

# Country profile

# Ecuador

World Vision

## GEOGRAPHY

Ecuador lies on the north-west coast of South America, sharing borders with Peru and Colombia. Slightly larger than the state of Victoria, it is named after the equator, which crosses the north of the country. The Andes Mountains separate the coastal plain from the Amazon River basin.

Ecuador has several massive volcanoes, including the still active Cotopaxi, and is subject to occasional earthquakes. The climate is tropical (average 27°C) on the coast, but cooler in the sierra (highlands). Rainfall varies from as low as 36mm per year on the south coast to 5,900 mm per year in the Amazon rainforest.

## PEOPLE

Ecuador's population is estimated to be 13.8 million. More than half the people now live in cities. Both the capital, Quito, and Guayaquil, the main port, have more than three million inhabitants. The tropical forest region of the Amazon basin is sparsely populated, compared with the central provinces inland in the Andes Mountains. Ecuador's population is ethnically diverse. The Mestizos (mixed descendants of Spanish colonists and indigenous Indians) are the largest group and make up 55 percent of the population. Spanish, the official language, is widely spoken, but Quechua and many other languages are used within indigenous communities. Most Ecuadoreans belong to the Catholic Church, but Protestant churches are growing in membership. Some people still follow indigenous beliefs.

## HISTORY

Local tribes were conquered by the Incas in the 15th century. In 1534, the Spanish Conquistadors defeated the Incas in Quito. The Spaniards, like the Incas, shunned the steamy coastal plains, and built their cities in the milder highland valleys. The indigenous people were forced to work on the large estates which the Spaniards carved out of their land.



Onion harvesting in Ecuador.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, University of Texas at Austin.

In 1822, an independence movement defeated the Spanish. Ecuador united with Colombia and Venezuela to form the Republic of Gran Colombia, but withdrew in 1830 to become a separate state.

Since independence, Ecuador has had a succession of presidents, dictators and military rulers; many governments have lasted less than two years. Elected leaders face major economic and social problems.

## ECONOMY

Ecuador's economy traditionally depended on agriculture, which still employs at least one-third of the workforce. Many peasant farmers grow corn, potatoes or barley to feed their families on plots smaller than one hectare, but cannot afford fertilisers, improved seeds and machinery. Major cash crops are bananas (Ecuador is the world's leading exporter), coffee and cocoa. In recent years, large transnational companies have invested in the production of luxury crops like spices and tropical fruits, and non-traditional items such as flowers, for export. Some rainforest has been cleared for palm oil plantations. Ocean fishing and shrimp farming are also important activities. Since the 1970s, Ecuador has relied financially on selling petroleum.

Governments in the 1990s took drastic steps to control inflation and reduce the national debt. By privatising key industries and slashing government spending, they have also contributed to the widespread loss of jobs

and to sharp price rises for essential goods. Thousands of Ecuadoreans are working in the 'informal economy', which is not subject to taxes, but offers little security. It is estimated that more than a third of the people are living in poverty.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

Many rural families live in small homes made of reeds and mud, or sun-dried bricks, with straw roofs and earth floors. Staple foods are maize and potatoes in the sierra, with wheat and rice preferred along the coast. Many households cannot afford to eat fruit and other vegetables, so they are vulnerable to malnutrition and illness.

Unemployment and under-employment are serious problems, both in the country and in the city. Many people move to the cities, only to end up doing poorly paid work as labourers, domestic servants or hawkers and living in squatter settlements without running water and sanitation. Some become street beggars. Working mothers often have to leave young children unattended, or daughters miss school to take over the housework and childcare.

Poor nutrition, unsafe water and poverty lead to high rates of preventable diseases such as diarrhoea and respiratory problems, resulting in many deaths among young children. The poorest families often have to live on land vulnerable to floods or mudslides.

## Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	ECUADOR	AUSTRALIA
Population	13.8 million	20.3 million
Urban population	67%	89.1 %
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$7,931	\$38,692
Population with an improved water source	94%	100%
Adult literacy rate	94%	99%
Population living on less than US\$ \$1.25 (PPP) a day	4.7%	0
Net primary enrolment ratio	100%	100%
Under-5 mortality rate (deaths per 1000 live births)	25	6
Life expectancy at birth	75.4 years	81.9 years

Source: United Nations Development Programme  
Human Development Report 2010



Ruben writes a letter to his sponsor.

Vaccination campaigns have been an important step to protect children against disease. Increased use of iodised salt has reduced the incidence of iodine deficiency. However, government budget spending on public health services has declined. Clinics and hospitals regularly lack supplies.

## EDUCATION

Education is compulsory for six years beginning at age six, but almost half the children do not commence secondary school. Although child labour is illegal, many children (especially in rural areas) have to work to help support their families. Officially, 91 percent of adults can read and write, but literacy rates are much lower among indigenous groups and in the slums. Providing opportunities for disadvantaged people to improve their living conditions will require commitment from both community groups and the government.

## WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN ECUADOR

- is increasing access to quality education;
- assists the development of children through improved access to quality health care services;
- trains youth, families and communities to increase their incomes;
- assists children, families and communities to advocate for their rights.

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