

# A Challenge Costa Rica Has Not Been Able to Defeat

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María Isabel Barquero Zúñiga<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

According to the United Nations, “the main goal behind all Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 -No Poverty- aims to eradicate poverty in its forms by 2030, worldwide”. (United Nations, 2024). However, Costa Rica has made significant progress towards achieving this goal, alongside its social welfare system. To understand the key to understanding the country’s approach to poverty eradication, we must investigate the Costa Rican political system, mainly its Constitution and understand the progress that has been made, alongside its ongoing challenges.

### Costa Rican Constitutional Provisions related to Poverty and Sustainable Development

After the Costa Rican Civil War in 1948, José Figueres Ferrer oversaw the Constitution of Costa Rica and shortly after, drafted the document. It was approved in November of 1949. The Constitution has various key articles which align with the objectives of the SGD 1, in which many include the right to health, education, and social security, adopting a significant role in the path of eliminating poverty. Articles such as

- **Article 50** of the Constitution of Costa Rica is significantly important since it “guarantees the right to a healthy and ecologically stabilized environment” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949, en Constitute, 2011). This has an impact on the eradication of poverty, since living under environmental degradation indirectly affects those living in such conditions. This article also mentions the obligation in which the State must guarantee the well-being of the population, promoting policies that seek to eliminate inequality and poverty that affects citizens.
- **Article 51** It ensures the State's commitment to social well-being, which “guarantees the protection of the family” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949, en Constitute, 2011) y, since this is a fundamental and main unit that makes up society. This provision is essential in the context of poverty, since it emphasizes the social support that the State provides to families, which can help reduce the poverty rate over generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Estudiante de Relaciones Internacionales en ULACIT. Correo electrónico: [mbarqueroz172@ulacit.ed.cr](mailto:mbarqueroz172@ulacit.ed.cr)

- **Article 73** establishes “the right to social security” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949, en Constitute, 2011), which has a wide variety of protections, for example: free medical care, pensions and unemployment benefits. These measures are significantly important in the context of poverty, since they are preventing citizens from falling under the effects of it, due to old age, health problems or economic instability.

The social reforms of previous decades, which had been driven by the need to improve the financial inequalities that overtook most of the population, have been responsible for the expansion of these provisions in the Costa Rican Constitution. Costa Rica's most significant moment in history is the 1948 Civil War, which established the way for the creation of the nation's current Constitution. On this occasion, its goal was to establish a political structure that gave greater attention to social justice and the well-being of all citizens, but especially to the most disadvantaged. Like many other countries, Costa Rica realized that poverty had to be addressed if social stability and economic growth were to be achieved.

An extensive variety of programs and policies have been put into effect in Costa Rica with the goal of lowering poverty. The social security programs of the nation consist of a range of sectors, which includes social security, health, education, and housing. "Programa Avancemos" (Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social [IMAS], 2006) is one of the State's initiatives designed to “provide low-income families monetary assistance so they can continue sending their young children to school” (IMAS, 2024). This program aims to address an absence of employment and educational opportunities, mostly because of an outcome of school dropouts, which is one of the main root causes of poverty. The "Programa CEN-CINAI" (Dirección Nacional de Centros de Educación y Nutrición y de Centros Infantiles de Atención Integral [CEN-CINAI], 2023) is another important initiative which “provides low-income families with childcare services and nutritional support for their children” (CEN-CINAI2023).

Costa Rica stands out thanks to its strong constitutional commitments to the social well-being and sustainable development, compared to other countries in the Latin American region. Many countries in the region have similar constitutional provisions; however, with their implementation, a significant change has been seen in the reduction of poverty in the country. Costa Rica's poverty rate is relatively lower, compared to neighboring countries, thanks to social safety nets and its commitment to access to essential services.

