

# Ecuadorian education and privatisation

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## **Abstract:**

The current Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador is the guarantor of the right to education. However, in the context of a country continually affected by deep social and economic crises, there has been a strong privatization trend in various areas since the 1980s. Education did not escape the logic imposed by governments that presented themselves as having different ideological tints, but which were all basically impregnated with different degrees of neo-liberalism. This has led to the gradual application of privatization policies in education, with the aggravating factor of a visible decrease in its quality. Thus, this strategic social sector is no longer contributing to providing responses to the multiple problems that Ecuadorian society is experiencing.

**Key words:** right to education, social crisis, privatization of education.

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## **Right to education in Ecuador**

The Ecuadorian Constitution (2018) states the following in Articles 26 and 28:

Art. 26.- Education is a right of the people throughout their lives, and it is the inescapable and inexcusable duty of the State. It constitutes a priority area of public policy and state investment, a guarantee of equality and social inclusion, and an indispensable condition for a dignified living. Individuals, families and society have the right and responsibility to participate in the educational process.

Art. 28.- Education shall respond to the public interest and shall not be at the service of individual and corporate interests.

...

Public education shall be universal and secular at all levels. It must be offered for free up to, and including, the third grade of higher education.

This constitutional mandate, still in force, is also present in the 1998 Constitution. But it is necessary to review current compliance to show to what extent it has truly responded to the interests of the Ecuadorian population and the educational communities at different levels, with special emphasis on public education.

It is worthwhile, for further analysis, to open the debate on the relationship between the law and the meaning of “public”; as well as between the so-called public interest and the popular interest. “National interest” or “general interest” often masks support for policies that only benefit the dominant sectors that run the State as a sounding board for their sectorial or corporate interests.

### **General crisis and educational crisis**

A brief historical overview of education in Ecuador is provided by Milton Luna, former Minister of Education and Coordinator of the Social Contract (2014) in his article “Education in Ecuador 1980-2007”. He analyzes the situation of a country that was going through one of its worst financial crises, especially in the 1990s. Luna points out that, during that period, public education suffered particularly from a process of stagnation and regression, in the midst of reforms that ultimately failed. Public policy, and in particular that regarding education, experienced inconsistency and weakness that affected an unstable and unstructured management.

Luna also states that the problems in education not only affected access and permanence of students in the school system, but also its quality. He also says:

There is a complex and interconnected network of causes that contributed to the crisis in Ecuadorian education during these years. The following stand out: the sustained divestment from education, poor quality of spending, periodic teaching conflicts, great instability of the educational authority, weakening of the Ministry of Education, an outdated education model for the system, lack of adequate legislation, limited social participation, and the divorce between education and economy, and education and development”. (p. 8

This scenario of deterioration in public education spurred the growth of private education. The families of students from the middle and upper classes migrated to private education as a consequence of the smear campaigns against public education, which suffering budget cuts, was presented as of an inferior quality<sup>2</sup>and conceived as an education for the poor. Despite the empty speeches of its importance, proposals to improve public education did not achieve implementation or success, remaining in many cases only a discourse of good intentions.

Luna (2014) also dwells on the actions developed since the early 1990s. Some were expressed in social mobilizations for education, such as the three 21st Century National Consultations; and, in the early 2000s, the participation of broad sectors of the State and society to promote long-term educational policies, which marked substantive changes in subsequent years.

It is necessary to emphasize that:

Since the 1990s, educational policies in Ecuador were imposed mainly through projects financed with foreign debt. The Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of Public Credit included in its work the educational credits that were determinant in education policies and were regarded even more important than the Ministry of Education itself, which received the popular nickname of the “poor Ministry” as opposed to the “rich ministry” that was any of these programs...” (Ângulo-García et al, 2021, p. 652).

Other analysts, such as (Isch, 2008), agree:

...have shown that the imposition of neoliberal policies is here to stay in Ecuador, affecting human rights and

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2. Although the qualifier “quality” is used, it must be questioned for its origin and effects. Isch (2023) raises the need to consider, as a replacement, the search for dignified education, considering that every human right is related to and aims to guarantee human dignity.



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education in multiple ways, and provoking changes outside national interests and the laws in place. They have triggered a transfer of competencies from the State to the private sector or to the users, through payment mechanisms and, finally, without achieving a better-quality education, which in fact is confirmed by the documents from the same banks that manage these projects. (Ibid. 653).

Along the lines of a historical reconstruction of Ecuadorian education, the article by Edgar Isch<sup>3</sup> (2018) "Breves apuntes para una mirada crítica a la educación ecuatoriana entre 2007 y 2017" (Brief notes for a critical look at Ecuadorian education between 2007 and 2017), agrees to a large extent with Luna's analysis described in previous paragraphs.

For Isch (2018), the demand for serious attention to education led, for the first time in national history, to a Ten-Year Plan 2006-2015 (Ministry of Education

and Culture, 2006), which incorporated the proposals generated by the three National Consultations "Education XXI Century." Later, it also led to the international commitments taken on by Ecuador in educational matters.

During the first years of the government of former President Rafael Correa (2007-2017), given the increase in state revenues due to the high price of oil, there was a significant boost in social investment. But this was only in the first years of his administration. After the approval of the 2008 Constitution, and the support given by popular sectors for Correa's reelection, a right-wing process began, expressed in the persecution of popular organizations and the National Union of Educators, with policies that sought to divide them and criminalize leaders of democratic organizations.

