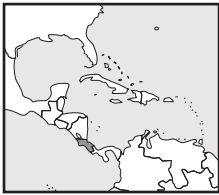


COSTA RICA

Social protection: a view from childhood and adolescence



The low specific budgetary allocations for health care and social welfare programmes for minors demonstrates that the protection of the rights of children is not given the priority required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Costa Rica's Childhood and Adolescence Code.

Federación de Organizaciones de Defensa de Derechos de los Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes en Costa Rica (COSECODENI)¹

The social spending which the state carries out is an effective yardstick to measure the effort actually made to promote social security and guarantee the full exercise of human rights, in particular economic, social and cultural rights.

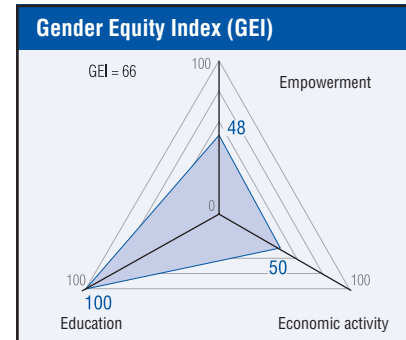
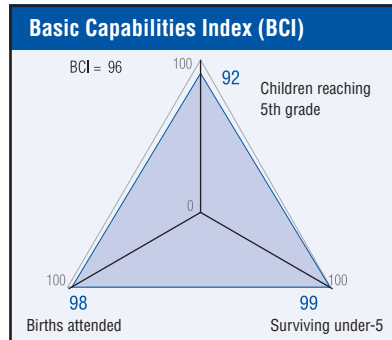
The Costa Rican state's social spending during 1998-2003 rose from 16% to 18.7% of the gross domestic product (GDP). This spending is aimed at five general areas: education, health, social assistance, housing, and recreation, culture and religion.

Figure 1 shows the relative structure of social spending. It should be noted that expenditure on education, health, and social assistance combined constitutes over 90% of the total, whereas expenditure on recreation, culture and religion (which includes sports, cultural, recreational and religious services) makes up less than 1% of the total social spending.

As a percentage of GDP, the relative structure of social spending has undergone slight modifications during the period. There has been a slight increase (one percentage point) in education and health expenditure, while at the same time the growth in social assistance expenditure has declined slightly. Expenditure on the housing sector has remained practically unchanged, as has the minimal spending on recreation, culture and religion.

In Figure 2, however, it is worth noting the dynamic growth of the proportion of GDP devoted to servicing the public foreign debt. In comparison with the social spending components, the amount devoted to paying the debt is rising at a much faster rate, more than doubling during 1998-2003. Growing pressure to service the foreign debt is evident, even when this implies curbing expenditure on sectors which are key to the country's development and to creating the conditions necessary for the exercise of human rights.

1 COSECODENI is a member of the Costa Rican Social Watch Network. This report is an extract from the Alternative Report presented to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Coordinating Team: Virginia Murillo Herrera (Defence for Children International-Costa Rica), Xinia Brenes (YMCA), Catalina Fernández (Casa Alianza). Alternative Report Work Team: Juan Carlos Zamora (Defence for Children International-Costa Rica), Djamilia Salas (Aldeas SOS), Catalina Fernández (Casa Alianza), Josial Salas (World Vision).



Paradoxically, the debt contracted by Costa Rica to finance its development process has become a heavy burden weighing down the very development it should have facilitated. The country's foreign debt stands at USD 3.753 billion, and 40% of this amount is owed to multilateral organizations whose declared mission is to promote development and the exercise of human rights in developing countries.

It is also worth noting that in no year has expenditure on education reached 6% of GDP as required by the Constitution, thus constituting a violation of the Constitution itself and of the principles which establish priorities for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

A guarantee for the future

It is also clear that not all social spending is aimed at children and adolescents, and so it would be enlightening to attempt to visualize the proportion of this expenditure that specifically benefits minors.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the United Nations in 1989, is a broad compilation of the civil and political rights and of the economic, social and cultural rights of minors. It has been affirmed that for each of these groups of rights the state should adopt a different attitude, in order to provide citizens with guarantees regarding these same rights. Although civil and political rights establish that the state should abstain from taking measures which could limit them, in the case of economic, social and cultural rights, it is necessary for the state to adopt positive measures in order to make them possible.

Further to these arguments, in the case of the rights of minors, basic measures and actions are required, and these should be aimed, on the one

hand, at directly guaranteeing fundamental rights such as health and education, and on the other, at enabling children and adolescents to enjoy these rights adequately. Not only must there be investment in education, but specific measures must also be taken to guarantee that all children are enrolled and effectively remain within the educational system.

In 2001, according to UNESCO (2004), 17% of expenditure on education was allocated to higher education and 9% to vocational training. Therefore, 74% of the total spending on education was directly channelled into general education (including study incentives), an area in which the great majority of beneficiaries are minors.

