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## The abolition of the army in Costa Rica: effects on education and culture

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### Abstract

As time goes by, Costa Rica becomes more of a concept than a country, whose nuances have attracted disproportionate global attention. Costa Rica stands out for the abolition of the army, democracy, nature, and its people. What will be the relationship between these variables? That proclivity for peace probably made it easier for Costa Rica to nurture education as an ecosystem for all, a democratization of power with participatory communities and a host society. This essay offers some thoughts on the subject. Explores the dynamics of an ecosystem nurtured by synergy and symbiosis between education, culture, nature, and Costa Rican society after the abolition of the army.

**Key words:** biodiversity, economic behavior, ecosystem, peace, social innovation, socio dynamics.

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## La abolición del ejército en Costa Rica: efectos en la educación y la cultura

### Resumen

Con el paso del tiempo, Costa Rica se convierte más en un concepto que en un país. Un concepto cuyos matices han atraído una atención mundial desproporcionada. Costa Rica destaca por la abolición del ejército, la democracia, la naturaleza y su gente. ¿Cuál será la relación entre estas variables? Probablemente, esa proclividad a la paz facilitó que Costa Rica cultivara la educación como un ecosistema para todas las personas, una democratización del poder con comunidades participativas y una sociedad anfitriona. Este ensayo ofrece algunas reflexiones al respecto. Explora la dinámica de un ecosistema alimentado por la sinergia y la simbiosis entre la educación, la cultura, la naturaleza y la sociedad costarricense tras la abolición del ejército.

**Palabras clave:** biodiversidad, comportamiento económico, dinámica social, ecosistema, innovación social, paz.

If you walk along a beach in Costa Rica  
and you see rows of pelicans flying in  
perfect formation, consider it the  
Costa Rican air force, on maneuvers.

— David Barash

## Can you imagine a country without an army since 1948?

In a turbulent context, generated from the socioeconomic impacts of the First and Second World War, back in 1948, in Costa Rica, there was a political dispute between communist political movements and those who called themselves social democrats. The latter emphasized the policy of social benefit centered on the people<sup>1</sup>. Thus, a leader emerged: José Figueres Ferrer, who assumed, through the Junta de Gobierno, the command of the Second Republic, but this was vulnerable, since it did not have the North American backing in terms of armament provision, which compromised the situation for Costa Rica<sup>2</sup>.

Then, the Constituent Assembly discussed the aspect «of the inclusion of an article referring to the Costa Rican army. The decision without controversy was clear and is recorded in Article 12 of the 1949 Constitution, in force until today»<sup>3</sup>.

Based on the facts described above, the decision to abolish the army has had a significant impact on Costa Rican society. Therefore, in this article, its effects on both education and culture will be discussed in order to illustrate the socioeconomic and environmental benefits for Costa Rica.

Such a proposal leads to the story of two beautiful friends: Tania and Charlie. They are a young Costa Rican couple, who enjoy a nice flow in their peaceful life. Now, think for a moment about your friends who live in peace...! It is likely that, in their home, education is breathed, power is democratized, everyone participates, and they are good hosts.

In this sense, it can be indicated that humans are peaceful beings, as explained in the following research:

ample evidence from archaeology, anthropology, history and political science tells us that for the vast majority of our time on this planet (about 2 million years for the genus Homo), we lived in peace (Fry, 2006, 20015). In fact, war and intergroup violence are relatively new inventions: they first

<sup>1</sup> David Díaz, ed., *Imperios, agente y revoluciones: la larga guerra fría en Costa Rica (1928-1986)*, San José: CIHAC. 2022, [https://www.kerwa.ucr.ac.cr/bitstream/handle/10669/89578/Capitulo4\\_DiazArias.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://www.kerwa.ucr.ac.cr/bitstream/handle/10669/89578/Capitulo4_DiazArias.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>2</sup> Mercedes Muñoz, «Costa Rica: la abolición del ejército y la construcción de la paz regional», *Historia y Comunicación Social* 19 (2014): 375-388, <https://www.kerwa.ucr.ac.cr/bitstream/handle/10669/80692/CostaRicaLaAbolicionDelEjercito.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

emerged about 10,000 years ago (Hass, 1999). On the contrary, we have shown a strong inclination for peace.<sup>4</sup>

That proclivity for peace probably made it easier for Costa Rica to nurture education as an ecosystem for all, a democratization of power with participatory communities and a host society. As time goes by, Costa Rica becomes more of a concept than a country, whose nuances have attracted disproportionate global attention.

