Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean is a dynamic and culturally, economically and ethnically diverse region, including countries at different stages of political and economic development. The region’s population has nearly trebled since the Second World War, reaching 459 million in 1993 (Grant, 1995). Latin America as a whole has shifted from a continent largely populated by villagers to one of people concentrated in major urban centres, representing nearly three quarters of the region’s population. It is thus the most urbanized continent in the developing world. Urbanization throughout the region is proceeding faster than the growth of employment and basic services, and is straining the available economic and social facilities and infrastructures. One result has been the growth of spontaneous slums and shanty towns in the large urban areas of many countries in the region.

The region is also characterized by extreme imbalances. Gross national product per capita (1992 US dollars) ranges from $330 in Guyana to $12,070 in the Bahamas. Although per capita income is higher than that of other developing regions, the region is marked by the persistence of greater degrees of income inequalities than other regions. In many countries of the region, society remains divided: on one hand, middle and upper classes enjoy a standard of living close to that of industrialized countries, and on the other, a vast number of people, representing 41% of the region’s population, live at subsistence level. These disparities are clearly reflected in great differences in access to basic services (food, health, education, welfare), in levels of socio-economic development from country to country, and in all general indicators of social well-being: infant mortality, education, access to safe water and sanitation, housing, employment.

There are currently more than 55 million children under five living in Latin America and the Caribbean, representing 12% of the region’s population, and 167 million under sixteen years of
age, or 37% of the population in the region. The regional context in which children grow up is changing. The great majority of children are and will be born in urban areas, raised in small family units and live in poverty-stricken environments (Collier et al., 1992).

During the last decade as many countries moved from military dictatorships to democracies with liberal policies, economic progress has been achieved. Unfortunately, this development has been at high social cost and the number of poor people is growing in the region. The poor are not only materially poor, they also have more limited access to services, lower health and nutrition standards, reduced educational opportunities and are at greater risk from political violence. Less public spending on social services and diminishing family income have had a negative impact on the quality of care available to children. As a result, although under five mortality rate has currently decreased to the level of industrialised countries in the 1960’s, being the lowest of the developing regions today, child survival is still a major problem in the region.

However, a growing awareness among political leaders of the problems in the region has resulted in a number of countries starting to adopt and implement policies favourable to child care, education and development, in part as a response to the 1990 World Summit for Children. Many Latin American and Caribbean countries have thus taken initiatives to improve the lives of young children and their families. Furthermore, all countries in the region have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Children in Latin America and the Caribbean**

Children are not only the most poverty-stricken population group, but they also constitute the human resources that in the near future will be responsible for consolidating the development of democracy. (IACI, 1991)

**Health & nutrition**

Despite progress in terms of food production and increase in daily calorie intake, hunger and malnutrition still remain important problems in many countries of the region. The situation is particularly alarming for preschool children. Although only 11% of the children under five are under weight, some 20% of the 55 million preschool children in Latin America are malnourished today (Musgrove, 1993). Parents, health workers and communities must receive basic nutrition information and be trained to monitor children’s growth. Also needed is the promotion of improved health for pregnant women, and the encouragement of breast-feeding and appropriate weaning habits.

A majority of children in Latin America and the Caribbean are likely victims of diarrhoea, pneumonia, nutritional deficiencies and other common infections. Illiteracy, poor sanitation and housing conditions, inadequate safe water supplies and health care infrastructures strongly influence the quality of child health conditions. Infant mortality rates are still high in many countries and a large number of children at risk have not yet been reached. Furthermore, the spread of epidemics (e.g. cholera) and AIDS in some countries are an evidence of the precarious health conditions in many parts of the region and of the strains put on health services.
In Latin America and the Caribbean, evolutions in demographic, health and nutritional trends are transforming the demands made on health services. Service delivery has not yet adjusted sufficiently, however, to these changes (IADB, 1993). Promotion of breast feeding, provision of safe water, better housing, better hygiene, behavioural changes through education are needed, as are the expansion of primary health services and family support, together with programs providing food, health care, and education to vulnerable children and their families (Musgrove, 1993).

The following factors also contribute to the poor health situation prevailing in a majority of countries in the region: poverty and underdevelopment, poor education, recurrent childhood diseases, civil unrest and conflicts. Nevertheless, there have been important improvements. The under-five mortality rate has decreased from 157 in 1960 to 50 in 1992. Today 74% of the population has access to health services and approximately 80% of children are immunised against the major childhood diseases (tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, polio and measles) (Grant, 1995).

Early childhood education

The rapid expansion of early childhood education over the last decade has been one of the most important changes in the education sector of the countries of the region, as well as the increase in attendance rates, particularly among the 5-to-6 year old population. (Schiefelbien et al., 1993). Though the number of preschools has increased in recent years, few young children have access to formal programmes. The availability of early childhood education has so far favoured middle and upper classes in urban areas, despite a certain headway in rural areas through non-formal programmes.

