

Inequality is the biggest obstacle



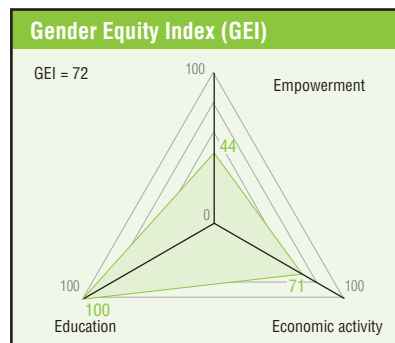
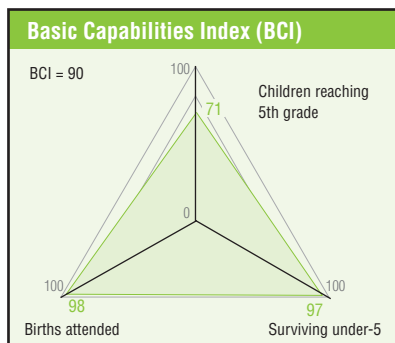
The Dominican Republic is fraught with numerous problems including violence against women and against immigrants from Haiti, the degradation of the environment, and principally inequalities in the education system, all of which make it most unlikely that the Government will be able to bring about sustainable human or economic development in the middle term. There has been progress in some areas, but the country urgently needs more far-reaching social policies that are genuinely geared to the changes needed to ensure a decent future. The country will almost certainly not be able to achieve sustainable development unless the education system is drastically changed to make it more democratic.

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The Government of the Dominican Republic has made a commitment to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but the obstacles to doing so are that its policies in crucial areas like social investment, the redistribution of wealth, restoring the environment and in particular improving education are not effective. As explained below, official and also independent studies show the country is a very long way from MDG 1 (the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger), Goal 2 (universal education) and Goal 3 (equality between men and women). In addition to these problems, there has been little progress in environmental sustainability in a land that is severely degraded after decades of over-exploitation, and this raises the question of whether the Government is actually capable of creating a sustainable economy.

In 2006 the Government set up the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development (MEPYD), charged with monitoring State policies for social development and reform. The Ministry drew up the Basic Document for a National Development Strategy 2010-2030, entitled "A journey to change into a better country".¹ This was an attempt to create a consensus that would clarify the steps to be taken to transform the Dominican Republic into a fairer and more equitable nation.

In 2010 UNDP described the Dominican Republic as "A middle income developing country that depends mainly on the services sector and remittances from abroad. Today the level of economic activity is 12 times greater than it was in 1960, and the average growth rate over the last 48 years has been 5.4% per year. Foreign currency income from exports, tourism and remittances is now 15 times greater



than it was 40 years ago."² However, in spite of these positive indicators and institutional changes, social investment is at a low level and there has hardly been any improvement at all in education, which means the country is still a long way short of the goals the Government claims it is pursuing.

Persistent inequality

The Dominican Republic has made good progress towards some other MDGs, including infant and maternal mortality and life expectancy at birth, indicators for which have improved significantly in recent years. But, data from the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development shows that in a country of nearly 10 million, the current levels of poverty (34%) and indigence (10%) are very high,³ although they have fallen considerable since the economic crisis of 2003 when these indicators reached their peak: 43% and 16% respectively.

The UNDP 2010 Human Development Report concludes that the biggest obstacle to the country's development is inequality.⁴ The report also says that education and health service levels have not increased in the same proportion as per capita wealth. The UNDP Human Development Index ranks the Dominican Republic 88th out of 169 countries, with a mean human development rating of 0.663.⁵

The 2006 UNICEF report on the State of the World's Children stated that "social progress in the

Dominican Republic, measured by life expectancy at birth, infant mortality, babies underweight at birth and the adult literacy rate, is very low compared to other countries in the region with the same levels of economic growth."⁶

ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) reports that since 2004 the Dominican Republic has been third from last among the countries of the Americas in terms of relative investment in social policies, and this is reflected mostly in the population's poor access to health and education services and social assistance.⁷