Now, how can this effect of the abolition of the military be described in the current environment of Costa Rican education, why can it be called an ecosystem for all? Perhaps you can already imagine the answers to these questions, but here are some thoughts on the subject.

## Education

Formal education in Costa Rica is funded by the state from preschool through high school and even university with full scholarships for those in need. Education is a value and a priority for Costa Ricans. In fact, this is a great advantage and, in a way, can be linked to the historical milestone raised here: the abolition of the army, since, in the words of Muñoz<sup>5</sup>, education was a right that was chosen over the military.

## Education as an ecosystem

Despite that formal idea, education is more than what the educational system offers. Human beings are constantly learning and unlearning, within an educational ecosystem or environment that includes natural, social, political, and economic environments, in which people relate to each other.

A few years ago, in Switzerland, a Swiss colleague asked me: after the abolition of the army, was there any attempt to recreate it? I found the question fascinating. The answer was a soft no<sup>6</sup>.

Nowadays, I consider that the abolition of the army is, at the same time, the cause of a peaceful essence and the effect of that peaceful essence: perhaps, the courageous and visionary decision strengthened a courageous and visionary society.

## Historical difficulties for a successful educational and peace ecosystem

The abolition of the army did not guarantee a democratic regime in the following years. In fact, experts indicate that the transition to democracy in Costa Rica took

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Coleman, Joshua Fisher, Douglas Fry, Larry Liebovitch, Allegra Chen-Carrel & Genevière Souillac, «How to Live in Peace? Mapping the Science of Sustaining Peace: A Progress Report». *American Psychologist*, November 12 (2020), Advance online publication, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000745>

<sup>5</sup> Muñoz, «Costa Rica: la abolición del ejército...», 221.

<sup>6</sup> Lizette Brenes, *Exceptional Costa Rica*. San Pedro: FUNDEPREDI, 2022, <https://www.alabc.com.au/resources/Exceptional%20Costa%20Rica.pdf>

ninety years, almost a century, from the late nineteenth century to 1975<sup>7</sup>, even a quarter of a century after the abolition of the army in December 1948.

The new constitution established the importance of education and its minimum funding as a percentage of government spending, as well as a platform of autonomous institutions that are part of the aforementioned educational ecosystem, such as the university and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

In the second part of the twentieth century, the Costa Rican state strengthened its institutions and its capacity to decide and act. To achieve balance, it became essential to strengthen society so that the dance of peace and freedom could continue. Acemoglu & Robinson<sup>8</sup> consider that breathing peace and freedom requires a constant dance between a strong state and an equally strong society, and Costa Ricans carry their rights on their skin.

The peace and freedom ecosystem and the educational ecosystem probably have similar components and complementary dynamics. For example, cross-fertilization, according to Diamond and McDonald<sup>9</sup>, from the multi-track diplomacy system to peacebuilding. This system includes conflict resolution professionals, businesses, private citizens, media, religious and interfaith activities, activism, research, training, and education.

In other words, a successful peace ecosystem seems to require an effective educational ecosystem, and vice versa. Therefore, Costa Rica has been able to maintain its stability surrounded by international problems in the region:

Between 1951 and 2010, there were 97 coup attempts, 21 episodes of global political violence, 134 episodes of civilian political violence, and 35 episodes of ethnic violence in the region. Costa Rica was practically on the margins of these events, as well as of dictatorships and autocratic governments.<sup>10</sup>

In this same vein, a new question arises: did the abolition of the army also bring about changes in Costa Rican culture, what is the relationship between this ecosystem of peace experienced by Costa Rican citizens and their modern culture? The following is a viewpoint on these questions.