A case study showing the impact of Costa Rica's constitutional provisions is the support system “EBAIS” (Equipos Básicos de Atención Integral de Salud). This is a primary health care system, which offers free or very low-cost health care services to all citizens (Liberación, 2022). The EBAIS system, which is supported by the constitutional guarantee of the right to health, takes an important place in the poverty reduction process, as it ensures that even the poorest citizens can have access to essential health services. Another case study example is the “IMAS”. A governmental institution which is responsible for implementing social welfare programs. IMAS works to “provide direct financial assistance to those living in extreme poverty” (IMAS, 2024), helping to bring out many Costa Ricans out of this condition. The work of this agency is related to the constitutional provision of social security and welfare.

Despite the great progress Costa Rica has made in eliminating poverty, the country continues to face structural challenges that prevent it from fully achieving the SDG 1. These challenges are related to economic, political and social factors, which require continuous attention to solve them in a more effective way. Some of these challenges are

- Persistent **economic inequality** remains a concurrent challenge in the country. Although poverty has been reduced through social policies and programs, the way in which money is distributed remains unequal, and therefore continues to be another problem. The gap between the income coming from people who belong to a much higher economic status and the income of people living under poverty conditions remains the same and is causing a limitation to economic and social development opportunities.
- The impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic** has had a negative impact on the economies of many other nations and Costa Rica was no exception. The health crisis reversed some of the progress already made in poverty eradication. Many families and households, especially those in the informal sector, experienced a significant drop in income, which increased poverty levels. The sanitary emergency also highlighted some deficiencies in social protection systems, which had to be addressed almost immediately.
- The **informal economy** poses some specific challenges in the fight against poverty. It is very common for workers in the informal sector to have a lack of access to social security, health insurance and other employment benefits. This makes them more vulnerable to falling into poverty during unemployment or times of crisis. Informality also makes it difficult to implement more economic equity policies because many informal sector workers are not registered in any official systems.

However, there are not only challenges present during the poverty reduction process. On the other hand, the institutional framework and political stability present significant opportunities for Costa Rica, as the country can continue to strengthen social protection systems and take advantage of constitutional provisions. Some opportunities are:

- Given that Costa Rica is known for its dedication to environmental conservation, the **green economy's potential** may work to its advantage in the battle against poverty. This implies that the transition to a green economy may open possibilities for employment in business sectors like ecotourism, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture (Green Economy Tracker, 2022). These opportunities will not only create additional sources of income but also more stable and over an extended period job opportunity, in particular for rural areas, and they will also help to lower poverty at the same time.
- **Education and training** are key factors in poverty reduction, and fortunately Costa Rica could strengthen education systems to ensure that the entire population has access to basic education. Job training can improve the skills of the personnel and increase competitiveness in the labor market. This opportunity helps the young population and those transitioning from the informal to the

formal sector. Financial and economic education is also essential for long-term results, alongside the new generations.

From my perspective and the knowledge, I gained while conducting this research, certain recommendations can be made to improve alignment with SDG 1. For example:

- Improve educational opportunities, such as bringing “Programa Avancemos” (IMAS, 2006) to more remote communities so that more children can have the opportunity and ease of being able to go to school or college, despite the moment of crisis that families are going through. Thanks to programs like this, the cycle of poverty can be broken, since the full achievement of SDG 1 can be achieved by starting off with the education provided to the child and youth population.
- Provide more focus to policies that are based on reducing the conditions of poverty that families in rural areas and indigenous territories are going through. This is because they are citizens who may work in the informal sector and fall into poverty because they are going through a crisis and most poverty rates come from families who live in the rural area too. The focus should be on poverty reduction in these places, rather than focusing solely on urban areas, in which the poverty rates are not as high.
- Efforts should be made to improve inclusive economic growth, i.e., giving equal opportunities to women, youth and marginalized communities, to ensure that economic growth is benefiting the entire population and therefore eliminating persistent economic inequality. Since this is also a main cause of high poverty rates.
- Costa Rica’s governmental institutions can make use of digital platforms and technology to improve their services, making them more accessible to those in need, such as La Caja del Seguro Social “EDUS” and “CAJA MOVIL” applications. Both facilitate the social service abundantly, both for the governmental institution and for the citizens who need it.