Violence and discrimination

In its 2010 report, Amnesty International denounced the Dominican Republic for persistent discrimination against Haitian immigrants and their descendants. These people are the victims of numerous hate crimes that even include lynching, and as illegal immigrants they are exploited in the labour market. Unofficial estimates put the number of Haitians in the country at 800,000 and nearly all of them live in the poorest areas.⁸

In 2007, following a directive by the Central Electoral Council, thousands of citizens, mostly descendants of Haitian immigrants, those becoming Stateless had their identity documents rescinded. This severely restricted their access to health services, education and jobs, and also took away their right to vote. People without the correct documents are

1 Basic document of the proposed National Development Strategy 2010 – 2030, (Santo Domingo, 2010), <www.end.gov.do/download/Documento_base_propuesta_END_2010_2030.pdf>.

2 See: <www.pnud.org.do/content/acerca-del-pais>.

3 See: <www.economia.gov.do/eWeb/ShowContent.aspx?idc=452>.

4 UNDP. Human Development Report 2010, <undp.org/es/informes/mundial/idx2010/capitulos>.

5 See: <hdr.undp.org/es/estadisticas>.

6 See: <www.unicef.org/spanish/sowc06/index.php>.

7 See: <www.unicef.org/repUBLICADOMINICANA/grafico_ODMs.pdf>.

8 IPS, "Aumenta la violencia contra haitianos," <cpnnoticias.net/nota.asp?idnews=90376>.

liable to arbitrary detention and can be expelled from the country. These regulations are still in force today.

Gender violence is another endemic problem, above all with regard to people under the legal age. In May 2009 the Santo Domingo Prosecutor's Office said that in 90% of reported cases of sexual violence the victims were girls under 18 years old.⁹

Environmental degradation

In the second half of the 20th century the country's natural resources were so heavily exploited that most of the forests and coral reefs were devastated, and today some 80% of its river basins are severely degraded.¹⁰ Moreover in many areas there is no adequate sewage system and there are big problems with the distribution of potable water, which together create a widespread health risk. The fact that poverty is so widespread means that a large proportion of the people have to depend on the natural food resources of their own areas, and this inevitably places great strain on these stocks and makes for further degradation of the ecosystem.

Poor education and Government inaction

A discouraging aspect of the current situation is that the State is paying scant attention to education, even though an educated population must be the cornerstone of any future plan to improve social, economic and environmental conditions. Education is the main means whereby a society constructs its values, and it is a key factor in sustainable human development because it will enable future generations to properly manage the country's social and natural resources.

As well as failing to increase investment in education, the State is even failing to comply with the requirements of the Education Law of 1997 (Law 66-97, which states in Article 197 that starting in 1999 annual public spending on the sector should be at least 16% of total public expenditure or 4% of the estimated GDP for the current year, whichever is higher.¹¹ Public expenditure on education, which increased from 1.9% to 2.9% of GDP in the period 1996 to 2002, dropped as a consequence of the economic crisis to a paltry 1.5% in 2004. In 2005 it recovered somewhat to 1.9%, but it is still far too low and it has never reached 3% of GDP.

The Ministry of Education has calculated that in the 2000 to 2005 period the proportion of the education system financed by the State decreased to 52% and the proportion contributed by students' families

fell to 39%, while the OECD reports that the shortfall was made up with foreign loans and donations and contributions from private enterprises.¹² Some 24% of the student population attend private educational institutions, which do better than the State system in terms of this basic human right.

