

Capacity Building in Social Policy Research and Training (*)

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The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing debate about the role and contribution of social policies in building social and human development capacities in the Latin American region. The paper argues that if the intention is to succeed in closing persistent poverty gaps in the region, the conceptualisation of both social policies and the capacity building approaches to strengthen social management capacities need a radical shift.

Addressing the challenges of poverty, structural inequality, weak governance structures, and systemic inequity require breaking away from conventional remedial social policy thinking. A new perspective of social policy in the region needs to be built with a focus on developing capacity building strategies, appropriate accountability systems, and comprehensive policy evaluation models that address the causes of poverty and exclusion and look beyond the short-term impact of remedial policies and aid schemes. Seeking a new social policy perspective implies to start anew revisiting the ways in which class, power, gender and ethnicity factors play a role in the global economy; examining the new and emerging gaps between rich and developing countries, and developing the analytical capacity to support this change. With this in mind, the paper suggests areas in need of further attention and research.

Introduction

There are encouraging signs in the international development community about the need to revisit existing approaches to reducing poverty and the central role that social policies and social policy analysis play in such context. Changing the developmental role of social policies poses new demands on human and financial resources that are already stretched thin. However, the main challenge is neither exclusively one of availability of resources nor purely an economic phenomenon. The underlying poverty conditions in the region deeply impact on the capacity of individuals and institutions to take leading roles in their own change and build sustainable social management capacities adjusted to the changing demands of globalisation.

At the roots of this challenge, a critical social policy issue today is achieving an ethical distribution of the available wealth and the technical and institutional capacities to promote and monitor equitable access to the benefits of growth. In this light, building a new development capacity is the foundation of a new vision of social policies for this new century.

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Efforts to date to address social policies in the region have been limited by segmented sectoral approaches, short-term objectives, remedial strategies, and conceptual dichotomies that restrain rather than move forward social policy thinking. The refurbished discourse about social policies emphasizes the better use of resources as a key to poverty eradication and alleviation efforts. This, however, is only part of the equation. The paradox of the last two decades is that globalisation and the changes in the world economic order have expanded opportunities in access to resources while reinforcing rather than reducing inequalities. Not addressing this issue limits the impact and weakens the sustainability of the solutions to date.

There are thus critical questions about the future of current social policies and social policy approaches in the region that must be considered. How and with what effects decisions about the re-distribution of social resources are made and implemented? How to improve social policy making to achieve a long-lasting impact on the well being of the poor? What new forms of accountability and policy assessment must be set in place to enhance the operationalization and viability social policies and of human development?

Evidence from developing regions including Latin America, shows that rethinking social policy in a global development context is often easier said than done (Stallings and Peres, 2000; Carlson, 1999; Vásquez, 1999; Urzúa, 1997; Savedoff et al., 1997; Konate, 1997; Osteria, 1996). Social policy reforms in place throughout suggest that global as well as local structural social and political barriers contribute to maintain rather than to change the remedial status of social policies, and that pre-set development approaches to changing public policies reinforce this trend.

Pro-poor development strategies considering the poor as a homogenous core not only categorizes a diverse sector of the population as falling below a statistical line defined only in economic terms, but also ignore the complexities and differences present in this sector. They place individuals at the recipient end of macroeconomic and political strategies expected to translate into modernization, progress, scientific advancement or greater access to services and wealth.

These approaches have serious long-term implication for the viability of social policies in terms of delivery means and infrastructure, identification of target groups, monitoring and delivery of programs, and analysis and evaluation of performance and impact. They often see social policies only as an additional component in a wider system of supply and demand regulated by the capacity of specific groups to operate in a market for public goods. Primary health care, basic education, child care programs, the provision of shelter, and social security and welfare become in practice de-universalised in their supply and competitive in their demand, or subsidiary to the pressing political goals of the day.

Achieving a greater and more sustainable impact of social policies in the social well being of people requires shifting the focus to one of capacity building. This implies questioning the values and core assumptions of current practices in the process of development and management of social policies, training the appropriate human resources, and bridging research, knowledge, and decision-making

Current social policy thinking is instrumental in creating comfort zones that allow to promote and support development schemes and definitions of progress that at the roots of the problem maintain the fundamental order of the development universe known to date. The perception of development oriented towards reducing poverty by emphasizing the central role of social policies needs to strengthen the fundamental and mutual complementarities between of economic growth and human development. The later is not a direct outcome of the former in societies where social inequality is deeply rooted in an ethos of cultural, gender and class inequalities. Ignoring such differences leads to continuing focusing on remedial policies and on expectation that their effects will trickle down and result in better living conditions, which in turn may end in the development of human and institutional capacities to carry out or influence social change.

