



The implementation of the ‘Buen Vivir’ principle in Ecuador: A look into how citizen’s capacity and potential is built through education

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Abstract

Objective 4 of the National Plan for Good Living (PNBV) is Ecuador’s response to the challenge in implementing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations (UN). It is aimed at building citizens’ capacity and potential through education. How institutions in Ecuador implemented PNBV 4 to meet the goals of SDG 4, and the implications that the operationalization of its goals had on the achievement of its targets serve as the rationale of this study.

Using an exploratory approach, data culled from selected national and international databases from 2013-2017 point to three goals - democratization of access to education, completion of studies, and promotion of continuing education as key in achieving quality education. While these goals have produced satisfactory percentages and accomplished targets, they have also produced nuances and contestations that define the complexity of implementing broad policies that emanate from a much broader set of SDGs.

Keywords: education, development, sustainability, goal, citizenship

Introduction

On February 17, 2013, the government of Ecuador created a governance template popularly known as the National Plan for Good Living or the ‘Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir (PNBV)’, and it refers to the ‘collective well-being’ (Walsh, 2010: 15) which epitomizes the essence of the Citizen’s Revolution administration of President Rafael Correa. Under his leadership, Ecuador had shifted from a capitalistic orientation to a socialist state whose aim was to build and develop ‘good living for its citizens. The embodiment of this Program was seen and felt in every corner, institution, and landscape of Ecuador aptly captured in its slogan, ‘Ama la vida’ or ‘Love the life’.

From 2013-2017, under the PNBV, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were operationalised, implemented, and lived out in almost all aspects of Ecuadorian life. One of the SDGs that was at the forefront of radical and abrupt change in 2013 was the promotion of SDG 4. The sole purpose of SDG 4 is the achievement of quality education in the country, and the PNBV 4 was conceived to ‘establish holistic education in order to achieve the socialist knowledge-based society and leap forward from an economy of finite or material-based resources to an economy based on infinite resources or knowledge’ (p, 60). The promotion of quality and holistic education that tried to implement equitable distribution of resources constituted the crux of the objective, and all efforts of the government were aimed at

achieving a ‘socialist knowledge-based economy through the construction and development of knowledge.

The PNBV 4 has ten policies with eight goals. These policies are statements that identify and specify the priorities of the government in the field of education. There are also declarative statements that are envisioned to promote the ‘Buen Vivir’ principle of the government. Most of these goals have specific targets expressed in percentages.

From 2013 until 2017, the implementation of the PNBV policies had been felt in the country. Out of ten policies, significant amount of quantitative data were produced in five policies - Policy 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. These policies revolved around activities that promote the achievement of universal access to basic education, democratization of access to higher education (PNBV Objective 4, Policy 1), promotion of completion of studies in all educational levels (PNBV Objective 4, Policy 2), promotion of non-formal and on-going education (PNBV Objective 4, Policy 3), improvement of educational quality (PNBV Objective 4, Policy 4) and empowerment of teachers as key actors of Buen Vivir (PNBV Objective 4, Policy 5).

The education sector was one of the priority areas of the PNBV’s operationalisation of SDGs. Since most public education institutions were recipients of funds, projects, and opportunities, the entire plan had been costly to the Government. Despite heavy spending on education, the Government believes that human capital is at centre of all

development efforts if the country were to leap forward to an economy based on knowledge as form of infinite resource. Thus, it is through education that the country can maximise its natural resources, the diversity of its flora and fauna, and the cultural heritage of its people across the three regions - highlands, coast, and Amazon.

Concrete action plans from 2013-2017 were implemented to transform education in the country and these were evident in its reforms in the basic education program; the overhauling of its higher education system; the massive sending off of its citizens to study overseas; and, the building of synergies between and among government institutions. However, this type of 'leaping forward' in the education sector, though exhaustive and comprehensive, had been beset by contestations, nuances, and conflicts. There had been concerns about Ecuadorians not getting a job or having to wait for a number of months despite having studied overseas for their graduate degrees. In the basic education sector, there were issues related to 'too much democratisation of students' rights that teachers ended up not having authority to command attention and respect. The construction of millennium schools or 'state-of-the-art' public schools was seen as breakthrough in basic education and an innovative response to bridge the gap between public and private schools in terms of infrastructure and access; but, some teachers had not been able to maximize the school's potential due to lack of training. In terms of figures, however, the PNBV had lifted the education sector to a marked degree.