Social mobilisation factors, the pressures of urbanism, and the incorporation of women into the workforce have produced an accelerated demand for children's services that independently the education sector cannot meet. The greatest demand is for the creation of new structures responsible for appropriate care of children. In relation to this, we still must make the curricular contents adequate to satisfy the needs of the children, the parents and the community. (Fujimoto, 1989)

However, problems such as the high percentage of children who have not yet been incorporated in early childhood programmes, the concentration of availability in urban areas, the significant differences in the quality of services provided, the training and remuneration of staff and lastly, the disparity of teaching approaches, remain to be solved in the years to come.

Early childhood education is increasingly important since children need to satisfy their basic learning needs from birth. It is evident that the greater the satisfaction, the better their future learning development, and the lower the cost to the society to attain a specific level of knowledge or to overcome behavioural problems. (UNESCO, 1993)

The increasing number of women in the labor force suggests that other persons are assisting mothers in caring for young children. Early childhood education for most children in the region
does not take place in formal institutions. There is, however, little information on the quality of the services provided by the non-formal system or even what actually constitutes this non-formal system (Reimers, 1992).

**Changing social and family environments**

Social structures in Latin America and the Caribbean illustrate the coexistence of traditional ways of life with 'modern' ones. Changes in family structure and socio-economic activities have increased the pressure for development of extra-familial child care and education. A shift away from the extended family towards the nuclear family has meant that fewer family members are immediately available as caretakers. In addition, women have joined the labour force in large numbers. The patriarchal family, however, with the household as the basic unit of reproduction, women in the private sphere and men in the public sphere, is still a common feature of family life.

Latin American [and Caribbean] families, whether rural or urban, play an essential role in transmitting social values, in production processes, in the education and care of children, and also, in every activity pertaining to social development. However, family life is adversely affected by various conditions stemming from the region's particular situation. (UNESCO/UNICEF, 1987)

With expanding urbanisation, family structures and ways of bringing up children have changed. A third of men and women are married by the age of eighteen in the region. Political violence, increasing divorce rates and early marriages cause a rise in the number of families consisting of the mother and child, and a temporary or unstable presence of father, as well as single headed households (Jelin, 1991). Nearly a third of households in Latin America and the Caribbean are headed by women. Most are either single parents, heads of extended families, or elderly women living alone. The migration of men seeking employment that is not available in their place of origin has also lead to an increase in women-headed households.

Such social changes have been rapid, and have increased demand for housing, basic services and infrastructures. The difficult conditions faced by children and their families are on the increase. Children suffer from the social disintegration of the family, family instability (separation, divorce, or unwanted pregnancies), and adverse parental behavior (such as family violence). Parents who are not offered child care solutions and cannot afford to pay caregivers are forced to leave their children alone.

This widespread practice of what Bornstein calls ‘non-existent child care’, in which infants or young children are simply left unattended while parents are otherwise engaged, seriously undermines healthy child development. (United Nations, 1995)

**Children at work ... and on the streets**

Abandoned children are the offspring of poverty. Impoverished communities that cannot look after their children simply leave them on the streets. (Romero, 1991)
The number of children forced to survive on their own has greatly increased during the last decades. In most cities, there has been a steep rise in the number of street children. Estimates of the number of children working on Brazil’s streets vary from 7 to 10 million of which over a million do not have families to go home to at night. It seems, however, that most of the children on the streets are still with their families, and are important sources of household income.

Children in and of the streets are the growing urban tragedy as their lives are spent in environments in which their mental and physical health is permanently at risk. Among them are the glue-sniffers who inhale toxic vapors as a survival strategy against cold and hunger; the sexually abused girls who are constantly replenishing the ranks of teen prostitution; and the child laborers who prematurely engage in a diversity of work activities unsuited for their age. (IACI, 1991)

The economic basis for survival has thus deteriorated. Child labour is for the poor an important part of family income. Over 30% of school-age urban children in poor Latin American and Caribbean communities work. Child labour is concentrated in three sectors: agriculture, the urban informal sector and domestic service. Working children are often unschooled and illiterate, work as long and hard as their parents and are exposed to dangerous machines, chemicals and abuse. (ILO, 1989).

**Armed conflicts and unrest**

War, oppression and political unrest have plagued various parts of Latin America and the Caribbean for many years. The demand for land and the quest for remunerative crops underlies rural conflicts, drug wars and violent responses from security forces. Thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety and peace in other areas or countries. Most victims of these upheavals are civilians, in particular women and children. Unknown numbers of children have been killed, wounded, abandoned, orphaned or taken as hostages.

