

Mexico

Capital: Mexico City

Area: 1,972,550 sq km

Languages: Spanish, various Mayan, Nahuatl and other regional indigenous languages

Ethnic groups: Mestizo (Amerindian-Spanish) 60%, Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian 30%, white 9%, other 1%
Administrative divisions: 31 states and 1 federal district

Government system: Federal republic, the political system is presidential, bicameral and federal

Currency: Mexican peso

MEXICO IN FIGURES	
Human Development Index (2003)	0.814 ²⁶
Demography	
Population (2005)	107 million ²⁷
Population under 15 (as % of total) (2003)	32.1% ²⁸
Economy	
GDP ²⁹	US\$ 676.5 billion ³⁰
GDP growth (annual) (2004)	4.4% ³¹
GNI (per capital) ³² (2004)	US\$ 6,790 ³³
Unemployment (as % of total labour force)(2003)	2.5% ³⁴
Inflation rate (2004)	6.1% ³⁵
Population living below the national poverty line (1990-2002)	10% ³⁵
Health and education	
Life expectancy at birth (2004)	75.1 years ³⁷
Adult literacy rate (15 years and above) (2004)	91% ³⁸
Gross primary enrolment ratio (2003)	109.2% ³⁹
Survival rate to Grade 5 (2001-2002)	93% ⁴⁰
Gross secondary enrolment ratio (2003)	78.8% ⁴¹
Public expenditure on education (as % of GDP) (2002)	5.3% ⁴²
Public expenditure on health (as % of GDP) (2002-02)	2.7% ⁴³

²⁶ UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

²⁷ UNFPA, State of World Population 2005.

²⁸ UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

²⁹ Gross Domestic Product.

³⁰ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³¹ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³² Gross National Income, Atlas method.

³³ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³⁴ UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

³⁵ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³⁶ UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

³⁷ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³⁸ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

³⁹ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

⁴⁰ UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2006.

⁴¹ World Bank, World Development Indicators database, April 2006.

⁴² UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

⁴³ UNDP, Human Development Report 2005.

Background

Mexico is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world. Sharing a common border throughout its northern extent with the United States, the country is bounded on the west and south by the Pacific Ocean, to the east by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, and on the south-east by Guatemala and Belize.

Mexico has a diverse mix of people and landscapes. It is also a nation where affluence, poverty, natural splendour and urban blight rub shoulders.

Economy and development

Mexico has a free market economy. It contains a mixture of modern and outmoded industry and agriculture, increasingly dominated by the private sector. Economic growth over the last decade has made Mexico an upper-middle income country, but there remain huge disparities and social exclusion. Approximately 24 million Mexicans live in extreme poverty. Rural areas are often neglected and huge shanty towns ring the major cities.

In 2004, Mexico achieved an inflation-adjusted growth rate of 4.4 per cent (compared with 1.3 per cent in 2003). It benefited from economic recovery in the United States (the country's principal export market) and high international oil prices. Government officials maintained tight budgetary discipline, however, and sought to use the oil-export earnings to pay off the country's external debt rather than to increase public expenditures. The need to generate sufficient employment to meet the country's pressing human needs remained a particularly serious concern.

Education

Mexico has made great efforts to improve educational opportunities for its people. It is the goal of the federal government to eradicate illiteracy and to ensure at least a primary education for all citizens. Attendance is required for those aged 6 to 14.

Public schools in Mexico are funded by the federal government. Although nearly three-quarters of all primary public schools are located in rural areas, such schools are the least well-developed in the nation and often do not cover the primary cycle. Many internal migrants move to cities because of the availability of better schools for their children and the social opportunities that derive from an education.

Enrolment figures in Mexico are high, but so are drop-out figures. The *Oportunidades* scheme provides a grant to families whose children remain in full-time education: the longer the child stays in school, the larger the payment. According to some international observers, the scheme is successful both in reducing extreme poverty and in improving basic education.

Child labour situation

Labour law in Mexico prohibits employment of children less than 14 years of age, details protective measures for working children between 14 and 16 and limits the participation in hazardous work of children under 18. Those between 14 and 15 may work for a maximum of six hours per day. However, household work is not covered by labour legislation, so children working in domestic work – who are mostly girls – are only protected by the law on compulsory education.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Moe, Levison and Knaul: Youth Education and Work in Mexico, World Development Vol. 29 No. 1, 2001.

Some 43.5 per cent of the population are under the age of 18. Owing to poverty, many children migrate, with or without their families, within rural areas, from rural to urban areas, among urban areas, and to the United States. This results in family instability and a large number of working children.

There are few statistics on child labour in Mexico, and in particular the worst forms of child labour have not been investigated. Galeana suggests that 8 million children (close to half the number of children of official school-going age in Mexico) are working, and this figure has been widely published.⁴⁵ A large-sample time allocation study by Knaul found that half of all 12-year-old boys in the sample worked more than 20 hours per week.⁴⁶ Taracena found widespread use of child labour in agriculture on plantations in Mexico, particularly during harvest season, and especially involving children from an Amerindian background. The work might include long hours (12 seems common, up to 17 is quoted) and can easily lead to skin punctures and infection or exposure to dangerous chemicals.

In 2004, the National Institute of Geography, Information and Statistics (INEGI) presented

the outcome of a national study on the situation of child labour from 1995 to 2002. Some of the most relevant findings included:

- An estimated 3.3 million children aged between 6 and 14 are working in Mexico.
- Two-thirds of working children are aged between 12 and 14 and the remaining one-third is under the age of 12.
- The states with the highest incidence of child labour are Chiapas, Campeche, Puebla and Veracruz. In these states, between 20 to 30 per cent of the population aged between 6 and 14 works.

Other research on child labour in Mexico reveals the following:

- Nearly 95,000 boys, girls and adolescents work in different public spaces and streets around Mexico, with over 14,000 in the streets of the capital.⁴⁷
- 16,000 children and adolescents are victims of sexual commercial exploitation.
- 1.6 million children aged between 6 and 14 do not attend school in Mexico.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Quoted in Taracena, Elvia: Les modèles de scolarisation des enfants travailleurs au Mexique: Le cas des enfants d'origine indienne travaillant comme ouvriers agricoles, paper submitted to the International Conference on Rethinking Childhood, Bondy, France, November 2000 (IRD, Paris).

⁴⁶ Moe, Levison and Knaul, op.cit.

⁴⁷ Censo de niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores, 2001 UNICEF, DIF DF.

⁴⁸ Elena Azaola, Infancia Robada (Stolen Childhood), UNICEF, DIF Nacional, CIESAS 2000.