The former President Correa once mentioned at the United Nations Assembly that, 'In Ecuador we mean by development as achieving the Good Living of everyone, in peace and in harmony with nature, considering the indefinite prolongation of human cultures'. This is self-evident that the country had improved and developed in almost all aspects; however, development is conceptually messy. During the four-year implementation of PNBV 4, there was significant access to education and increase in completion rate due to the remedial system or 'supletorio' in basic education as provided for by the law, however, there might had been a drop in the quality of students' promotion as some teachers merely passed students to avoid the complicated process of remediation. While there were more scholars educated abroad, universities, simultaneously, had elevated their standards that even an Ecuadorian who recently earns a Ph.D. graduate degree abroad could not easily access due to requirements that could only be complied through years of experience and academic contributions such as publications and research outputs.

In this study, the results are presented from the four-year implementation of the "Good Living" (Buen Vivir) philosophy in the area of education. How these results were generated and achieved are explored and analysed to determine whether or not the governance template of the Government had truly influenced and improved the education sector of the country. Specifically, this study intends to determine the mechanisms by which SDG 4 are translated and operationalised in PNBV Objective 4, and the implications of the implementation of this objective. Further, the study also aims to probe the ways

the quantification of goals (with percentage and targets) influence the priorities of the government in introducing the policy on building the capacities of citizen and their potential.

Methodology

This exploratory study uses the case of Ecuador, and it explores the ways and mechanisms by which the PNBV 4 (to build citizen's capacities and potential) had been translated from goals into policies that promote and advance SDG 4 (quality education) in the country. Comparison of data generated from different sources provide triangulation and point to the importance of understanding numerical data such as percentages as guide in determining the impact of a goal which is translated into working policies.

There is no predetermined sampling size in this study; however, the 2013-2017 period is considered the spatial and delimited period from where document analysis of implementation strategies serves as detailed description of the extent and magnitude of the implementation of the goals set forth in the plan.

Data are culled from reports of government offices, news articles, and databases of Ecuador's Ministry of Education (MinEduc), National Statistics and Census office, and from international databases of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Reports. Themes are produced through coding that produces the patterns and establishes similarities among data.

Results and Discussions

To bring to the fore the impact of PNBV 4 in the education sector from the year 2013 until 2017, policies are first presented, followed by specific programs that the government had put in place in all levels of education.

Policy 1: Universal Access to Basic Education

Three goals were put forward to achieve Policy 1 – completion of basic education, completion of secondary school, and the reduction of drop-out rate. At the start of 2013, the government intended to increase the percentage of people age 16-24 who completed basic education schooling to 95%. As evidence, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics Database revealed that Ecuador had achieved gross intake ratio of (into the last grade of primary) 104.8% and the percentage of repeaters was 0.7% in 2017. In 2016, its survival to the last grade was 90.73% and the primary to secondary transition rate was 98.64%.

Based on the provision spelled out in the PNBV 2013-2017 of the country on education, access and completion of basic education, which consists of 6 years primary, 3 years of superior basic education, and 3 years of senior high school (bachillerato), is of paramount goal. The 98.64% transition rate from primary to secondary in Ecuadorian schools could be a reflection of the country's support mechanisms. Under the PNBV, the MinEduc provided free uniforms to almost all primary school children and provided snacks every day to all students. The daily food provisions basically consists of milk, biscuits, and granola bars. Undoubtedly, this type of feeding

mechanism and uniform support had helped encouraged students to stay in school especially those who are in danger of dropping out due to poverty.