Military expenditure in Latin American and the Caribbean was high during the military dictatorships, but this has changed. Today, most countries in the region spend less on the military than on health and education (Grant, 1994). In areas where civil wars still prevail, there have been attempts to focus on the well-being of children; e.g., ‘days of tranquillity’ promoted by UNICEF in El Salvador allowed many children to be immunised (Grant, 1991).

**Governmental & non-governmental involvement**

Some groups, especially women and children, are much more ‘invisible’ to governments and official experts than should ideally be the case. Their status is a subordinate one, and what they think and feel is usually unrecorded. (Collier et al, 1992)

Changes in living conditions, social relationships and family structures have led to changes in access, availability and provision of services and care for young children. Prior to 1970, governments took little interest in early childhood, leaving the field to NGOs and communities who catered to the needs of children in the 4-6 age group. Recent years have seen an increase in
both governmental and non-governmental attention to early childhood programmes. The private sector continues to be important in catering to income groups who can afford early childhood education. Although growing, free state-run programmes are still limited. Nevertheless, the public sector seeks to alleviate educational and social deficits of poor communities, by promoting programmes to train families and communities both to provide integral attention to children from birth, and to facilitate the child's transition from home to school, and reduce repetition and dropout rates (UNESCO/UNICEF, 1993).

On the political front, significant progress has been made towards government support for early childhood. Many governments have realized the importance of placing early childhood on the national agenda, and have consequently adopted policies and measures to improve services for young children and families. Nevertheless, funding levels have remained low as primary education and other socio-economic concerns retain priority. In 1988 only four countries invested more than 0.5 % of their education budget in preschool education (Collier et al., 1992).

Most countries in the region have or are in the process of developing National Programmes of Action as a follow up to the World Summit for Children. Plans of action include health and nutrition, water and sanitation, housing, environment, income and employment, community development and education. In addition, ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by all countries in the region has greatly strengthened interest in children’s issues. A concern for the well-being of the child is also reflected in the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, a comprehensive intra-regional educational reform and development strategy designed to meet basic educational needs by the year 2000. (Collier, 1992). The Major Project gives priority to education of the least privileged and vulnerable groups, living in rural and marginal urban sectors. Among the seven targeted groups are 'children under 6 years of age, living in poor social and economic conditions which cause irreversible consequences on personal cognitive development' (UNESCO 1993).

In general, state-run programmes reach only few children and get little priority in national budgets. Therefore governments have encouraged and supported initiatives to broaden early childhood programmes through informal, integrated methods, involving parents and communities. Feasibility is not the only advantage of these informal programmes. Experience suggests that family and community participation in early childhood programmes increases the chances of programme impact and sustainability.

Parents and community members have a far stronger influence on small children than teachers or secondary care-givers, making relationships with parents essential to the success of early childcare programmes. (Guttman, 1994)

Many Latin American and Caribbean countries have developed a number of innovative alternatives based on an integrated approach to child care (including health, nutrition and education) involving the family and community. In collaboration with community organisations and early childhood centres, programmes have been able to reach many children at a relatively low cost. Without the involvement of parents and communities, however, efforts to improve early childhood care and education in the region are unlikely to be effective.
Early Childhood Care and Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: what future?

During this decade, the state must join efforts with a fully developed civil society. The challenge is especially important where the welfare of children is concerned. Children must be assigned top priority in the actions taken by the state and by civil society to cope with the current problems. (Venezuelan Ministry for the Family, 1990)

The challenges of the 1990s are many, as population and poverty continue to grow. Problems such as economic debt, political change, civil conflicts, unemployment, urbanisation, social disintegration, and an increasing number of poor are still common in most Latin American and Caribbean countries. These problems concern children and families directly but also indirectly, in that their multiplicity limits governmental funding for effective programming. Socio-economic reforms that combine social equity with sustainable long-term growth, as well as national policies for early childhood education, are necessary to spread more equally the available benefits and to develop the potentials of young children in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Nevertheless, many opportunities exist to meet these challenges as a multitude of organisations and communities have emerged to look after young children.

Each situation encourages active participation of social organizations together with educational staff and other representatives of the community (parents, students, entrepreneurs, civil and religious organizations) in initiatives designed to meet basic needs relevant to local demands and requirements.

Co-operation should be perceived as a strategy to encourage progress and complementarity of ideas and efforts. By accepting that the reality of each country is integral to the future of the region, regional and international co-operation then becomes one of the key factors for the achievement of higher and equal development for all. (UNESCO, 1993)

Progress has been achieved as governments realise the importance of focusing on the well-being of children, initiate intergovernmental co-operation and recognise the contribution of NGOs and communities. The support which the Convention on the Rights of the Child has received from all governments in the region is an indication of the importance attached to the welfare of children. The political will would now seem to exist in Latin American and Caribbean countries to allocate resources to programmes seeking to improve the living conditions of the region’s children.
References


Copyright © 1996 UNESCO

---