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<sup>7</sup> PEN (Programa Estado de la Nación), «La larga transición hacia la democracia en Costa Rica», en *Auditoría ciudadana sobre la calidad de la democracia*, 2017, 101-130. PEN, [https://repositorio.conare.ac.cr/bitstream/handle/20.500.12337/880/930.%20Auditor%20C3%ADa%20C iudadana%20de%20la%20Democracia\\_Cap%20C3%ADtulo%202\\_La%20larga%20transici%20C3%B3n %20hacia%20la%20democracia%20en%20Costa%20Rica.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y](https://repositorio.conare.ac.cr/bitstream/handle/20.500.12337/880/930.%20Auditor%20C3%ADa%20C iudadana%20de%20la%20Democracia_Cap%20C3%ADtulo%202_La%20larga%20transici%20C3%B3n %20hacia%20la%20democracia%20en%20Costa%20Rica.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y)

<sup>8</sup> Daron Acemoglu & James Robinson, *The narrow corridor states, societies, and the fate of liberty*. Read by Stephen Graybill. Penguin Audio, 2019, Audible audio ed., 23 hr., 44 min.

<sup>9</sup> IMTD (The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy), *The Second Decade 2001-2011*, Arlington, VA: IMTD, <https://imtdsite.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/institute-for-multi-track-diplomacy-2001-2011-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Abarca & Suráyabi Ramírez, «A farewell to arms: The Long run developmental effects of Costa Rica's army abolishment» January, Preliminary version Observatory of Development, University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica, 2017, <https://www.ippapublicpolicy.org/file/paper/594eced12e818.pdf>

## Culture

The second effect begins with the fact that peace is also a good investment. After the abolition of the army, it went from being the fourth Latin American country with the lowest growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita «standard measure of value added or created through the production of goods and services in a country during a given period»<sup>11</sup> before the abolition of the army, to being the second with the second highest growth, only behind Brazil<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, a cultural change was generated in relation to the economy and leading to a more proactive, productive, and commercial way of thinking.

## Powerful, democratized, and participatory communities

Costa Rica is a country of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which represent 98.2 % of businesses, according to the SMS Observatory<sup>13</sup>. In parallel, social entrepreneurship is the preferred strategy to achieve common or community goals. Costa Ricans choose to associate and participate as a cultural aspect. For example, water management counts with the support of a network of Associations for the Administration of Community Water and Sewage Systems (ASADAS).

Costa Ricans like to have a say in the different spheres of their lives; therefore, they democratize as much as possible. Likewise, people feel comfortable associating to achieve their personal and collective goals. They even invented one: Solidarity associations, «are social organizations inspired by a human attitude, through which man identifies himself with the needs and aspirations of his fellow men, committing the contribution of his resources and efforts to satisfy those needs», article 1, Law 6970 of Solidarity Associations.

This participatory movement translates into more than 30 000 leadership positions to be assumed by people in the communities. For every 150 people, one position on the board of directors must be filled, without considering the other boards that do not correspond to the aforementioned bodies, such as education, environment, health, emergency, etc. committees.

This growth was built on a broad democratization of power and participatory communities. These communities have become a host society. The following paragraphs explain this statement.

## Warm and host society

Costa Rica has not been left out, in terms of receiving people in its territory. It is a society of social openness, and, for this, it has been recognized. Two people arrive in Costa Rica for every one that leaves. Its role as a host society has grown steadily

<sup>11</sup> OCDE (Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos), El producto interno bruto, 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/espanol/estadisticas/pib-espanol.htm#>

<sup>12</sup> Alejandro Abarca & Suráyabi Ramírez, «A farewell to arms, 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibíd.*, 9.

and has diversified over the last thirty years. For example, according to Mideplan<sup>14</sup>, total immigration, in 2016, amounted to 440 109 people, corresponding to 9 % of the total population.