A Shift in Understanding the Problem

Making social policy the thrust in development thinking implies to take steps to empirically and critically assess on going practices of social policy change. This is likely to shed light on what the systemic forces are; where the centres of power lie in practice; what the values are guiding these forces; with what degree of success have they met their policy objectives, and what are the capacity-building gaps that still exist. (Morales-Gomez, 1999)

Attempts in the 1990's by governments, donors, and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to insulate the poor from disproportionately bearing the costs of economic shocks had limited impacts on significantly altering inequality. Changing social policies to complement changes rather to guide changes in macroeconomic conditions has fallen short of the desired goals in the region. Missing from these efforts is a healthy scepticism about a natural correspondence between investments, growth and social well being. The rush to apply prescriptions for reform based on isolated cases of success has led to a failure in preventing and managing the negative impact of global forces acting upon weaker local realities. Cyclical political and economic crises, such as those in Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela show a lack of appropriate and sustainable means to making institutions more responsible for the public good; decision-making processes more democratic, and social policy systems more efficient and accountable.

More appropriate perspectives of social policy to the development of the region must include but go beyond issues of efficiency and financing of public policy processes. Such perspectives need to position a new vision of social and human development at the intersection of two axes. The first is an understanding of the systemic factors of class and power explaining why development and growth continue to leave social inequality untouched. The second is the extent to which the ways in which the goals of social policy change have been re-defined to date have, in practice, added value to create accountable human and institutional capacities to learn, organize themselves, and articulate social demands.

Making this shift in approach viable, implies addressing four fundamental questions that underscore policy decisions and actions:

- § How relevant to the reality of the poor are the value assumptions guiding the region's development and the perceived role social policy plays in it?
- § What kind of institutional and human resources capacities need to be built and what are the most suitable mechanisms to reach such goal for sustainable change to occur?
- § What kind of appropriate training, research and methodological tools are available or need to be built to develop systemic capacities to implement and assess policy practices?
- § How to strengthen national capacities to identify lessons learned and create feedback mechanisms to create a culture of accountability?

These types of questions could provide a framework to move the conceptualisation of social policy in the region from a prescriptive and remedial perspective to a more responsive orientation. The former limits the design and implementation of social policies and programs to a supply approach subordinated to priorities driven by cost-efficiency considerations. The latter is a demand driven approach defined by local priorities to building human and institutional capacities for growth.

From Managing Crises to Building Sustainable Capacities

Policy research suggests that poverty; social, political and economic inequality, and exclusion are threats to human security and obstacles to achieving sustainable social policies and human development. "Social development depended not only on economic growth and getting the so called fundamentals of macroeconomic policy right, but also on social policy and better distribution of the benefit of growth." (UNRISD, 2000: i) The continuing emphases of social policies on short-term concerns focussed on fragile economic growth and on the role of the market as regulator of public goods reinforce rather than resolve the conditions that reproduce inequity in access, quality and use of social services.¹

The re-conceptualisation of the role of social policies requires a shift from short-term problem solving and crisis management approach to a longer-term, problem-prevention and sustainable development agenda. Attempts to achieve these goals in the 1990's, however, had mixed results (Gross Stein, 2001; Morales-Gómez et al., 2000). Reforming social policy systems to meet economic adjustment objectives, injecting a "human face" and a poverty focus to economic

¹ A(We) keep on hoping that we will rediscover prosperity through this mechanism called market forces.(...) We are deregulating everything in sight and even restructuring government and education along industry lines. We have fallen back in love with an old ideology that has never paid off in the past. (...) Now, there are those who will mistake what I say for an anti-market tirade. They will be wrong. I love the market. (...) But I'm not fool enough to mistake these necessary and important narrow mechanisms for a broad, solid, conscious force that can lead society.@ (Saul, 1995: 122-23).

development, or experimenting with “sector-wide@ approaches to poverty eradication are insufficient in themselves. (Jones, 2000; Foster, 2000) Expectations that decentralization, privatisation and targeting would make social services more readily available to the poor, for example, or their delivery more equitable and effective have not been fully met. Shortcomings in the distribution, maintenance, quality, and coverage of services continue to hamper the gains shown by social indicators at the macro level. The lack of capacity to manage these processes remains a central contributing factor limiting success.

