Inequality and the Education MDG
for Latin America

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After the Millennium Declaration in 2000, eight comprehensive goals with specific quantitative targets to be met by 2015 were articulated as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These include halving poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, eliminating gender disparities, improving child and maternal health, promoting sustainable development and constructing a global compact for development. In the year 2005, a comprehensive evaluation found uneven progress across the world. While many countries had experienced rapid progress towards several of the goals, a sizeable number had moved slowly and some had experienced reversals.

Key for development is the achievement of universal primary education, Goal 2. This goal is within reach for most regions —the exception is Sub-Saharan Africa. Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC) is performing well on this goal. The corresponding indicator, net enrolment in primary education, shows a 95% rate in 2004/2005. Progress in the region has been rapid, propelled by fast improvements by population groups with low attainment in the 1980s.

Using data derived from household surveys and displayed in the EQXIS system (http//:www.iadb.org/xindicators), one can visualise the speed of progress and the reduction in inequality. The graph shows the gap between the richest and the poorest fifth of the population in the 1990s and the 2000s for selected countries (bars indicate gaps; its left end gives the net attendance rate for the poorest fifth of the population, the right end gives that for the richest). Most countries experienced improvements in the national attendance rate and most also reduced the gap between the richest and the poorest quintile.[1] In some instances, such as Chile, Ecuador or Mexico, data for 2002 suggests that the difference in net attendance rates between these two groups is small.

But inequality is far from being eliminated. Looking closer and bringing in factors such as gender and ethnicity, one finds areas of concern. While no difference exists between the top and bottom quintiles for the *white* ethnic group in Brazil, both at 92%, the rate for afro descendents (*pretos*) in the poorest quintile is 86%. In El Salvador the interplay of income and gender shapes inequalities. While national attendance rates for males and females are the same, 88%, females in the poorest quintile have a low rate, 82%, while those in the richest have a 94% rate.

Net attendance in primary education
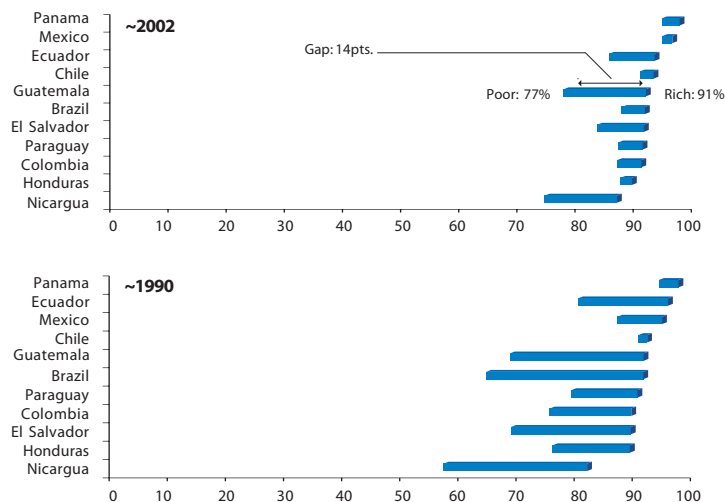
LAC's inequality heritage might prevent it from achieving universal primary education by 2015. Current projections of net enrolment suggest that the region is on track to meet the target by 2015. However, projecting from the 1990s into the next 10-15 years assumes that the very rapid rate among the population groups that had a low educational attainment in the early 1990s will continue. But, it is easier to increase enrolment rates when initial levels are low. So now, with higher attainment, the speed of change is likely to slow down. ECLAC's MDG report (2005) confirms that inequality is a major problem.

Policy decisions guided by broad average figures can be seriously misleading. In order to achieve universal primary education, as well as other MDG goals and targets, policy making should be based, from the start, on analysis drawn from disaggregated data. While the region has been successful in narrowing large education gaps, the pace of future progress is likely to be slow. So policy efforts must be escalated. Support to deprived groups must be well designed since it will be more difficult to reach them. Success in increasing the number and proportion of people with primary education does not guarantee its quality; indeed, quality of education is clearly in need of improvement. Moreover, access to quality education must be egalitarian.

Reference:

1. Diana Alarcon, Jose Antonio Mejia and Eduardo Zepeda, Achieving the MDGs Beyond the Averages, Conference Paper: The MDGS in Latin America: Inclusion and Human Development, IPC-IDB, Brasilia, Brazil, October 2006.