



Education for the good of humanity

Roger McKenzie interviews SALVADOR VENEGAS about Nicaragua's education policies



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(L to R) Early childhood education in Nicaragua, 5-year-old Karen attends the Guardabarranco School in Acoyapa; Ruben Dario School in Matagalpa; lunch at the Guardabarranco School in Acoyapa *Photo: Global Partnership for Education - GPE/flickr/CC*

SALVADOR VENEGAS is the adviser for education to the President of Nicaragua Daniel Ortega.

This is a central role in Nicaragua as education is one of the top priorities of the revolutionary government.

It is unarguable that Nicaragua has made massive strides in education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) Nicaragua is now illiteracy free.

Also the World Economic Forum 2022 Gender Gap Index ranks Nicaragua as seventh in the world of countries closing the gender gap on education.

Venegas has been at the heart of this amazing progress. But he is also a true child of the Nicaraguan revolution.

He told me: "I was 14 years old when the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship began and I joined in the fight against the dictatorship.

"I saw injustice. I saw people being exploited and an unjust concentration of wealth in the hands of the few so I got involved in the struggle to overthrow the dictatorship."

"During the first revolutionary period I was studying sciences, economics and education but I also remained an activist.

"However, during the neoliberal period in the 1990s, after the Sandinistas lost the elections, there was no possibility of social and economic development," Venegas said.

"During those years I was a teacher at a university and I stayed

involved in the revolutionary struggle to help build a country where there was more justice and where wealth wasn't concentrated in the hands of the few.

"In what we call the second period of the revolution in 2006 when Ortega was elected he invited me to be part of his team.

"I first worked on global policy before he asked me to take on the education role," he said.

Venegas told me that the aim set out by President Ortega was to bring about an evolutionary transformation of education in the

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Nicaragua has backed up their commitment with funding. The budget for education has increased year on year as part of the government policy for social investment and education as key to reducing poverty and improving wellbeing, and developing the economy.

Since 2006 the Education budget has been increased by a staggering 457 per cent.

The country has also doubled the number of teachers and maintained continuous training, including school teachers in rural areas, to ensure high quality education.

Nicaragua places girls, boys and whole families at the centre of all the educational policies that are developed.

They promote and support an inclusive multicultural model at all levels of education, from initial or preschool, through technological education until higher education, to build sustainable and resilient

communities.

Ortega's government has particularly concentrated on education in the rural and indigenous as well as the afro-descendant communities. It has prioritised the preservation of languages and indigenous cultures, has expanded the installation of internet and technological support, and provided support for English as a second language.

The education curriculum and teaching in the autonomous Caribbean regions of Nicaragua are also supported by the government.

In Nicaragua education from primary to university education has been free since Ortega was elected in 2006.

Venegas said: "For us it's not just about free education. We also integrate social programmes into our education system to help those in most need.

"There are many from very low-income families who can't even afford to get to school so we step in as a government to provide them with grants.

"At the start of the school year each child gets a backpack with supplies such as pens and pencils and they also get free school meals to ensure they get at least one hot meal in the day.

"The teachers also get backpacks and are provided with textbooks free of charge," Venegas added.

To monitor the quality of education being taught the Nicaraguans have established a Higher Education Institute. There is also a

National Commission for Education which has teams that conduct regular reviews of schools and report back on any possible changes that might be needed to education policy.”

Unlike in Britain the education system in Nicaragua is not manically results driven. The government believes there is far more to education than that.

“Our concept of education is not just about process and exams. It’s about human development, social justice, values and respect for the environment.”

He added: “It's about belonging to the country. The whole community is involved in education.”

Venegas told me that “one of the most important things for us is that children go to school every day. So we involve parents, teachers and the whole community to make sure children attend every day and don’t leave the education system.

“Education is not a commodity for us so that somebody can be sold into the market,” he said.

“The indicators we prioritise are around social justice, respect for women and the environment.

“We also pay a lot of attention to cultural aspects such as the arts.

“We want to educate people to contribute towards the common good so we are transforming education into focusing on making good human beings.

“For us the right to education is the pathway for human

development,” he added.

Resources are always a challenge but particularly in a country under such pressure from the US and their allies.

Venegas said: “Although resources are sometimes a challenge that hasn’t stopped us from continuing the process of transforming education in our country.”

He told me that Nicaragua has moved way beyond the neoliberal days when only a handful of teachers had any formal training.

“Now around 98 per cent of teachers are formally qualified,” Venegas told me. And the training for teachers is free.

“This year we have also upgraded teacher training to university level.”

But teachers are also given space to meet together every month “to review their pedagogy.” “This gives the teachers the chance to share their own learning with each other.”

I asked Venegas what the key indicators for success were in the Nicaraguan education system.

“We want to see students leave the education system as better human beings and be able to recognise injustice and to fight against it,” he said.

“We also want to see improvements in the sciences and technology.

“And of course we want people to be able to attract investment into the country but without exploiting anyone.”

He added: "But we also want people to sing and dance. A human being is not just knowledge, it's about caring for each other, their country and the planet and also about enjoying life."

OTHERS LIKED



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