Executive summary

Freedom of education must be understood as an effective plurality of educational offerings and a system of public funding that allows access to non-governmental schools (NGS) by families, regardless of their income level. It is a fundamental right that must be guaranteed in every country to respect human rights. This study describes trends in educational freedom across countries, analyzes its potential enhancers, and quantifies the relationship between educational freedom and the main representative indicators of educational system performance and income distribution.

Typology of countries according to their degree of freedom of education

The first analysis of this report consisted of grouping the 81 countries of the OIDEL Freedom of Education Index (FEI) into four categories with homogeneous values of this metric and attempting to characterize each of the clusters. Although presenting different features, the degree of educational freedom within the group increases as the value of variables such as per capita income, human development, income distribution, economic freedom, and life satisfaction increases.

There is also a higher performance in characteristics of the educational system as educational freedom increases, both in terms of the indicators representing the overall learning level of students in the PISA tests, as well as the indicators representing equality of opportunities (equity) and social segregation in schools.

Evolution of educational freedom in the first two decades of the 21st century

The degree of educational freedom tended to increase since the beginning of the 21st century in all regions. Almost 70% of the countries recorded an increase in FEI between 2002 and 2016, compared to 28% in which this index decreased. A process of convergence can be seen, as the countries that initially had a

lower level are those that to a greater extent have increased their FEI score in the 14 years between 2002 and 2016. However, some cases (Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Saudi Arabia) show an involution, despite their low starting level.

Freedom of education and its relation to other basic freedoms

A high correlation can be observed when comparing educational freedom with other basic freedoms in all countries and regions. Most freedoms in the analysis, specifically economic freedom, religious freedom, and freedom of expression and information, are guaranteed in most regions. However, no region presents desirable values when it comes to freedom of education. In those regions where educational freedom is most established (Europe and North America), the average levels are far from what would be optimal, considering as such the value of Group 4, made up of Belgium and the Netherlands. Consequently, in terms of freedom of education, there is a notorious potential for improvement in all regions of the world.

Correlations can also be distinguished between basic freedoms and individual indicators of the FEI. For instance, FEI Indicator 1 (legal possibility to establish and manage NGS) and religious freedom presented a strong correlation. Indicator 2 (public funding of NGS) is closely related to the proper functioning of the rule of law and, to a smaller extent, to the level of economic freedom. Indicator 3 (primary school enrollment rate) is also strongly linked with economic freedom and the functioning of the rule of law. Finally, Indicator 4 (share of NGS) shows no association with the other freedom variables.

Freedom of education, performance of the education system, and income distribution

Some FEI indicators show a positive association with the school performance of countries in the PISA-2018 tests, although this relationship is lost when including certain control variables, such as the average economic and cultural level of the country, or the geographic region to which it belongs. Previous studies showed a better performance of the educational system associated with private and charter schools, using techniques that allow establishing causal relationships, which is manifested not only in the PISA competencies (mathematics, reading, science) but also in various aspects, including better foreign language learning.

Similarly, an association between FEI's Indicator 4 and certain variables representative of social segregation in schools is initially apparent but disappears when the per capita income level or geographic region is added to the equation. We thus must reject the hypothesis that freedom of education, as defined by the FEI, leads to greater segregation.

Finally, the FEI, and Indicator 2 in particular, is associated with a more equitable income distribution. This relationship remains, even after including control variables, such as per capita income and the geographic region to which the country belongs. In this sense, the idea that freedom of education increases inequalities must not only be rejected but the inverse association must be established.

Conclusions

Based on this report and the extensive literature on the superior performance of non-state schools in most countries, we can conclude that there are advantages to moving towards greater educational freedom. Freedom of education respects the right of parents to choose the type of education for their children. Moreover, it achieves greater equity and reduces economic inequalities, boosting the performance of the education system and improving its efficiency.

1. The state of freedom of education in the world

1.1. What do we mean by freedom of education?

In this study, the Freedom of Education Index (FEI), provided by OIDEL in its 2002 and 2016 editions, represents a measurement of educational freedom. Four indicators construct this Index. First, **Indicator 1** shows the legal possibility of creating and managing non-governmental schools (NGS). For 2002, it only considered the legality of this right, being a variable with values of 100 (legal recognition) or 0 (otherwise). For the following edition, this indicator had 3 different sub-indicators: legal possibility of creating and managing NGS (80 points out of 100); constitutional recognition of freedom of education (10 out of 100); and legal recognition of homeschooling (10 out of 100).

Indicator 2 reflects the public funding NGSs receive. This indicator is relevant since the lack of government funding for NGSs makes it difficult for lower-income families to access non-state institutions. Comparing both editions, only the scoring system has changed, while the categories remained the same. **Indicator 3** corresponds to the Net Enrollment Rate in primary education. Finally, **Indicator 4** captures the percentage of students enrolled in NGS.

This report analyses the trends and relationships of the overall FEI and each of its four indicators with other variables since each one describes hugely different circumstances. While Indicator 1 is the legal basis for the existence of a non-governmental educational offer, Indicator 2 measures the population's access to these schools, which should be reflected in the values of Indicator 4.

1.2. Typology of countries according to the OIDEL Freedom of Education Index

The hierarchical clustering technique classified the countries into relatively homogeneous groups according to their level of educational freedom. Four clusters were obtained, as shown in Table 1, with the following characteristics:

- **Group 1** consists of the four countries with the least educational freedom, whose average FEI value for 2016 is only 29.3. Two are African (Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia), one Arab (Saudi Arabia), and one from Latin America and the Caribbean (Cuba). It is striking to note the relatively high average level of indicator 4 (NGS quota), of 25.7%, which paradoxically is higher than in group 2 and group 3. Thus, in some of the Group 1 countries, NGSs have a significant presence but are available only to families of a high socioeconomic level.

- **Group 2** is the largest group, with 49 countries, concentrated in Latin America and the Caribbean (28.6% of the total), Asia and the Pacific (24.5%) and Europe (22.4%), with an average OIDEL index of 53.6. The country with the lowest FEI value in this group is Belarus (43.9), and the highest is Romania (46.5).

- **Group 3** is mostly composed of European and North American countries (73.1%), including Spain, with an average FEI value of 69.2. Argentina is the country in the group with the lowest index value (64.5) and Denmark with the highest (79.2). The main difference between this cluster and group 2 is indicator 2 (public funding of NGS), with an average of 74.2, compared to 27.1 in group 2.

- Finally, the only two members of **group 4** are European (Belgium and the Netherlands) and in both cases, the FEI level is similar to the average value of the cluster (89.5). The two distinguishing features of this group are the high funding of NGS (average of 100, compared to 74.2 for group 3), and the share of NGS (60, compared to 11.6 for the previous cluster).