Although the Correa administration provided education equipment, materials, textbooks, uniforms, and school breakfast programs during his first years, it is also true that he closed thousands of community schools, affecting bilingual indigenous education. He closed manual craft training centers and technical high

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3. Edgar Isch has been a consultant on human rights and education. He has been a researcher for the Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of Public Credit (CAIC, 2008).

schools, and described private education as the guiding star. Even Milton Luna (2019), who was his Minister of Education, questioned the fact that during **Correa's** administration around 7,000 schools were closed, particularly in rural areas.

When Lenin Moreno took office as president in 2017, 486 additional schools were closed. Moreno was followed by Guillermo Lasso, who came to power in 2021, with a strongly neoliberal administration, particularly in education. Finally, with the election of current president Daniel Noboa in 2023, far from increasing investment in education, he announced cuts for 2024.

Against this backdrop, the National Union of Educators (UNE) called in October 2023 for the declaration of an emergency in the country's education system. Among their reasons, it is believed that more than 200,000 children and youth have been excluded from the school system in the last six years; teachers are not given permanent contracts and work in precarious labor conditions; There is a teachers shortage of about 74,000. More than 1,000 educational institutions were have been put out of commission due to the effects of the El Niño weather phenomenon, especially on the Ecuadorian coast. More than 45% of schools lack basic services, and the infrastructure in general is in poor condition. Over 6,000 children have suffered some type of sexual violence in the classrooms in recent years. In addition to all of this, there is violence and insecurity around the schools, where minors are recruited by organized crime gangs, and teachers are also their victims with the so-called "vaccines," that are "protection" racketeering in exchange for their safety in the criminal turfs.

UNE is urging the government, through the declaration of an emergency, to guarantee security and quality public education for all Ecuadorians. After all, it is defined as a human right according to the Constitution.

### **The commodification of education**

Treating education as a lucrative business robs it of the qualities of the right that it actually is, and transforms it into just another commodity, susceptible to be negotiated

to the highest bidder. Castro and López (2020) state:

It is convenient to point out that today we are living a process of instrumentalization and delegitimization of education as a process of human formation. Training by competencies, the market and economies gravitating to the postulates of neoliberalism, ignore and disregard ancestral, indigenous and ethnic knowledge; as well as those arising from social movements. Thus, the construction of critical thinking and the commitment to new realities is hindered. The dehumanization of education is imposed as a result of leaving it at the mercy of market forces.

From this perspective, in Ecuador there are clear signs of a process of commodification of education, driven by the same liberal and neoliberal educational policies of the successive governments in power over the last four decades. We are also witnessing socioeconomic dynamics that have developed as a result of the policies created by those same governments.

Among the causes that would explain the increasing number of students moving from the public to the private system are: (i) the intentional "low quality" of public education due to the lack of trained teachers and the insufficient number of them in educational institutions, lack of equipment and learning resources, insufficient and deficient infrastructure, lack of school sites, persistence of traditionalist pedagogical methodologies; ii) the lack of opportunities for students, such as national and international scholarships; iii) the diversity of "novel" career offerings in private institutions; iv) the offer of virtual education; v) the increase in private investment by international corporations and national economic groups in opening establishments surrounded by great publicity; among other variants.

In addition, despite the fact that the 2018 Constitution allocated a minimum of 6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education, as of that date neither the percentage increase (0.5% per year) nor the total amount established has ever been met, hindering public

education. By 2023, it had only reached 4.8% of GDP, and an estimated reduction of 0.27% is foreseen in 2024. Without the fulfillment of the State's responsibilities, public education cannot promote a social project aimed at achieving its goals, which are also established in the normative instruments.

Evidence of growing privatization in the country can be seen in the increasing number of private institutions at all levels of education nationwide. For example, high school graduates who were unable to obtain a place in a public university, opt for a private university, even at the cost of indebtedness for their families.

Another shift from the private to the public is the incorporation of digital technologies in the classroom as a strategy for modernizing methodologies and teaching resources. This induces the need to continually update equipment and programs as part of a social status symbol, without necessarily translating into better teaching and learning processes. Many families believe that the type of social relationships established at a university will be more important than the actual learning achieved.

Consequently, privatization generalizes an education subsumed by educational models and paradigms that do not respond to students' contexts. It has been impregnated by approaches and methodologies that promote "competencies" and stimulate individualism.

### Final considerations

A chief cause of the education crisis in Ecuador is the application of an education model based on neoliberal policies, which seek, among other things, direct or indirect privatization. This policy model implies an attack on the public sector and the reduction of social budgets.

Privatization of education is contrary to the commitments to education excellence for the entire population. There is a long list of evidence of the crisis of our public and private education. With this, the only thing that is growing is the widening of social gaps. Only by the fulfillment of the fundamental right to a decent public

education, which is a condition that encourages the fulfillment and exercise of other rights, will this situation be corrected.

The reasons that proposals for direct privatization of education have not penetrated as deeply as the neoliberals intended is due to the strong resistance by the UNE and other grassroots sectors. This resistance, from protests to ongoing and in-depth proposals, seeks to rescue and defend public education.

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