The 'catchment area system' of the Ministry had also mitigated the problem of distance from children's home to their school. Students were expected to attend the nearest school in their area. With this system, transportation fares especially in urban areas were solved and punctuality was reinforced. However, there is a perceived downside to this system, especially in big cities like Quito and Guayaquil where the demarcation of social classes is location-influenced. In Quito, the perceived 'rich North' has better public schools and the perceived 'poverty-stricken' South has inferior public schools. Students who come from the South of Quito can never access the better schools in the North; thus, resulting to inequity in accessing quality public education.

Another factor that had facilitated the high completion rates in basic education is the system of 'supletorio' or 'remedial system' in schools. From year 8 of basic education until Year 3 of senior high school, students who fail in one or more subjects are given the opportunity to go through the 3-phased 'remedial system' which consists of three types of examinations that help students pass the academic year. Upon the implementation of this remediation scheme in 2013, teachers were expected to prepare additional materials and readings to bridge the gap in knowledge which had not been addressed to during the academic year. There had been no study about the remediation system in schools upon its inception in 2012 until now, and there might be implications this remediation system has to transition and completion rates in the entire basic education system as some students complete the academic year straight and some are chronic takers of this type of tests.

Ideally, students who have been to remedial examinations should not be taking this type of test in the succeeding year; however, based on my informal conversations with teachers, there are students who take remedial examinations almost every year. In this case, the definition of 'completion of a year' thus assumes a different meaning in this context. Any quantitative data in the form of percentage masks the nature of the concept, 'completion of studies'. Therefore, completion can be of two types in Ecuador's situation - it is either a straight completion with no failing marks or a completion which goes through the three remedial examinations.

The quantification of the transition rate of students by percentage has, in a subtle way, resulted to an educational policy which is exhaustive and extensive as evident in the three-phased examination scheme which provides students three chances to pass the level and complete the academic requirements in a year. This implies that when a student passes the year, there are two types of promotion – completion of the year with passing marks or completion of the year with attendance in remedial examinations.

Towards the end, every student who passes is counted as one regardless of the type of promotion a student goes through. Seeing the percentage alone may not show the nature of

students' survival rate and transition, and understanding transition and survival rates in the form of percentage does not always show the reality of a specific indicator. In universities, remedial examination is not mandatory. There are universities that provide this chance, and this has also implications to the definition of 'completion' as indicator of success.

The second goal that guarantees universal access to education is the plan to 'increase the percentage of people from age 18 to 24 who have graduated from high school to 78.0% (PNBV 2013-2017: 61).' Based on the World Inequality Database on Education of the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR), Ecuador has 57% lower secondary completion rate of students age 15-24 years old. Thirteen years later, the rate went up to 85% under the PNBV. In 2008, which is the start of 'Buen Vivir' as the guiding principle in the constitution, there is an increase in the completion rate of lower secondary students by 28% although the target age as envisioned in the PNBV is from 18-24 and the target age of the GEMR is from 15-24 years old.

Based on the database of the administrative registration of the Ministry of Education there is a steady and consistent increase of students progressing from the first year of senior high school to the third year. In the school year 2009-2010, there were 600,000 students, and towards the end of the school year 2016-2017, there were 800,000 students who progressed from first to the third year of senior high school. This increment is a reflection of the positive influence of the government's support to education and all its key actors; however, there is no data if remedial examinations or feeding programs are significant factors that contribute to students' transition in grade or year levels.

The third goal is the reduction of dropout rate in the 8th year of basic education and first year of high school to 3.0% (PNBV 2013-2017:61). The reduction in the dropout rate reinforces completion and transition percentages. This mean that students are promoted and are assumed to have acquired the skills and competencies that are expected from all subjects. However, the three-phased remedial examination given to students who do not pass in one or more subjects could be the factor behind this percentage. The operationalisation of policies through goals that are expressed in percentages or in numerical forms does not always show the process and nuances that significantly shape the attainment of such goal such as the reduction of the dropout rate. Moreover, under the education system in those years, teachers are expected to justify students' failures and they must prove that they have done everything possible to help students. Demands like these from the Ministry of Education could have, in a subtle way, pushed teachers to pass students to avoid problems, paperwork, and parents' intervention.

