Policies and social-aid programs in the cities of the XXI century

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Introduction

Social policies have acquired recently certain priority in the set of public policies in Mexico. This is, undoubtedly, a direct consequence of the intense situation of poverty and social exclusion in which large numbers of workers and families live, which in turn is a result of the Neoliberal economic policies that have been undertaken in the series of processes aimed at the globalization of the economy.

One of the features of that massive impoverishment can be seen in the increasing tendency to make progress in the process of ‘urbanization of poverty’, that is, in Mexico—as in the case of other societies of Latin America—the number of urban poor tends to increase in comparison to the total number of poor, this occurred especially during the crisis that started in the middle of the 90’s.
This phenomenon has forced social policies of the Federal Government that are aimed at the rural environment (we refer mainly to Progresa-Oportunidades program) to be now accompanied with policies designed to solve the social challenges in the Mexican cities.

Those policies directed at the urban population demonstrate the interest in giving a significant role to the local governments and searching to strengthen the social local capital. However, the implementation of social programs implies a series of obstacles that limit the possibilities of achieving said objective.

The purpose of this work is to debate on these topics that are of central significance in the achievement of the objectives set by the social programs. It starts with the following questions: what is the difference between social and public policies? What is the new context in which social policies operate? What are the institutional capabilities of the local governments to design and implement social programs? How shall one understand citizen participation in the main social programs that are implemented in Mexican cities?

**Public policies and social policies**

Public policies are the kinds of interventions made by an authority vested in public power and government legitimacy which is in charge of providing specific solutions to different public affairs (Lahera, 2002). The public nature of the policies was limited to the state or governmental spheres for a long time; in contrast, it is now accepted that the public sphere is a space in which different non-governmental agents participate. These agents can belong to social, civil or professional associations or to entrepreneurial and academic groups. That is, precisely, the main element of the new democratic local governance. On the other hand, in spite that different areas of the central, federal, state, provincial and municipal or local governments take part in the public policies, these imply different stages that are necessarily consecutive –design, operation or administration, continuity and evaluation–, and which can be undertaken by other actors.

In this regard, the so called social policies are a special kind of public policies that have the objective of creating social equity as main goal. They also aim at promoting and guaranteeing the exercise of the social rights. Among these, one can mention the health, education, housing and recreation policies, which are directed to the whole citizenry and based on criteria of universality because they are part of the social responsibility of the State. Although their contents change temporarily and between the different social contexts, what is common to all social policies is to give the general rules that guarantee the whole citizenry access to the basic goods and services that are considered part of the social rights, generally outlined in the highest laws of the states (Constitution).

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A special kind of social policies are the social policies of attention, reduction and fight against poverty, which are of essential significance given the high poverty levels reported in the Latin American societies and their purpose is to bring out of misery those people who have not yet reached the basic level of survival (Abranches et al., 1994). These policies of attention to poverty have been mainly directed to the rural sphere in Latin America, but in the recent decade, given the intense growth of poverty in the cities, a great variety of programs have also been implemented in the urban areas. The different national versions of the Habitat Program deserve special attention among these, on account of the different possibilities of governmental action, among which the improvement of precarious or deteriorated neighborhoods stands out.

These policies seeking the attention of poverty, along with other social policies aimed at degraded or precarious regions or urban zones and at vulnerable social groups (single mothers, female heads of households, older adults without resources, handicapped people, people infected with HIV, etc.) are generally focused policies that imply a kind of social intervention of the State that is necessary to solve the social inequalities. The reference policies start with the assumption that those who are different cannot be treated in the same way, because that would not reduce inequality, it would stress it. Hence, in order to create conditions of equity, it is necessary to treat inequalities in an unequal way. Therefore, these policies also tend to be called policies of ‘positive discrimination’ or of ‘affirmative action’. In this regard, social governmental action tends to combine and simultaneously apply universal and focused policies (Cardoso et al., 2000).

Correspondingly, if social policies on education, health and even housing and urban ones were generally in their origins a competence of the national government, the processes of descentralization of the last decades tend at least to transfer their operation to the local governments (state and municipal).