In the decade between 2006 and 2016, the process to obtain residency grew staggeringly: from Colombia (from 11 316, in 2006, to 26 789, in 2016); from the United States (from 8902 to 24 201); from the Northern Triangle of Central America (went from 10 527, in 2006, to 20 283); from Europe (from 8958 to 19 683); from Asia (from 8902 to 15 852); and Venezuela (from 1350 to 7692).<sup>15</sup>

From a complementary perspective, this host society includes the environment. The intense relationship between society and nature is considered an important component in building a culture of peace. It is necessary to consider this approach, as well as noted in the following quote:

The Earth Charter can be seen as a popular attempt to establish the kind of culture of peace called for by the UN. Its symbolic focus on the interdependence of peoples and their common earth provides a kind of spiritual coherence that is somewhat lacking in the UN declaration. The data, together with a consideration of the literature on peaceful cultures suggests that, in a global culture of peace, it may require the development of an additional foundation that is not mentioned in the UN program of action.<sup>16</sup>

People in Costa Rica are good people because they are a valuable society, not a valuable society because they are nice. Costa Rica is more than a country; it is a concept. As Howard<sup>17</sup> explains, «Costa Rica invested modest sums in a 'triad of peace-education, health care, environmental protection-generating immense social 'strength' through peace».

Costa Rica has demonstrated that it is a valuable society and, therefore, nice people, not the other way around. As Chan<sup>18</sup> explains, «it is possible to become strong without being loved, it is possible to provide human welfare without being rich, and it is possible to be a standard bearer for human rights and international law without the resources of a huge diplomatic corps».

I come from a country where it is easy to find a school in every corner, however remote, our children and adults have not seen a soldier or a military parade and our seniors have a vague memory of war after 75 years of peace. Therefore, that culture of peace has been forged when the Costa Rican people and its visitors identify with

<sup>14</sup> MIDEPLAN (Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica), Costa Rica. 2017. «Plan Nacional de Integración 2018-2022», <https://www.migracion.go.cr>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Joseph De Rivera, «Assessing the Basis for a Culture of Peace in Contemporary Societies», *Journal of Peace Research*, September 41 (2004), n. ° 5: 531-548, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304045974>

<sup>17</sup> Sean Howard, «Ukraine and Costa Rica: A tale of two futures?» *Rethinking Security for a just and peaceful world*, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2022/03/07/ukraine-and-costa-rica/>

<sup>18</sup> Maritza Chan, «8. Establishing a Cooperative Security System that Works: The Costa Rica Experience», *Reintroducing Disarmament and Cooperative Security to the Toolbox of 21st Century Leaders*. Report. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep24520.12.pdf>

the harmony of the country, its land, its culture, and sensitivity towards others to meet their needs.

## Conclusions

According to the arguments presented, we found determining effects on Costa Rican education and culture after the historical milestone of the abolition of the army in the country.

As an effect of this milestone, education is now conceived as a right, enjoyed by the country's inhabitants; it is financed by the State; it offers scholarships for populations in need or who stand out for their efforts; it has a formal modality; it is considered an ecosystem because it includes natural environments, the right to freedom of expression is a fundamental right of the Costa Rican people; it is a right of autonomy for educational institutions, and it is linked to the peaceful processes of the country. These advantages enjoyed by the Costa Rican people are due to the resources and continuous struggles to protect this right have contributed to its maintenance.

The second effect of this historic milestone is in the culture, as the peace ecosystem became an excellent investment. For example, its GDP increased, making Costa Rica a country that adds more value to the production of goods and services. Likewise, the economy improved, thanks to greater productivity. Among the most valuable cultural aspects of this culture of peace are the creation of MSMEs and community welfare associations. In this way, Costa Ricans have become involved in their communities through political leadership and decision-making.

Finally, this has also created a warm and remarkable host society with great social openness that welcomes its visitors and immigrants within its peaceful ecosystem, which has transformed it into a concept that brings together a pleasant environment thanks to its commitment to peace integrated by education, medical care, and environmental protection. Many of its visitors are even attracted by the magic of biodiversity.

Life in Costa Rica is not perfect, and violence exists and shows important challenges, however, the dynamic and tightly knit Costa Rican society will know how to take steps towards a better future.

So, you, reader, how do you think that this unique Costa Rican approach to peace, in the current global context of war and hatred, could spread to other spheres of the planet?

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