Policy 2: Democratisation of Access to Higher Education

Under the PNBV governance template, the democratisation of access to higher education is one of its flagships. Policy 2 was conceived to mitigate the growing dichotomy between public and private universities. Private universities share in the burden of educating the country's population; however, not all Ecuadorians can access private universities whose tuition and

miscellaneous fees range from approximately \$1 500 per semester to as high as \$3 500, and these fees are not the same across degree programs. The public-private divide is common among developing countries. Private universities flourish in the developing world and some universities have become stock-and-profit corporations instead of remaining as educational institutions.

To facilitate access to universities, the Government's intention was to increase the enrollment in higher education to 50%. To help achieve this goal, on August 13, 2013, the Government through the Higher Education Organic Law, inaugurated four new universities: Yachay University (technology and engineering), IKIAM University (natural sciences and biodiversity), University of Arts (arts and culture) and the National University of Education (education). According to Rene Ramírez, the former president of the Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation or the 'Secretaría de Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnológica E Innovación (SENESCYT), the creation of the four 'emblematicas' or premiere universities initiates the new era of a knowledge-based society in Ecuador. Students who gain admission in these universities do not have to pay any fee and scholarships are offered to those who meet certain requirements.

Further, aside from the four new universities, all existing public universities were required by law not to charge any fees to facilitate greater and wider access to higher education. Students who finish upper senior high school are required to take the examination, 'Ser Bachiller', which evaluates aptitudes and competencies believed to have been acquired during students' intermediate education years. The scores they obtain determine their chances in getting a slot in public universities. Premiere universities like the newly created universities require higher scores and 'in-demand' degree programs like medicine have limited slots. Students who have high scores in the examination have higher chances to access these quota degree programs.

With the democratisation of access to universities, every Ecuadorian has the chance to complete an undergraduate degree program without paying tuition and miscellaneous fees. The provision of scholarships and bursaries to students who meet certain criteria increases the chances of poor yet deserving students to have no preoccupation over materials and accommodation if they study in far locations.

Another mechanism of the Government is the "Nivelacion" or the Leveling Program of the National System for Year Leveling and Admission Office. Students who do not have the required score to be admitted in a public university as first-year students are given supplementary instruction for a semester or more to 'bridge' the knowledge assumed to have not been learned during their basic education years. In some universities, students are admitted but are placed in the Leveling Program for a semester and upon completion with satisfactory grades, they are eventually admitted as regular first-year students. In some universities, completion of the leveling courses merit automatic admission.

In the past, students who do not have the required admission examination score cannot access public universities. They either have to retake the admission examination the following semester or attend tutorial classes at their own expense. With the Leveling Program, students have more chances to study a university degree program. What is common among public universities admission is the required 'Ser Bachiller' (Secondary School Examination) examination score without which a student cannot access undergraduate degree programs.

Policy 3: Promotion of completion of studies in all educational levels

Completion of studies in all levels is another priority of the Government. One of its goals is to achieve 80% rate of students in higher education who complete their degrees. There are two provisions that help achieve this policy. First, by law, universities can offer remedial examination to students who have failing marks in their subjects after a semester. Although this is not mandatory, some universities in the country have remedial examination to facilitate transition and completion of students' undergraduate studies. Second, the Council on Higher Education (SENESCYT) provides scholarships both for studies in the country and overseas to students based on established criteria. Students who score high in the 'Ser Bachiller' become members of the 'Group of High-Performing Students' who are given scholarships to study overseas and financial grants for their projects. In 2017, the scholarship has been reduced to \$318.00 every month to those who are studying in Ecuador.

The test-taking nature of Ecuador upon completion of basic education is a form of assuring the State that students had acquired the expected competencies and skills during the ideal 12-year stay in primary and secondary schools. The examination, 'Ser Bachiller', or the examination administered to high school graduates work as a double-edged evaluation mechanism. With a passing mark, it facilitates students' access to higher education, particularly to public universities. With a lower score, it influences students' chances in selecting the degree program they prefer. Despite the government's desire to increase entry to universities, the examination regulates the number of students who can access public universities where the admission score in the examination is pegged at a higher level. As a result, private entities have started to offer review programs for a fee and some public universities provide free review for one or two weeks.