But Brugué and Gomá (1998) point out in their analysis of the European reality that the main challenge of the social policies in the local sphere –that were sustained in a model of state of well-being in Europe– is located nowadays in the change from the construction of a simple agenda to the creation of a complex one. That is, it is a broad set of performances that coincide in the same field and in a single society, which, when being mutually potentialized, allow obtaining better results. Hence, one can see different kinds of social programs that have been developed during the recent decade and which can be grouped in the following way:

1. Policies that promote the local economy (productive employment, support to SME’s (small and medium enterprises), credit to small-size producers, support to social or solidary economy)
2. Social policies of social well-being (health, education, food)
3. Urban policies and those of territory (housing, improvement of neighborhoods).
It is important to point out that the change from simple public actions to a complex agenda implies designing the social policies again adopting criteria of comprehensiveness and following the intention of constructing citizenry, strengthening social capital and laying the foundations for the performance of the shared responsibility between the government and the local society. The idea is also to relate the different public performances that are carried out by the public institutions of the different levels of the government (federal, state and municipal) by also proposing new instruments of personal, communitarian and even, in some countries, entrepreneurial participation.

The new context of the social policies

There is no doubt that society inexorably advances towards its urbanization, but this urbanization is very different to that experienced at the beginning and middle of the XX century that was a consequence of the industrialization processes which brought about a growth in the cities and one of the main functions of these territories was to provide different mechanisms –formal and informal– of economic, social and territorial integration (expansion of the peripheral popular neighborhoods) for the great contingents of workers that migrated from the rural sphere in search for better labor opportunities and conditions of life. Unlike then, cities have faced intense economic processes in the two recent decades; they have modified their physiognomy, and the nature of the territory-society relation (Ziccardi, 2003). In this regard, the processes of structural nature and the more general ones that have contributed to produce these changes and which frame the significant transformations that can be seen in the social sphere and in that of the social policies and programs are:

1. The processes of globalization of the economy whose counterpart is the expansion of an urban labor market in which informality and precariousness prevail. This profound economic transformation has modified the social question in its physiognomy and in its substance and has brought about the recovery of the ‘social exclusion’ notion to describe situations in which workers and their families experience a general absence of goods and services and which is mainly derived from the precariousness, instability, flexibility and the degradation of the conditions that prevail in the urban labor market. The higher restrictions presented in the social action of the State is added to them as a consequence of the crisis in the social regimes of well-being, which has never been fully developed in Latin American countries.

2. The reform of the State, which has promoted two processes: the privatization of the public services and the decentralization of functions and competences from central to local governments. This, together with the crisis in the social security as a consequence of the disappearance of the ‘salary society’ (Castel,
1997), that is, organized according to the remunerated labor, a society in which workers from the most diverse professional categories have to accept the instability and precariousness, as well as the non generalized access to the basic social services. In this economic context, the governments of the cities have to give a new structure to social policies, extend the attention and coverage of the minimal incomes of the citizens (for example, to support female household heads, universal pensions) and try to provide health, education and recreation in a universal way, as well as to provide more support in the acquisition or improvement of housing and neighborhoods for the popular sectors with lower income.

3. The democratization of the political system, which requires essential changes in the forms of government of the cities and the expansion of the social citizenship.2 Political alternancy and pluralism appear in our cities and, at the same time, they renew and increase the expectations of the popular sectors with regard to the attention to its demands. The great challenge is to complement the representative democracy by constructing a participative democracy in daily life, creating new and better relations between the government and the citizens. In order for this to occur, it is essential to create new spaces and instruments of participation that guarantee the inclusion of their private interests—not the individual ones— in the decisive processes of the government institutions. That is, to restore the public nature of the government action, creating new forms of management to meet the requirements of the social sphere, which in cities correspond to the institutions in charge of formulating and applying the social policies. It is here where the new grounds for the construction of a democratic governance are laid and these shall sustain a new kind of government and of administration in the cities (Ziccardi, 1998).

The social policies and the local governments

One of the significant changes visible in the governmental action is the incorporation of decentralization criteria. This way, one notices a set of new and different roles that local governments (municipal) perform in terms of social policies. However, this topic has not been sufficiently debated because social policies have historically been concentrated in the instances of the federal government and the state governments; only recently have they started to be delegated to the municipalities, which have scarce economic and human resources for the development of a social public action that is complex at the local level.

2 On the analytical distinctions that exist on the notion of ‘citizenship’ and which identify the civil, political and social dimensions, see the pioneer work by Marshall (1998).
It has been asserted that, paradoxically, the processes of globalization of the economy produce a reevaluation on the role of the local governments, mainly at the moment of applying public policies and especially in the case of the urban social policies (Castel, 1997; Borja and Castells, 1997; Bodemer et al., 1999).