The lack of comprehensive approaches to address social policy changes to date has an unequal impact on the roles and responsibilities of the state and of governments across sectors. The limited success in strengthening the social management capacity of local and municipal governments, for example, is an issue largely ignored when it comes to reforming social policies on the ground. Involving the private sector and civil society institutions in the provision of social goods remains a challenge of competing priorities and demands. In part, this responds to structural inequalities that remain untouched. In part also it is due to a lack of a monitoring and performance assessment culture that could lead to more effective forms of collective social accountability and to new forms of partnership.

Social policies as presently applied help to soften the negative impact of market liberalization and globalisation but ultimately it continues to favour mainstream efficiency and market considerations in social investments, and ultimately the survival of the fittest. In practice, reformed social policy brings greater benefits to those sectors of society better equipped to participate in policy decisions, to obtain the greatest benefits from global and regional markets, to be more effective in lobbying politicians and in influencing political agendas, and those who have better established institutional representation in society.

Lessons from countries with ongoing reforms show the need to address some specific concerns. On the one hand, the implementation of social policies is increasingly guided by efficiency considerations (UNRISD, 2000; Lustig and Arias, 2000). On the other hand, the articulation of a comprehensive vision of the type of society social policies aim to build is dominated by extra national development priorities and reactions to crises (Morales-Gómez, 1999; Hunsley, 1992). These trends instil values and practices that weaken states= abilities to reconcile and harmonize social, economic and political interests, provide legal frameworks, and respond to social demands through legitimate and representative institutions. They also set standards of quality and frameworks for democratic participation that are not always rooted in local practices and traditions. Above all, they fail to ensure an equitable distribution of social goods over the longer-term as they are guided by short-term political priorities. Public responsibility and universal access to social services such as primary health, basic education, social security, housing and welfare remain elusive goals or are undermined by international and local interest groups (Fleury et al., 2000; Martinic et al., 1999).

Comparative research suggests that if distributional equity is a goal, strong states must ensure sustained economic growth, human resources development at all levels, productive efficiency, transparent markets, and international competitiveness. However, research has yet to answer

questions such as how to guide economic growth by social and human development consideration; how to make human resources development equitable and sustainable; how to raise productivity without a greater cost to the poor; how to design the legal frameworks and mechanisms needed to socially regulate markets; and how to define the scope and ends of international competitiveness.

Building Social Policy Capacities: An Agenda

A new social policy perspective need to embrace ethical values that places equity as the defining thread cuts through development objectives, their economic rationale, and the means and capacities for achievement them. Such a perspective must provide the capacity building framework within which prospective strategies, representative institutions, and proposals to make social policy the engine of social development can be drawn. Defining such a framework is a prerequisite to knowing, for example, what kind of quality education, primary health care and social security to deliver, to whom, and how to do so effectively, democratically and equitably.

Most of all, such a perspective must guide efforts to build future human and institutional capacities to make this possible. Accordingly, a research agenda that contributes to rethinking social policy with capacity building goals in mind must assign priority to four interrelated sets of issues:

1. The political economy of social policy addressing the intersection of political, cultural and economic factors affecting social policy choices.
2. The social management practices from where to draw lessons to assist in the design of avenues to develop individual and institutional capacities to identify and advance social demands, promote public debate, and manage, monitor, and evaluate social policy responses.
3. The social policy innovations that can help to target and maximize social service provision.
4. The effectiveness of social policy regimes that can assist in the identification of sustainable and accountable means to build the capacity of public, private, and civic institutions addressing social needs.

§ The Political Economy of Social Policy.

Social policies are built on values-based assumptions about development, growth, needs, and human well-being. These assumptions, internal and external to the policies they are intended to influence, respond to normative factors defining policy decisions both nationally and internationally. They are often “invisible” normative frameworks within which social policies are selected, designed, financed, implemented and evaluated by different actors in the policy process.

