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More than One Hundred Years of Improvements in Living Standards: the Case of Colombia

Borrador número 1027 Keep in mind
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This paper examines the long-term trends observed in the standard of living of the Colombian population during the past one hundred years, with special attention on health. We construct a historical index of human development for Colombia (HIHDC) for the 19th and 20th centuries by gender. We find that there were no major advances in living standards during the nineteenth century due to the stagnation of Colombia’s GDP per capita as a result of the lack of dynamism in exports. On the contrary, significant advances in all components of the HIHDC were seen in the twentieth century, especially those for women. During the first half of the century, improvements in the quality of life were mainly driven by a higher per capita income, while improvements after the 1950s were driven by greater public investment, for example, in education and health. Next, we analyze health achievements, considering health is one of the components of the HIHDC that has been less studied in the Colombian economic history literature. We construct a new dataset using statistics reported by the Colombian government, which included annual information on the main diseases and causes of mortality during the period of 1916-2014 disaggregated by territorial units. The data show that the percentage of deaths from tuberculosis, pneumonia, and gastrointestinal diseases decreased significantly throughout the century. On the contrary, deaths caused by cancer and heart diseases have increased considerably in recent decades. Results from difference-in-difference models show that the decline in the total mortality rate and in the mortality rate for waterborne diseases was largely related with the expansion in the provision of public goods, namely aqueducts and sewerage services.

Fuente: https://d1b4gd4m8561gs.cloudfront.net/en/borrador-1027