

Investing in Education and Health versus Militarism: The Case of Costa Rica

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One of the most popular speeches of the Fourth Congress was one delivered by Professor Leonardo Mata at the morning Plenary Session. Most of Dr. Mata's address is reprinted here:

Costa Rica is the only nation in Latin America without an army; the Constitution of 1949 proscribed its existence. Last year, the elected president of this small nation passed a decree making Costa Rica disarmed and neutral. In this manner, we became the fifth country to declare itself officially neutral – along with Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and Austria – and the first in the world to become unilaterally disarmed.

Background

Costa Rica has a rather humble ancestry of tribal aborigines blended with poor and mostly illiterate colonizing Spaniards, and

with a later and very modest immigration of other Europeans. A rural agricultural society developed. Costa Ricans became strongly attached to the land, built tight familial bonds and developed a democracy with active political participation. The small aboriginal population of not more than 50,000 at the time of the Spanish Colonization, the difficulties encountered in setting a subsistence agriculture, and the unhealthiness and toughness of the environment – especially in the lowlands – precluded exploitation of men and establishment of big landholdings (*latifundios*) in the manner seen in other Latin American countries.

Costa Rica is still considered a poor country, depending almost solely on agriculture. There is no significant exploitation of the subsoil and there is no knowledge of existing deposits of petroleum, precious stones or valuable minerals.

For more than 150 years Costa Ricans insisted on a democratic system with alternation of power, and at present they elect, every four years and by direct vote, a president, two vice-presidents, deputies and local municipal authorities. Several parties compete and share power.

Costa Rica has not invaded any other nation; Costa Rica has not been occupied by any other nation. The change of authorities every four years is followed by a replacement of most of the police forces and of their corresponding directors, who generally are civilians without military training. This interesting behavior has precluded the establishment of a military tradition in Costa Rica. The emphasis on peace and democracy has been accompanied by a significant investment in education and health as opposed to militarism...

Political and Civic Accomplishments

Costa Rica has been a pioneer in the struggle for civil rights, and gains were quickly effected generally without violence. Slavery was negligible, owing to the lack of wealth and resources, and was abolished in 1813. Elementary education became a priority in the last century and was declared universal and compulsory in 1869. We were the first country in the world to abolish the death penalty (in 1882) and have not reestablished it since. Costa Rica has maintained an opposition to apartheid and any other form of discrimination. Important improvements of the electoral system occurred



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Table 1: Infant Mortality in Developed Countries, Per 1000 Livebirths, 1965 and 1980

	1965	1980
Finland	17.6	7.7*
Switzerland	17.8	9.1
Canada	23.6	12.0*
Ireland	25.2	12.4**
England and Wales	19.0	12.0
Austria	28.3	14.3
Czechoslovakia	25.5	18.8**
Costa Rica***	76.1	19.1
Hungary	38.8	23.2
Portugal	64.9	26.0**
Yugoslavia	71.8	32.7**

*1978; **1979; ***less developed

Source: Klinger, 1982

before World War II, and a fourth power was created in 1949 – the Supreme Tribunal of Elections – which, in addition to its permanent administrative and controlling capacities over elections, also controls all the police forces during election time, making our system a subject of permanent scrutiny by international organizations, and an example for other countries. Women acquired the right to vote in 1949, have been elected to the Chamber of Deputies and have been appointed ministers, justices and to other important posts.

Improvement in Health

A marked decline of death rates due to infectious diseases was documented since 1930, but particularly after a period of social reforms in the 1940's (labor legislation, social security, etc.), and even more so during the 1970's when scientific wisdom and political decision coupled with economic bonanza permitted the extension to the sparse rural population of water supply, waste disposal, primary health care, and delivery of medical services. The dramatic effects of such actions are visible in the mortality for diarrheal diseases, most of which consist of infantile deaths; the decline was from figures of 250-400 to less than 10 per 100,000 population. It is not surprising that there was a strong correlation between infant mortality and severe malnutrition, particularly in the 1970's. The malnutrition ward of the National Children's Hospital was closed in 1977.

Other communicable diseases also declined, particularly malaria, which killed one out of every three adults in the early 1940's, and which was brought under control in the 1950's through case-finding and treatment and vector control. The reduction and eradication of infectious disease was related in part to an improved quality of life and, in part, to specific actions derived from improved medical care (e.g., prevention of death due to dehydration). Still other diseases were controlled by the successful application of vaccination campaigns and medical technology, thanks to an aggressive rural health program; Costa Rica was a pioneer in the concept of primary health care. Smallpox was eradicated in 1938, diphtheria and poliomyelitis in 1974, and no deaths due to measles or tetanus neonatorum were recorded in 1983. In 1980 Costa Rica exhibited an infant mortality rate comparable to those of many European nations, surpassed only by highly advanced industrial nations, which now

exhibit an infant mortality below 10 per 1000, regarded as "very low" (Table 1)...