A new perspective of social policy must examine these assumptions, as they are often the foundation

upon which policy agendas, strategies, programs and projects are built. Empirical research and training could identify and analyze aspects such as:

- § The normative factors of class interests, power relations, and social status influencing specific social policy choices.
- § The assumptions about acceptable standards of well being underlying the models and methodological approaches to design, monitor, and assess social policy implementation.
- § The relations of correspondence and contradiction between the normative assumptions of various intervening actors in social policy that prevent or facilitate policy impact.
- § The political and cultural factors underpinning traditional social protection systems and the extent to which these are integrated into national and international social policy agendas.
- § The barriers and opportunities to carry out value-based capacity building efforts in the context of growth driven global development models.

§ **Improving Social Management Practices.**

There is sufficient evidence to argue that current social policies approaches will not achieve their intended objectives if they are conceptualized and implemented without a strong civil society base. Building such a base requires identifying and developing human resources and institutions that can both articulate and put forward demands, and translate them into policy. This goes hand in hand with building national and local social management systems capable of leading to greater institutional efficiency, transparency and accountability in developing and delivering social services.

However, the challenge is not only how to change institutions and management practices to improve efficiency but how to do so prospectively, acknowledging the change tendencies in political context, power relations and incentive regimes in which individuals and institutions operate. A new social policy perspective must examine the capacities of state, national and local government, and civil society organizations to introduce participatory forms of social management in social policy systems. Research and training could address issues such as:

- § The feasibility of integrated approaches to reforming public administrations and building capacities of non-government actors to play effective roles in advocacy, delivery and monitoring of services.
- § The effectiveness and relevance of new institutional arrangements for service provision between state, local governments, kinship and community-based networks, traditional structures, and/or the private sector.
- § The institutional mechanisms and approaches most suitable to reconcile and manage conflicts while improving efficiency, transparency and accountability in the allocation of resources and delivery of basic services.
- § The political, administrative and organizational incentive systems required to improving integration, coverage and quality in service provision.

§ The means to monitor and account for the allocation and management of resources.

§ **Social Policy Innovations and Tools.**

A capacity building challenge in the current social policy climate is to design policies and programs that lead to the provision of services ensuring equitable access and quality according to minimum standards based on users= needs and demands. It has become clear that macro policy reforms not always contribute to this end.

A new social policy perspective must seek capacity building practices and innovations that build on the assets of users to articulate and negotiate their demands; improve access to social services; and monitor and evaluate results. Research and training could examine issues such as:

- § The type of new government-civil society-private sector partnerships most suitable to produce, finance and deliver services; to contribute to improving quality, access and coverage; and to meet users= needs.
- § The non-government innovations and lessons of success to extend social provision and complement government actions.
- § The innovative means available to strengthen the capacity of governments and civil society to monitor access, quality and equity of services.
- § The proven innovations in political participation, regulatory governance structures, decision-making processes, financing arrangements, and management practices.

§ **Re-building Social Policy Regimes.**

Building the capacity of individuals and institutions with a vision of the future requires more than technical efficiency and managerial improvements in social management. Countries must build representative systems and effective processes for governments and citizens to make choices and resolve differences in the broader realm of public policy. Social policy practices to date have been driven by models of policy reforms that tend to favor efficiency rather than effectiveness considerations. These approaches, however, have significant political dimensions not fully addressed. Improving the lines of administrative responsibility is only one dimension to ensuring equity or effectiveness of social policy systems

The challenge of a new social policy perspective that integrates social policy into broader development goals is to identify and introduce representative systems and processes for governments and citizens to make and manage choices, resolve differences and account for decisions. Research and training could examine issues such as:

- § The citizens= expectations of the state, and the means by which their social needs can be articulated to influence decisions about priorities for services and resource allocation.
- § The means to ensure transparency and accountability of national and local governments, civil society institutions and the private sector as social policy agents.
- § The capacity of municipal councils, unions, cooperatives, parliamentarian commissions, and community associations to negotiate and advance social service demands.
- § The means to assist citizens and stakeholder groups, particularly those most marginalized, to influence decisions about priorities for services and resource allocation.
- § The factors defining people=s identities, allegiances and views about citizenship as a basis to improve articulation of social demands and legitimacy of the state as guarantors of social policy.

The implementation of an agenda that integrates research and training such as this, is likely to face multiple challenges. Building human resources and institutional social policy capacities that enhance social development opportunities, prevent the erosion of fundamental social values, and contribute to the integration of nations into the global economic system in a more equal footing will requires much more than bridging existing gaps and correcting inefficiencies. It requires changes yet to come to the way in which capacity building processes contribute to create sustainable and reliable social policy systems that lean from their own success and failures.

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