In conclusion, Costa Rica’s path towards eradicating poverty is deeply influenced by the country’s distinguished historical, political and social context. The country’s strongly positioned Constitution is laid out by articles that prioritize more social justice and the well-being of its citizens. Articles such as those that guarantee the right of a healthy environment, the protection of the family and social security, show the commitment that Costa Rica has, to endure a society where poverty is not fully eradicated, but it is being dealt with, using a variety of right-based approaches, as well as social security programs. It is difficult to understate the significance of these constitutional provisions. These can show the efforts that the country has made, regarding poverty eradication, instead focusing on developing a sustainable growth. Article 50, for example, talks about the “preservation of the environment” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949, en Constitute, 2011) and acknowledges that the poor are the ones being indirectly impacted by environmental deterioration and it is associated with environmental sustainability, as well as the end of poverty. Like the foundational support that protects citizens from falling into poverty, mainly during times of economic instability or more personal crisis, which then is also provided by Article 51 “focusing on family safety” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949) and Article 73, “emphasizing on social security” (Constitución Política de Costa Rica, 1949, en Constitute, 2011).

Costa Rica's social assistance programs, including "Programa AVANCEMOS" (IMAS, 2006) and the "CEN-CINAI Program", are real-life instances of the constitutional guarantees. These projects concentrate more on some of the underlying causes of poverty, such as lack of access to education and proper nutrition, especially among low-income children. Ensuring that these children stay on school grounds and receive proper health care, these programs as well, can meet the immediate needs but also contribute to a long-term poverty reduction plan by supplying future generations with the amenities they need to be able to overcome the cycle of poverty.

Furthermore, Costa Rica's success in poverty reduction can be linked to a strong constitutional framework and the successful implementation of these laws. For instance, the EBAIS which can offer accessible health care to every citizen, as well as IMAS' work in offering direct financial support to citizens in extremely poor conditions, are clear examples of how legal obligations can be put into useful advantage of those who are in need. These systems not only benefit Costa Rican's lifestyle; however, but they also help to prevent poverty by crucial amenities that people who live in other countries are most likely to not have them. Despite these accomplishments Costa Rica still faces some major challenges that prevent the country from fully achieving the SDG 1. Economic inequality remains a serious concern among Costa Ricans since this inequality not only limits the financial options for low-income people but jeopardizes social stability.

Additionally, the presence of the informal economy poses specific challenges to poverty eradication attempts. Workers from the informal sector tend to frequently lack access to social security, healthcare and other more critical employment benefits, leaving them highly exposed to falling into poverty at some point. To be able to address informality challenges, creative solutions must be developed, which integrate informal sector workers into the formal economy, while ensuring that they have access to the protections and benefits to which they are entitled. However, the country's strong institutional structure and political stability offer a solid foundation for dealing with these challenges and benefiting from new opportunities. Costa Rica's efforts to environmental sustainability has a significant potential in developing a green economy that could provide new jobs for those in need, and as well as increase the country's income, without putting aside the poverty reduction especially throughout rural areas.

To summarize, Costa Rica's alignment of its political system with the goal of the SDG 1, is not only a constitutional obligation but also a strategic path to a more equal and reasonable society. Costa Rica's progressive Constitution, merged with its commitment to social security, inclusive economic growth and sustainable development, have brought the country at the forefront of Latin American efforts to reduce poverty. Costa Rica can speed up its process towards the eradication of poverty and serve as a model to other nations which are also trying to implement similar objectives by improving its systems of social protection, focusing on current difficulties and taking advantage of new opportunities. The journey towards accomplishing SDG 1 is continuing, but Costa Rica with its powerful constitutional basis and unchanging commitment to social justice, has the potential to lead on this path and promote other nations to eliminate poverty.

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