

A new direction for public policies in Latin America

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In Latin America the scant success achieved in economic growth and poverty reduction and inequality have diminished the enthusiasm on the reforms in recent years; conversely, doubts in relation to their efficacy and the debate on the way to take in economic and social policy in order to reach the blurred goal of sustainable development with equity Latin American society aspires to.

This document is an inform on the ways in which policies have been constructed, approved and applied in Latin America in recent years, which present the Inter American Development Bank (IBD) —product of research in thirteen countries with presidential systems in the region— and as such, it is a contribution to this debate. The reason why in the very document it is recognized that differently from the economic perspective whence traditionally IBD has analyzed development policies, an innovative approach is presented from an institutional political vision considered indispensable to approach the understanding of the possible success of the social and economic policies.

This report's importance, thus its contribution, is not the study of the policies and their effects on the economic and social variables, but the characterization of the process by means of which said policies are debated, approved and applied, it seems as though, finally, IBD accepts that in a context of presidential democracies in this process diverse actors take part, and all of them with different power of voice and vote; actors who make up complex relation networks influenced by the institutions and customs proper to each country.

The historical review of the variations in success and failure of the policies implemented in the region makes the sense of the document, from two questions: “why this variation?” and “what is it that determines the capacity to design, approve and execute efficacious public policies?” Because of this, and before the complexity of the task, the work team justifies the approach from an “eclectic and interdisciplinary” view, retaking concepts of economy and political sciences. It is then, a comparative analytical study of the Latin American presidential systems. It starts from the criterion that it is the political institutions and practices where the explanations to why

reforms are only long-lasting in some countries or why other are more flexible and better adapted to the circumstances of the moment are to be found. For this very reason, the starring role of other factors, such as history, convictions and civil attitudes, or social leaders, is recognized, and the limitation of the report is accepted as they are not sufficiently studied. However, it is indeed clear the fact that the Political Processes and those of Political Formulation (PFP) are inseparable.

This report on IBD is a serious invitation to review both the previous suggestions from international institutions and the traditional ways to proceed inside each country on the issue of public policy making. At the time, it is a rigorous academic approach which documents and contextualizes categories of broad political and social action.

The coordinating team organizes the content of the works in five parts based on the subject, which makes their reading and analysis easy. In the first part, it presents a *general panorama of the employed methodology*. It is centered on the reconstruction and analysis of the PFP, as well as in the characteristics of the public policies resulting from the contexts they are elaborated in. The interactive effects of the diversity of institutional rules on the political practice and the consequences of these practices on the elaboration of policies are taken into account. The systematic approach employed is made explicit, as it is only “about understanding the limitations and incentives that condition the actions of the presidents, legislators, judges, public functionaries and other actors in the process”. Here we find the ten main messages of the report:

- The processes are important.
- One must be careful with the universal political recipes that supposedly operate with independence from the time and place they are adopted.
- Certain key characteristics of public policies can be as important to reach the objectives of development as their content or orientation.
- The effects of certain political institutions on the formulation processes of public policies can only be understood in a systematic manner.
- The proposals of political and institutional reform based on large generalizations do not constitute a good strategy of reform.

- Political or institutional reforms that have important feedback effects on PFP must be treated with special care, understanding their potential derivations.
- The capacity of the political actors to cooperate along time is a determining and crucial factor in the quality of public policies.
- It is easier the existence of efficacious political processes and better public policies if political parties are institutionalized and pragmatic, legislatures have a solid capacity to elaborate policies, juridical systems are independent, and public administration is strong.
- Most of these “institutional benignities” are not overnight achieved; in order to construct them the main actors are needed to have adequate incentives.
- Leadership, if functional, can be a vital force for institutional development.

Indubitably the case of Mexico is relevant for us, as it has been a nation obedient to the lineaments and external suggestions, which has led to a state of denial and uncertainty before the problems this has caused to most of the population.

In our country, contradicting one of this document’s conclusions, the technocratic process as part of the explanation to the failed reforms and frustrated expectations has been increasingly strengthened; this is a part of the reading hereby approached that can contribute the public designers, this is to say, the fact that from recognizing the complex set of variables and interactions that interact in the configuration of policies directed to the public.

The operation presented and argumentatively defended in the body of the text is that PFP consist in a succession of interchanges between political actors who interact in formal and informal scenarios, situation that requires being valued in its opportunity and reach, before the accepted fact that there are no recipes or magic potions.

In the second part, actors and scenarios of the process of policy formulation, the analysis is guided by the idea that the reach and sort of function developed by the actors —and their interactions— are framed by

a set of subjacent factors (formal and informal rules, interests, preferences, and capacity) and by the expected behavior of other actors and the characteristics of the scenarios where they are in. Some scenarios are more formal (a legislative commission) and other not so much (the street, where social movements occur). Some are more transparent (the hall of a tribunal) and other are less (indoor negotiations). Frequently, the roles which are really played by these actors stray from what should be expected from the formal rules and legally established functions. So the real roles in the PFP are to be carefully analyzed. This exercise is presented in this section; and it can work as an example to follow in another time, both by the scholars of polices and the decision makers.