Another goal of the Government is the achievement of 85% rate of university professional to obtain graduate degrees. According to the SENESCYT, 229 scholarships were awarded to Ecuadorians between 1993 and 2006, and this figure was increased to 10, 000 until December 2014. Ecuadorians had pursued undergraduate and graduate studies in at least 48 countries around the world with all expenses shouldered by the Government (Jaramillo, 2014). At the start of 2012, the Government offered three scholarships to its people namely - the Open Call, Excellent Universities Call, and Globo Común. Through these scholarship opportunities, thousands

of Ecuadorians were able to study abroad, and some of whom left the country with their families. To finance these scholarships, the Government's funding varies from as high as \$250,000 for a 4-year Ph.D. program in a British university to as low as \$10,000 in some universities in Latin America.

With the amount the Government had invested since 2006, René Ramirez (ANDES Info), reported that '98% of the scholars have returned to the country of which 35-40% are working in the university system, 20% in the health system and 20% in the private sector and the rest are distributed among non-government institutions. These returning scholars have an average of 3 months waiting period before they get jobs and with an average salary of \$2,000. According to Ramirez, only 2% of these scholars are unemployed but the Government has been trying to look for opportunities for them to get a job.

Policy 4: Promotion of non-formal and ongoing education

The Ministry of Education (MinEdu) is in the frontline in providing opportunities for continuing education. According to the MinEdu, they had invested \$100 million annually for the continued training and professional updating of basic education teachers in the country.

Aside from the MinEdu, universities also offer continuing and lifelong learning educational programs to different disciplines. Most universities offer the 'Professionalisation Program' which confers the title on teachers who do not have an undergraduate degree in teaching or education. This facilitates job promotion and financial mobility in their professional life.

To increase enrollment in technical and technological institutes to 25%, the Government launched the National Training Plan for the Public Sector from 2015 to 2017 where government employees had access to continuous training. In 2013, the percentage of government employees who were trained and who received financial support where they work was 58.67%. In 2014, the percentage was 71.41%, which is an indicator of increase in the trainings that workers accessed (INEC. ENEMDU 2013, 2014:27).

In 2018, the Government launched the 'National Plan for the Strengthening and Revaluation of Technical and Technological Training' which was intended to promote technical formation, stimulation of integral formation, labor insertion, research, innovation, and technology transfer (SENESCYT 2018). The Government believes that it is only through the construction, 'repowering', and development of public institutes that Ecuadorians have access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Policy 5: Improvement of Educational Quality

One of the policies of the government is the 'improvement of educational quality at all levels and modalities..' (PNBV 2013-2017: 61). One goal of the Government which is believed to be intended to realise this policy is the increase in Internet access in schools to 90%.

Through the Ministry of Telecommunications and the Information Society (MINTEL), the Government launched the

National Broadband Plan, which promoted access to information and communication technologies through the provision of equipment and training (MINTEL Ecuador) in public schools in Ecuador. The National Plan for School Connectivity provided an ICT laboratory in almost every school with Internet access and projectors. The investment in ICT infrastructure was aimed at reducing the digital divide and was intended to provide opportunities to teachers and students to access digital information.

Aside from equipping schools with ICT tools, one project of the Government that was part of its 'Ten-Year Educational Plan' 2006-2016 was the creation of 'millennium schools' in 2008. The creation of these schools was primarily aimed to raise the quality of basic education in the country and to respond to the growing number of students who want to access public education. Millennium schools are well equipped with ICT tools, laboratories for the sciences and languages, and teaching materials. These schools are also designed to respond to the needs of the community where it is located. In 2016, there were 65-millennium schools serving 83,425 students (Ponce & Drouet 2017), and after 8 years of continued investment, the Government has put in a total of \$803,511,096.61. Based on the examination results in 2015 and 2016 which was conducted to senior high students who were in their last level of basic education, students who graduated from millennium schools obtained better scores in mathematics and languages compared to the rest of the public schools in the country.