Socioeconomic and Health Indicators in the Caribbean Basin

Socioeconomic and health indicators in some Caribbean nations show an association between poor health and low socioeconomic indicators, and large investment in militarism (Tables 2 and 3). The countries doing worse from the sanitary point of view are those with a tradition of militarism and political instability, which at the same time have placed a lesser emphasis on education and health. The converse is also observed. It should be noted that a lower index of per capita food production was also characteristic of those nations with high illiteracy rate and poor health, which also invest large-sums in the military apparatus.

During the last 25 years of political violence in the Caribbean Basin, Costa Rica reduced its expenditure in defense and

Table 2: Socioeconomic Indicators of Caribbean Basin Nations, 1969 – 81

	% Literate Male/female (1980)	% Rural Population with Water (1980)	GNP Per Capita \$ (1981)	% Rate Inflation (1970-81)	Average Index Food Production (1969-71 = 100)
Guatemala	59/44	21	1,140	10.4	96
Nicaragua	61/60	10	860	14.2	87
Honduras	64/62	40	600	9.1	80
El Salvador	70/63	40	650	10.8	104
Panama	87/86	65	1,910	7.6	102
Jamaica	90/93	86	1,180	16.8	90
Cuba	91/92	-	1,410	-	106
Costa Rica	92/92	80	1,430	15.9	110

== Data not available

Sources: World Bank, UNESCO, WHO, FAO

Table 3: Health Indicators of Caribbean Basin Nations, 1979 – 81

	Infant Mortality Rate (1981)	Life Expectancy At Birth (1981)	%LBW Infants (1979)	% Infants Immunized (1980)	
				Polio	Measles
Nicaragua	90	57	-	18	15
Honduras	90	59	-	37	35
El Salvador	80	63	13	47	58
Guatemala	70	59	18	58	45
Panama	29	71	11	50	52
Jamaica	27	71	10	37	-
Cuba	19	73	10	-	56
Costa Rica	19	73	8	87	52

== Data not available

Sources: World Bank, UNESCO, WHO

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The worldwide military expenditure of over 750,000 million dollars annually – more than 1.4 million per minute – is greater than the total annual income of the poorest one half of the world's people. Expenditures on arms are rapidly widening the economic gap between less developed and rich countries. Consequences of the arms race include unemployment, diminished productivity, less investment in scientific research and health care, more alienation, and psychological distress to the population. These phenomena have been described as "destruction before detonation."

Many disadvantaged people in the less developed and in the industrial nations suffer from serious disabling, and life-threatening diseases. Hundreds of millions of people suffer from poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, infectious and parasitic diseases, and premature death, all of which are preventable.

The equivalent of a few hours of world arms expenditure would finance the entire annual budget of the World Health Organization. A few days of arms expenditure would buy the vaccines for 1000 million children. Three weeks of the annual arms expenditure invested yearly during the next decade would provide safe water for all of the world's population, 50 percent of whom now drink contaminated water.

The arms race and the threat of war – especially nuclear war – critically reduce levels of health and well-being, and the quality of life in all nations...

– Excerpts from the Summary of the Working Group on Economic and Health Effects of the Arms Race. Chair: Leonardo Mata, Ph.D. (Costa Rica); Vice-Chair: K. Balakrishnan, M.D. (India); Rapporteur: Helena Tuomi, M.D. (Finland).

Table 4: Expenditure on Defense, % of Government Budget and Per Capita (U.S. \$)

	% of Budget				P.C. U.S.\$
	1960	1965	1970	1973	1980
El Salvador	8.4	10.5	9.4	27.2	11.0
Honduras	12.1	11.8	11.3	14.8	12.0
Nicaragua	14.1	9.5	10.2	9.3	28.0
Guatemala	7.7	9.6	14.8	9.2	14.0
Costa Rica	4.1	3.1	2.5	2.5	3.0

* Expenditures are for the police forces, since there is no army
Sources: Int. Inst. Strategic Studies; Sivard, 1983

security, while the rest of the Central American countries increased it (Table 4). Unfortunately, no data on military expenditure were available for 1974-1983, the period of intensification of violence in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. The already low rate of 4.1 percent of the Costa Rican government budget devoted to police forces in 1960 dropped to an even lower rate of 2.5 percent in 1973, ten times less than expenditures in armed forces in El Salvador. It is of interest that the high expenditure in the army in El Salvador five years before the beginning of organized guerrilla activity apparently did not have the expected prophylactic effect, suggesting an inverse cause-effect relationship between those two variables.