In the face of this, the Government is sending confused signals. President Leonel Fernández sowed doubts about the degree to which he was committed to the provisions of Law 66-97 when he claimed there was no correlation between the amounts invested in education and the academic results achieved. According to Fernández, increasing the proportion of GDP allocated to the sector would not guarantee good quality equitable education.¹³

In response, civil society organizations have come together to form the Decent Education Coalition to demand the Government comply with its legal obligations. They have even received support from the business sector; for example the Federation of Industrial Associations (FAI) has backed the Coalition's campaign. According to the FAI and other similar institutions, "industry in the Dominican Republic cannot become competitive with a workforce that is poorly trained. We believe, as the President says, that the pedagogic style and the curriculum are in need of reform, but this cannot be done without resources."¹⁴

Inequality in the classroom

According to a 2008 report from the Latin American Laboratory for Education Quality Evaluation (LLECE), the Dominican Republic has "a dual-quality education model in which the best goes to the richer groups and the worst to the poorer groups, and this has become so ingrained in the culture that many people see it as the natural order of things."¹⁵ There have been many independent as well as official surveys and studies that lay bare the reality of the situation but nothing has changed, and this is making inequality endemic.

In 2007 the country's Demographic and Health Survey (ENDESA) found educational disparities that were attributable to differences in income. For example, in the richest quintile of the population the

illiteracy rate is only 2% but in the poorest quintile it is extremely high at 26%.¹⁶

Another evaluation that confirms these findings is the 2008 Second Comparative Regional Study and Explanation of Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean (SERCE), which concluded that "in mathematics and language pupils from third to sixth grade in the Dominican Republic are far below the average for Latin America and the Caribbean."¹⁷

One of the factors behind this poor showing in education is the poor quality of teaching. The teachers in the State system are not well trained, they are overloaded with work and badly paid, and in order for them to earn a minimum acceptable salary they have to do so many classroom hours they have little time to prepare the courses. This makes it impossible for them to keep to the set programmes or to effectively transmit the required educational content to their pupils. Another negative factor is that in the 2005-06 academic year only 43.1% of active teachers had a teaching diploma. The rest were not qualified to teach classes.

It is clear that the country's education system is not providing good quality education. In the last ten years overall pupil coverage has increased but academic performance is still very poor and consequently most young people finish their studies without the basic knowledge needed to compete in the labour market, which limits their access to decent work.

Conclusion

Overall, in spite of some encouraging progress in achieving national development goals, particularly regarding greater life expectancy and reduced maternal and child mortality, the Dominican Republic urgently needs to adopt a far-reaching strategy for sustainable development if it is to overcome serious obstacles, most of which relate to high, and increasing, inequality. This is especially evident in terms of access to health and education, both of which affect the productivity of the labour force, as does continued violence and discrimination against women and Haitian immigrants. In particular, if the quality of education does not improve dramatically, and if the population's access to it is not extended, it is most unlikely the Government will be able to lead the country along the path to sustainable development. ■

9 Amnesty International, "Human Rights in the Dominican Republic," *Amnesty International Report 2010*. <www.amnesty.org/es/region/dominican-republic/report-2010>.

10 Instituto del Tercer Mundo, República Dominicana, in *Guía del mundo 2010*, (Montevideo: ITeM, 2010), p. 468.

11 Organic Education Law of the Dominican Republic, <www.educando.edu.do/files/2413/1783/9636/ley_general_educacion_66-97.pdf>.

12 Ediciones OCDE, *Report of national education policies: the Dominican Republic*, (Paris: 2008).

13 "Iberoamérica alcanza logros en educación," *Listín Diario*, (5 December 2010), <www.listindiario.com.do/la-republica/2010/12/4/168999/iberoamerica-alcanza-logros-en-la-educacion>.

14 *DiarioDigitalRD, Industriales piden reforzar campaña a favor del 4% para la Educación*, <www.diariodigital.com.do/articulo,59550.html>.

15 UNDP- Dominican Republic, *Política social: capacidades y derechos-Análisis y propuestas de políticas sociales en República Dominicana*, Vol. 1, (Santo Domingo: 2010).

16 Centre for Social and Demographic Studies (CESDEM) and International Framework Inc., *Demography and Health Survey 2007*, (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: CESDEM and Macro International Inc).

17 UNDP-Dominican Republic, op cit.