which to implement policies.

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Listening to adolescents

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If we were to ask kind-hearted citizens in any city in Latin America what the dearest wish of homeless boys, girls, and adolescents is, most of them would say it is a home where they are well treated, fed, and brought up. If we ask those responsible for implementing public policies for vulnerable adolescents, their answer would be somewhat similar, albeit in more technical terms. They would then add what needs to be done to get them off the streets and return them to a life with dignity. If these adolescents were interviewed for the news, they would probably say the same thing.

If we all agree and are willing to back up our words with action, why is it then that homeless children stay such a short time in shelters where they are provided with bathrooms, hot meals, safety, and sex education? Perhaps what may explain the gulf between words and action is the answer a group of adolescents living in the sewers of Mexico City's Historic Centre gave anthropologist Sara Makowski when she asked them this same question away from the cameras, officials, and kind-hearted citizens: "To spend a night in a hotel with my partner, a bed, hot water, and a TV set." Perhaps all those who took to the streets to escape their "bad families" do not wish for other "good families" or a home, but a place with better conditions where they could continue to be together and follow their own rules. Obviously this answer is not the solution we were looking for, but it helps understand the lack of success of policies that fail to take account of the hopes and dreams of their beneficiaries and how they view their lot in life. Giving them a night in a hotel may not solve anything, but giving them a voice would make it easier to assess their situation and to make them participants in a

solution that recognizes their aspirations as legitimate. From an epistemological and methodological point of view, this means seeking more comprehensive information with which to design early childbearing prevention programmes.

Why do adolescents not say what they really want in front of the cameras or government officials? Probably because, like other at-risk groups, they have developed identities that help them obtain as much as possible by saying what is expected of them, and not what they actually wish. This "simulation" contributes to the creation of a vicious circle between policies, their beneficiaries, and their communication in the public sphere, and it needs to be broken with a view to rethinking social inclusion and policies to help adolescents.

I wanted to discuss homeless adolescents because they are a critical case which reveals the Achilles' heel of adolescent-education and -care policies. What must schools and teen-pregnancy prevention programmes do? Probably to take a moment's pause and listen to what adolescents actually want. This could well lead to avenues for the creation of new strategies or for how to redirect existing ones.





Zero Absence Campaign in Uruguay

Absenteeism is one of the major problems besetting preschool and primary education in Uruguay. Despite the fact that there is universal access to education at these levels, almost half of the three-to-five-year-old preschool pupils (47%) were present for less than 140 of the 180 days that made up the school year in 2009. This is an unacceptable state of affairs, particularly since absenteeism is five times more prevalent in schools in the poorest areas. Absenteeism seriously curtails the development of these pupils and is also a sign of the difficulties their families face in getting them to school.

Studies show that regular attendance contributes to lower grade-repetition and dropout rates for pupils at higher levels of education. Promoting regular attendance is a positive strategy that opens up greater opportunities for young people in both the present and in the future.

Against this backdrop, in May 2011 the Uruguayan Preschool and Primary Education Council (CEIP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched the Zero Absence Campaign, which seeks to raise awareness of the importance of attending school every day by appealing to the students, their families and their teachers. To this end, a contest with the same name was launched to recognize the individual or collective effort of all those who help children attend school regularly. It also aims to disseminate anonymous stories to encourage pupils to attain "zero absence," i.e. a perfect attendance record.

Source: <http://www.cep.edu.uy/index.php/cerofalta>



Educational development project in rural communities (bateys) in the Dominican Republic

The bateys are rural communities located along the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti that originally grew up around sugar cane plantations. A high percentage of the population descends from Haitian immigrants who crossed the border half a century ago. The bateys currently count among the most impoverished and isolated communities in the Dominican Republic. They lack drinking water, sewerage systems and electricity, and must put up with insufficiencies in terms of garbage collection, health care, and education.

Education without Borders, an international NGO, and MUDHA (a Dominican-Haitian women's movement), are working on a project to promote the comprehensive development of the Basima, Lecheria, Matomaton and Palmarejo bateys. The objective is to get more children into the school system and to reduce absenteeism. The programme has proved a great boon to their families and the community at large, which have both benefited from the advancements in social rights and improved educational resources it has brought.

One of the most serious issues faced by the members of these communities is the lack of official documentation, which is a violation of their rights, as without documents they have no right to public health and are disenfranchised and stateless. This situation is particularly grave for children, who are denied access to secondary education, as priority is given to children with documentation proving they have completed primary schooling. The political lobbying with the government and the work undertaken with the families have enabled more than 600 boys and girls to obtain birth certificates, a first step in gaining access to education and fulfilling their right to an identity.

Sources: <http://www.educacionsinfronteras.org/es/82/810981/> and <http://www.educacionsinfronteras.org/es/780575>

...that women of African descent between the ages of 15 and 29 in Brazil and Ecuador are twice as likely to work as domestic help as other women of the same age?

Source: Marta Rangel and Fabiana Del Popolo, "Afro-descendant youth in Latin America: diverse realities and (un)fulfilled rights", Santiago, Chile, Latin American and Caribbean Demographics Centre (CELADE)-ECLAC Population Division, October 2011.

...that in 2010 in Latin America, an average of 79.5% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 were students.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys in 18 countries.

...that in the Plurinational State of Bolivia the proportion of children of under 18 years of age who were not in school fell from almost 32% in 1999 to almost 4% in 2009, chiefly thanks to a reduction in school dropout levels.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Panorama of Latin America 2013, pending publication.

...that in Latin America the proportion of teenage mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2010 was higher than in 1990.

Source: Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-ECLAC Population Division, "Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Review of the period 2009-2013 and lessons learned. Summary and overview" (LC/L.3640(CRPD.1/3), July.

...that the rate of teenage pregnancies among young women with only a primary education is three times higher than among those with a secondary level of education or more.

Source: Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-ECLAC Population Division, "Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Review of the period 2009-2013 and lessons learned. Summary and overview" (LC/L.3640(CRPD.1/3), July.

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Adolescents and the right to education

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