However, the same study shows that study incentives (grants, vouchers, school dining rooms and school transport) represent only 4% of expenditure on education, which is surprising, since these programmes are the main strategies established by the government to increase inclusion, permanence and school success of the broad sectors which are currently excluded.

Half of the resources allocated to general education are focused on primary education, which explains to a large extent the marked deterioration of secondary education.

A health model that gives little priority to children

As regards health, 77% of the total spending focuses on curative medical services, while only 17% of expenditure on the sector is devoted to primary health care (illness prevention and health promotion).

It has been shown that adolescents are the least frequent users of the curative model whilst simultaneously constituting one of the groups which most

urgently requires the services of preventive medicine, such as sexual and reproductive education, information for the prevention of drug consumption, and others.

Likewise, spending on nutrition programmes represents only 2% of the total amount devoted to the health sector.

Scant social assistance for minors

It is under the heading of social assistance that children and adolescents are least contemplated as regards budgetary allocation. From the total amount allocated, 87% is devoted to the payment of pensions and work regulation, areas in which minors have no participation. The remaining 13% is directly targeted at vulnerable groups, including, as one of the target groups, deprived children and adolescents.²

For its part, a study carried out by UNICEF and the Inter-Disciplinary Study and Social Action Programme for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (PRIDENA) maintains that the meagre budgetary allocation corresponding to institutions that protect children's rights "makes it clear that the protection of those rights is not being given the priority, fiscal or macroeconomic, required by the Convention and the Childhood and Adolescence Code [of Costa Rica, Law No. 7739 of 6 January 1998]" (UNICEF/PRIDENA, 2004).

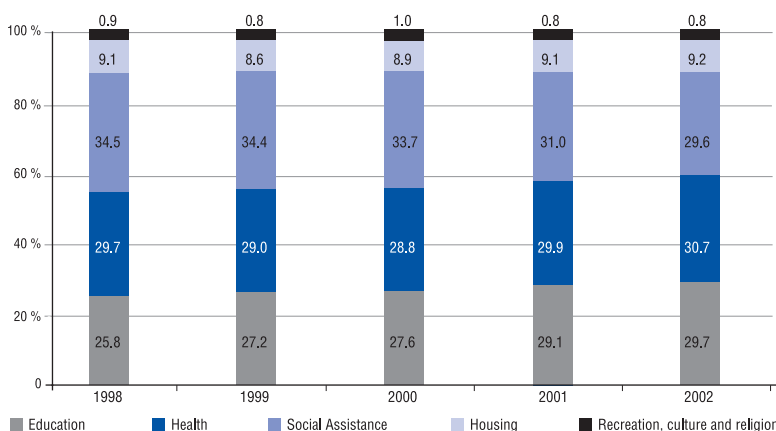
In short, children and adolescents – who constitute close to 38% of the total population – receive 36% of overall social spending, which raises doubts as to whether the state is placing the priority on this age group required by both national and international commitments. Specifically, this group accounts for 67.2% of total expenditure on education, 33% of health spending, barely 5.8% of the amount allocated to social assistance, 39.5% of spending on housing, and 34.2% of the very small amount allocated to recreation, culture, sports and religion. ■

References

UNESCO (2004). "Financiamiento de la educación superior en América Latina: el caso de Costa Rica". Available from: <unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001404/140483s.pdf>.

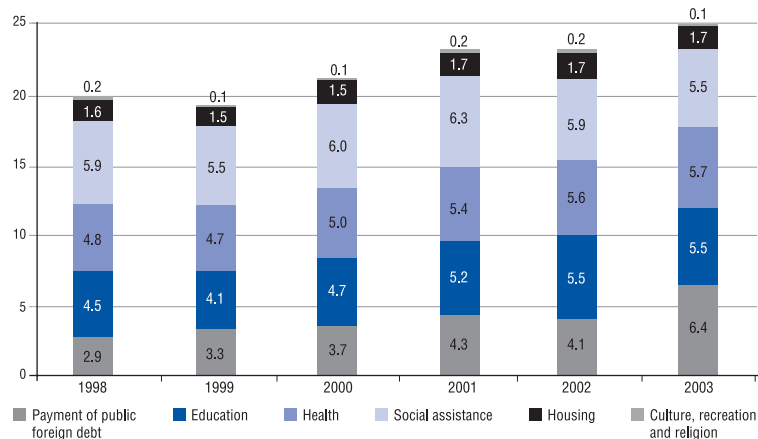
UNICEF/PRIDENA (2004). *IV Estado de los Derechos de la Niñez y la Adolescencia en Costa Rica*. San José: Universidad de Costa Rica/UNICEF/PRIDENA.

FIGURE 1. Relative structure of social spending (1998-2003)



Source: Drawn up by the authors with information from the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy: <www.mideplan.go.cr>.

FIGURE 2. Budget structure as a percentage of GDP (1998-2003)



Source: Drawn up by the authors with information from the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy: <www.mideplan.go.cr>.

2 <www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xml/8/4648/gasto.pdf>