In the third part, *the process of formulation of policies and the results from the policies*, there is advancement toward the conformation of a framework that gives an account of how diverse institutional aspects are related to PFP and to the characteristics of the policies which come from them; this, from the adoption of a comparative approach between different countries of the region, taking into account empirical measures of the characteristics of public policies. The remarkable aspects of some countries are presented in detail, from the identification of centrality in the interactions developed between the different institutional aspects, located in specific socio-historic contexts. The study is placed, in this part, on what is defined as “key characteristics” of the public polices:

- Stability: the measure on which policies are steady along time.
- Adaptability: measure on which they can be adjusted if they fail or when circumstances change.
- Coordination and coherence: degree to which polices are the result of well-coordinated actions between the actors who take part into their design, implementation, and are coherent with related policies.
- Quality of implementation and of the effective application.
- Orientation to public interest: degree to which policies procure the promotion of general wellbeing.
- Efficiency: degree to which they reflect an assignation of scarce resources which guarantees high revenues.

The fourth part, *the process of formulation of policies in action*, gives an account of the formulation of policies in several sectors. Comparisons of the formulation processes of those sectorial policies in different countries are presented, and the links between the result of the policies in each of these sectors and the characteristic proper to the formulation process of said policies are pointed out. The characterized sectors are tributary policy, public services and education; moreover, at the end the feedback effects of the reform on the PFP are approached and the fields of decentralization and budgetary processes are exemplified. In this point IDB, although veiled, pretends that the achieved characterization becomes the guideline of the comprehension of PFP, in relation to certain reform initiatives in specific fields, in concrete countries and precise moments. For instance, in the case of educational policy it is established that:

- There is a clear distinction between the basic policies and those which are not. The former are seldom questioned and are never really reformed, the latter are susceptible to change up to the point of becoming volatile. The different fortune the reform of policies has had in the case of this two sorts of policies is the result of the subjacent difficulty of the actors with veto power to reach long terms agreements when formulating educational policy. The only exception, the creation of educational incentives in Chile, is closely related to the exceptional PFP in this country, which have allowed counteracting that difficulty with a series of investments on mechanisms to secure trust and guard the application of rules.

The effort the study's coordinators make is praiseworthy as they achieve expressing with clarity, from the use of data, the fact that it is in each country, and paying attention to their own characterization, where the processes of construction of policies have to be fostered, leaving aside the traditional imposition conditioned from abroad; at the time they are within the institutional framework proper to IDB.

The fifth part is referred to conclusions, where it seems that IDB accepts the bad role thus far institutions with international influence have had, which historically, tried to impose their political development strategies to the

countries of the region. Thus, initially the recognition that the institutions will no longer be considered as a mere residual factor of the policies' implementation processes is distinguishable. Wherefrom it is established that economic and social development is possible if policies which fit into a "reasonable" range, but that can be adapted to the problems and circumstances of each country, without being tied to any particular model are adopted; out of several conclusions the following are noteworthy:

- Development does not only depends on adopting right policies from a technical point of view, but rather from negotiating, approving and executing them in a way which leads to their political survival and its effective application.
- The institutions and processes are not neutral or merely instrumental: they are the crucible where policies are forged, modeled and where they acquire their real form and meaning; this explains the dangers of copying political solutions from a country to another.
- The viability of the proposed policies is normally related in a closer manner to their legitimacy rather than to their technical correctness. The experience with policies of privatization in the region is an instance of this; it is indispensable the acceptance from the population so as the policies become effective.

The document closes with the presentation of ten strategic recommendations, the first three are related to the need of adapting the policies to the institutional context where they are applied, and seven are referred to the initiatives that alter the framework where the actors move.

Unquestionably, this study breaks with the tradition of offering "accurate" suggestions on the processes of political reform, from the forums which pretend to be above those of the nations which receive them as commands subject to conditionings. Hence, to the very extent it is self-introduced as a source of knowledge to orient IDB work and that of organizations that boost similar development, the principal role of the social and political actors of each country in the construction and implementation of policies with real "public" character, for they come from the people's participation, is recognized.

In addition to the aforementioned, I believe that large part of its value lays on the research process which originates it, and in the set of scholars who achieve the construction of a scenario of alternatives and possibilities, that recognize the complexity of the historic-temporary contextualization of the Process of Formulation of Policies. It is a demonstration that at macro or micro level, it is undeniable and indispensable that in the formulation of policies the participation in the process of the largest and most desirable number of people will be effective.

It is enough to say as a corollary that this work's reading is very light and educational; where in the end the reader will have new and solid elements to express renewed judgments on the possibility of politics in our country and Latin America. As such it is a text recommendable on its own.

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