

Nicaragua Fact Sheet

Background

Nicaragua is highly dependent on agriculture which represents 30% of the GDP and absorbs 43% of the workforce. Nicaragua has a disproportionately large amount of youth in comparison to the population; a phenomenon termed a “youth bulge,” and is plagued with high poverty and low productivity. In 2007 the average school level of the population aged 15 and older was only 4.8 years, decreasing to 3.5 years in rural areas, and below 2.4 years among the rural poor. It is estimated that 72% of the population does not finish secondary school and are expected to earn below the poverty line. “Within agriculture, more education renders a [Nicaraguan] worker 10 percent less likely to work as a family enterprise worker, the lowest earning category. Outside of agriculture, more education increases the likelihood of being an employer (by 34 percent), being a wage worker (by 34 percent), and being self-employed (by 17 percent)¹.” Improving the education system, including agricultural education, is paramount for poverty alleviation and increased food security in Nicaragua.



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From: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nicaragua-map.png>

Present Status

In 2008, Nicaragua’s education system had a total of 10,721 schools, 85% of which were public and 15% of which were private. The majority of school infrastructure was located in rural areas amounting to 79% of the total. The educational system is divided into four cycles. Cycles one and two include the primary level and are compulsory from ages 6-12. Cycles three and four include the secondary level. The third cycle (grades 7-9) leads to a basic diploma which allows for graduation and entry into the labor force, or continuation on to technical school or continued academic studies. The fourth cycle (grades 10-11) leads to a general bachillerato or technical diploma. The secondary system is divided into four modalities including: daytime, nighttime, distance, and adult secondary. There are 37 universities in Nicaragua with an estimated 100,000 students. This includes 650 majors with 90% of students enrolled in “traditional majors” and less than 10% in technological majors. This results in a large amount of unemployed graduates in traditional careers and a lack of graduates in technical fields. The National Agrarian University (UNA) is the public institution primarily responsible for agricultural education with some private universities offering agricultural majors.

¹ Guterrez, C., Paci, P., and Ranzani, M. (2008). Making work pay in Nicaragua: Employment, growth, and poverty reduction. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. (p. 96).

Challenges and Issues

Nicaragua has improved in many aspects of school participation and performance including significant increases in enrollment and achieving gender parity in education. However, it continues to be plagued with issues such as poor transition from primary to secondary, low student retention, low matriculation, poor quality, inequality between socioeconomic groups, rural and urban disparities, and low performance compared to other Latin American countries. Nicaragua has the greatest number of out-of-school students and lowest graduation rates in Latin America.



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Among the poor, rural poor, and families engaged in agriculture, a lack of school facilities and distance to schools are cited as barriers to participation. Economic barriers are significant between upper and lower quintiles as well as between regions and urban and rural areas. Only three out of every ten students in the poorest quintile complete primary school education as compared to eight of every ten in the richest quintile. It is estimated that 10% of children between 5-14 years of age are involved in work, which increases to 14.4% among boys. Work, financial issues, and school costs are cited as significant barriers to secondary education. Teacher training, quality, and salary are significant issues at all levels of the Nicaraguan school system. Nicaragua has the least qualified teachers with the lowest share of trained teachers in Latin America. Overall, 18% of Nicaraguan teachers have only a primary school education, most of who serve in rural areas. Only 14% of teachers had a higher education degree in 2005.

The poor enrollment, retention, and graduation rates in Nicaragua have significant impacts on literacy, job skills, and participation in the labor force. This is compounded by a mismatch between technical and vocational, secondary, and tertiary level graduates whose skills are not demanded by the labor market. Many secondary school graduates emigrate to work outside of Nicaragua. Agriculture, while considered the least dynamic sector in Nicaragua, continues to absorb the workforce making it an important part of the Nicaraguan economy.

Next Steps

- Improve and increase infrastructure and facilities.
- Improve teaching methods, practices, & biases to reduce the repetition and dropout rate.
- Increase private/public partnerships to provide more opportunities for students to continue schooling.
- Establish agricultural curriculum that is relevant to societal needs that provides graduates with the necessary skills to succeed in the labor market.
- Improve teaching practices by placing higher emphasis on practical application.
- Incentivize teaching as a profession including increase salaries, and provide support for teacher-mentor programs, college scholarships, and professional development.
- Implement performance monitoring programs to reduce teacher absence and increase performance.
- Explore new ways for funding higher education institutions to make them more accessible to students from poorer and rural backgrounds



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