But it is worth asking firstly, what is the role of the local governments in the social policies? In Latin America, it has been pointed out that municipalities cannot only be administrators of the new social policies, they shall also assume the social policy, making it a social-economic policy, that is, the idea is to change from the administration of limited means of life to the promotion of the sustainable human development from the local sphere (Bodemer et al., 1999). However, in the context of political democratization and strengthening of the local autonomy, most of the municipal governments in Mexico have a very simple agenda in terms of social policies. It is limited to the provision of goods and basic services, urban and territorial infrastructure (water, sewage, paving) and, to a lesser extent, actions of social communitarian well-being, mostly of a welfare kind, whereas only governments from big cities have the capacity to create more complex agendas.

A second question is the following: what are the obstacles that make it difficult for local governments to create and apply more complex and integrated agendas with socioeconomic policies which allow improving the situation of the whole citizenry living in their territories? This question is asked in terms of employment and quality of life.

In this regard, there are three axes of analysis that we shall introduce to understand the complexity that prevails in the processes of administration of social policies:

1. The predominance of centralized forms of political-administrative organization, despite the fact that in Mexico—as in the case of Argentina or Brazil— the political system is federal (Ziccardi, 2004).
2. A descentralization process, that at first deconcentrated only the functions and later on managed to achieve the stage of delegation of power and resources from the central government to the local governments, but which in reality has been severely limited in its scope and in its results (Martínez & Ziccardi, 2000).
3. The competences and capabilities of the local governments to create an innovating and democratic public action are very unequal, but in general restricted (Cabreró, 1996; Guillén, 1996).

The last topic is of particular interest given the fact that the institutional development is a required element for the local governments to play a significant role in the new policies and social programs that are applied in the urban sphere. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to undertake a set of tasks of redesign and institutional strengthening in the municipal governments. The competences that
the constitution of the republic, the Statute of the Federal District and the organic laws provide local governments, when confronted with the real capabilities they have and with the functions that shall be incorporated to the local action, demonstrate the existence of a clear institutional deficit related to:

- An obsolete institutional design which reproduces the sectorial and vertical organizational structure of the central and state governments.
- A strong dependence on the income of the local governments obtained from the federal shares or from the central government in the case of the Federal District.
- Governmental personnel hired mainly applying criteria based on political membership or loyalty to groups and people, instead of adopting criteria based on professional qualifications related to the activity to be performed.
- Sectorial political public local policies designed with lack of coherence among them, this demonstrates scarce institutional coordination.
- Lack of policies that promote local economic development, even when unemployment, labor precariousness and low payments abound.
- Subordinated and formal spaces of citizen participation aimed at legitimizing decisions made in the governmental sphere; a fact that creates apathy and lack of interest in most of the citizens.
- An inefficient management and attention to the demands of the citizen.

It is certainly necessary to undertake a profound institutional reform in order for local governments to act with criteria based on administrative efficiency and political democracy. In the area related to social policies, the municipality shall change from a restricted performance to the creation of a social basic infrastructure, a social policy that is complex and which improves the quality of life and the forms of social coexistence.

In Mexico, the finances of the states and municipalities has improved significantly thanks to the deconcentration of resources, specially in the case of those with high levels of population and that live in a poverty situation (Martínez & Ziccardi, 2000) when the Subclass XXXIII was created in 1998 from the budget of the nation. However, on the one hand, the resources are labeled, and on the other, there are strong limitations in the local administration regarding the engagement in an integrated economic and social policy. It has already been said that many municipalities cannot assume the administration of a social policy in an autonomous way, but many others can do such a thing and are able to undertake many more actions in the benefit of the community; in spite of this, not always do the federal or state governments promote these actions.

By means of this subclass resources are transferred from the federation to the states and municipalities mainly to perform works related to social infrastructure, a total of 124,857.3 million pesos, an amount that increased to 195,291.2 million in 2000 and to 424,171.3 million MXN by 2008 (Felipe Calderón’s Second State of the Nation Address, 2008).
The situation of the boroughs of the Federal District is even more complex because they lack own resources; they are deconcentrated institutions of the Government of the Federal District and the annual budget for the government of that city sets the amount corresponding to each of the 16 offices, that is, it does not have the capacity to create its own resources as the municipalities. In contrast, the functions that they have to fulfill in favor of the citizens, by being the sphere of the government that is closest to the citizens and hence the one which has the widest variety of demands, are almost the same as those of the municipalities.