Policy 6: Empowerment of Teachers as Key actors of Buen Vivir

Under the PNBV, the Government provided mechanisms in advancing teachers' mobility and professional promotion which is tantamount to financial remuneration and re-categorisation of staff. The Ministry of Education formulated ten (10) categories which are based from the teacher's functions, titles, professional development, length of service, and results obtained from evaluations with Category J as the entry-level and Category A as the highest level in the ranking system.

For professors and researchers in higher education, the Higher Education Council or Consejo de Educación Superior (CES) introduced changes specified in the Organic Law on Higher Education which standardises the minimum salary of teachers in public universities from the level of a tutor or 'tecnico docente' with a minimum salary of around \$1,500 to full professor with an approximate maximum salary of \$5,300 monthly.

Entry to university work greatly varies. Some universities like the four new universities of the government is more difficult to access even by Ecuadorians due to the qualifications set by the institution. A Ph.D. degree holder would always have an advantage over those who have master's degrees. To be granted tenured positions, universities vary in their requirements. However, to ensure that granting these positions are transparent and just, the Higher Educational Council mandates that universities hold academic competitions that are open to the public especially in public universities. The

Council has specific requirements for each level that a teacher has to fulfill to be considered a candidate for the competition. For assistant professors, a master's degree is not enough as one needs to have at least three publications, and one-year research experience, among other requirements. In some cases due to these requirements set by the Higher Educational Council, some Ecuadorians cannot even participate in competitions which has inadvertently paved the way for foreigners to join and win the positions.

There have been a lot of mechanisms by which the Government has elevated teachers' role in fulfilling the purpose of the PNBV 4 some of which are mitigating strategies as response to shortage of human capital. The 'Go Teacher Program' was a mitigating mechanism of the Government. The Program was launched in 2013 and was funded by the SENESCYT. The Program, self-evidently, had produced teachers who may have improved their English language proficiency and, ultimately, may have obtained certification to teach English. Similarly, the "Teach English Program" provided 14-week intensive capability training in the United States aimed at helping in-service teachers achieve TESOL (Teaching English on Speakers of Other Languages) qualifications. These programs were intended to raise the quality of teaching in the country, particularly in English but they had proven to be costly and not sustainable. Thus, after some years these programs were discontinued. There is no doubt, however, that those who were recipients of the programs have benefit a lot and have improved their professional and life chances.

Conclusion

The PNBV 4 embodies Ecuador's operationalization and implementation of the overarching education goal of SDG 4. Out of ten policies, at least five specific, quantified and target-driven goals were formulated in 2013. Based on existing data culled from several databases and sources, the Government showed success in five goals as evident in the high percentage incurred by its targets. Due to targets that were set in 2013, the key actors in governance responded through programs that are logistically big in scope such as the democratisation of higher education, completion of education in all levels, and the construction of 65-millennium schools which amounted to \$803 511 096. 61. In many ways, the quantification of goals has provided impetus to the government to prioritise policies that affect the greater population such as access to education in all levels. On the other hand, the politics of quantifying achievements and targets may mask the nuances, processes, challenges, and inefficiencies that have led to the attainment of a specific goal. Notable of these is the commendable completion and transition rates in basic education which is almost 100%, notwithstanding that there have been mechanisms such as the supplementary examinations and leveling programs in universities which may have widen and broaden students' access and have promoted transition and completion but at the expense of quality teaching and sound management in educational institutions.

With investments in higher and postgraduate education, the impact to the country is not one-sided. It has promoted the advancement of knowledge of its people by sending approximately 10,000 Ecuadorians to study overseas but it has also drained the economy with funds that could have been placed in aspects that need the most attention such as the lack of teachers in rural schools and the acquisition of innovative teaching materials to teach large class size which is typical of most public school classrooms.

The PNBV is, by leaps and bounds, a guiding and facilitating principle of a development model that has not only marked Ecuador's targets in the realization of SDGs but it has also shaped and defined how every Ecuadorian should view life. As template of government action, it has pitfalls in its mechanism of actualising quantitative-oriented policies but it has also brought in profound change to the country and to its people.

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