A different phenomenon was noted for Guatemala, where there was a relative decrease in expenditure and a stalemate of the guerrilla struggle. Nevertheless, the Costa Rican rate was four times less than those of Guatemala and Nicaragua. The important consideration of these data, however, is that expenditures in militarism in less developed countries, even when small, has a marked negative effect on budgets for education, agriculture and health. This is probably more noticeable in small countries such as those in Central America, and would explain why the second smallest country, Costa Rica, has reached its present level of health and social development.

In Costa Rica the differences between per capita expenditure in health and education versus security and defense (this includes the police and rural guard, about half of whom do not carry weapons) are remarkable (Table 5). Even in 1930, the oldest data available, expenditure in education and health was more than twice that

for security. Differences became larger during the 1960s and 1970s, correlating with the galloping increase in health indicators in Costa Rica. The reduction and eventual stagnation of expenditures in the police forces in Costa Rica contrasts with the dramatic increase in per capita expenditures first in education, and more recently in health. In 1980 our country spent \$64 per capita on education and \$69 per capita on health (in 1970 US dollars), more than ten times the expenditure on the police forces. Due to the current recession, the investment in education and health has decreased, while that for security and defense has remained constant, or even increased slightly, a matter of serious concern. The increase in police expenditures in Costa Rica in the late 70's correlated with the Sandanista war in Nicaragua and with certain political unrest in Costa Rica stemming from invasion of land by landless peasants and strikes of agricultural and government workers. The events just described suggest that the current model of deployment requires further adjustments. Equivocal health policies, for instance, plus an

Table 5: Per Capita Expenditures in Costa Rica, 1970 U.S. Dollars

Year	Defense &		
	Security	Education	Health
1930	3.9	6.9	10.8
1940	3.6	7.1	14.6
1950*	2.1	6.3	7.7
1960	2.7	19.3	14.2
1970	—	35.4	37.7
1980	5.9	63.9	68.7
1981	4.6	47.2	61.4
1982	5.3	33.9	43.3

* Army abolished in 1949
Sources: Rosero, 1984; Budget, General Comptroller, Costa Rica

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Table 6: Estimated Army and Police Forces in Central America, Men and Women (Rates per 1000 Population)*

	1975	1981	% In Rate End of 1983	1975-1983
Nicaragua	11,100(4.8)	30,000(10.7)	125,000(44.6)	+ 829
El Salvador	8,100(2.1)	20,000(4.1)	28,000(5.7)	+ 171
Honduras	14,200(4.9)	20,000(5.3)	25,700(6.8)	+ 39
Guatemala	15,000(2.5)	22,000(2.9)	24,660(3.3)	+ 32
Costa Rica**	6,000(3.2)	6,900(3.0)	7,700(3.3)	+ 3

* Not including paramilitary forces and guerrillas

** Police only, since there is no army; most policemen do not carry firearms.

enormous expenditure in food and welfare programs with little or undemonstrable impact, undoubtedly contributed to some stagnation and explain in part some recent deterioration, aggravated by the current world recession and the Nicaraguan conflict. However, present figures of expenditure in education and health are still in great excess to those recorded for the rest of Central America.

Comments

Costa Rica, one of the poorest nations in Latin America, improved its health and economic indicators to equal or surpass those of many European nations, in a record time of 20 years.

Costa Rica is showing that peaceful coexistence is possible in the midst of political violence, and without a military establishment.

"..One million children die of malaria each year in Africa alone. Twice that number of Third World children are believed to die annually of measles, tetanus, polio and other diseases for which vaccines exist. The United Nations Children's Fund estimated that in 1978 more than 12 million children under the age of five died of hunger and its effects.

Much of this tragedy could be averted... A cutback of the manufacture of one B-1 bomber, that is, from 34 to 33, would represent a prorated savings of \$240 million - much more than the \$133 million that would be required to restore to 1980 levels maternal and child health funds for all of the United States...

One million children can be immunized against the preventable communicable diseases for about \$5 million, the

Expenditure in militarism is a major constraint for investment in education, health, agriculture, and social development.

There appears to be a cause-effect relationship between militarization and the onset of armed violence.

There is a cause-effect relationship between socioeconomic injustice, poor health and low education, and militarization in less developed countries.

Militarization in less developed countries creates international tension, paralyzes progress and worsens the quality of life.

Militarization in less developed countries can easily lead to introduction and/or development of nuclear weapons.

cost of one Pershing II missile. Vaccines against malaria appear to be in a late stage of development, but the total amount of money committed annually to all research world-wide on malaria and all other tropical diseases is less than \$100 million, an amount approximating what the world spends on arms every hour. And the cost of a 20-year program to provide essential food and health needs of all Third World countries is estimated to be much less than the \$100 billion that was spent last year alone world-wide on nuclear weapons systems..."

- Howard Hiatt, M.D., Dean Emeritus of the Harvard School of Public Health, from his Keynote Address to the Plenary Session of the Fourth Congress.