Despite this, there is certain consensus on the fact that the moment has come to start a new stage in terms of design and administration of social policies, in which more responsibilities are delegated to the governments and to the local community to boost the resources available with their performance and with the social control that they can exercise in their territory. In order for this to occur, there is already a set of specific experiences that shall be evaluated in order to correct the mistakes and to formulate a complex, innovating, efficient social policy that promotes the social participation, that allows to significantly improve the conditions of life and of social coexistence of most of the Mexicans.

Social policies and civil participation

The legal foundations of the social or civil participation are described in the constitution of the republic and in the laws, both in the federal and in the state spheres. There are also local laws that specifically rule the citizen participation in the sphere of a city. For instance, Mexico City, which has had three laws (1995, 1998, 2004) that have attempted, without much success, to rule the forms in which the citizens participate in different government actions. One should add to that the set of laws that derive from the exercise of the social rights – housing, social development, health and education – which directly allude to the way in which the citizens shall participate, both in the design and the implementation of the social programs. Significant is to know the legal foundations of the social or civil participation that rule in each city and to call the citizens to take part in the design and implementation of social policies and programs, as well as to evaluate them.

But beyond the legal aspect, there is consensus considering that civil participation is an essential component to advance in the democratization of both society and governmental institutions. Civil participation conceived mainly as the kind of inclusion of the citizens and their organizations in public decisions; a participation that is neither the same nor replaces the political, but which complements it or activates it (Ziccardi, 1997).

4 On the different laws related to citizen participation in Mexico City, see Ziccardi, 2003b, 2006.
But it shall be mentioned that the relations that were constructed during several
decades between rulers and ruled have had as a characteristic the confrontation
or the subordination of the popular sectors to practices in which government posts
were promised in exchange of votes that politicized the exercise of the basic
rights. It is also common to see that the processes of alternance and pluralism that
have taken place in the local governments—state, municipal and boroughs—have
not managed to deeply transform the way in which local societies are governed.
The main question is then, how can one fight the survival of an authoritarian
culture and practices or those in which government posts are assured in exchange
of votes in order to advance in the construction of a democratic culture in the
broad sense, and not only the political?

In fact, the public space that is opened with the broadening of the social
policies is potentially powerful in terms of its capacity to create new collective
practices and behaviors. However, even though the social policies of the Mexican
State in its different spheres of government (federal, state and municipal) are
more and more complex, it can be seen that the question on how to include the
citizens so that they take an active part in the public decision is more a part of the
discoursive contents of the urban social policies and the legislation in which it is
sustained than of the actions effectively undertaken to materialize said inclusion.
Thus, in the policies, both in the federal government and in the local ones, there is
an allusion to the intention of constructing social capital, to expand the citizenry
and guarantee the eligibility of the social rights. But the simple fact of stating this
intentions does not guarantee its fulfillment. It is necessary to think again on the
design of the social programs, especially the way in which citizens participate.
It is also necessary to create the adequate conditions for the citizen mobilization,
the training of both the government employees and the representatives, as well
as the local society in the values and culture of the democracy in order to achieve
political commitments that support these kinds of social action.

What is more, policies are one thing and programs another, and in the field
of social policies and programs not always is there a coincidence between the
precepts contained in the former and the actions developed by the latter. This
is particularly true in the case of the participation of citizens. This way, in the
social programs, citizens are conceived and incorporated as beneficiaries and in
some cases as comptrollers. Undoubtedly, there are nowadays better conditions
—more information and transparency in governmental actions, which are a
requirement to advance in the democratization of the state administration and
to make it a public administration. But along with this, there is certain degree
of improvisation and lack of design of the spaces (commissions, committees,
discussion panels, workshops) and instruments (consultation, design, application
and continuity) of civil participation that shall be activated to democratize public
policies and especially the social (Ziccardi, 2004). In this regard, spaces are
generally little inclusive in the current Mexico. This in regard to diversity and the special features of the local society as well as the call for a broad representation; while the instruments are not much innovating in order to transform the decisive processes, so as to make them more efficient and democratic.

There is no doubt that there are specific experiences on the different forms of relation between the government and the citizens and they allow to make progress in the construction of a social and participative democracy, which in some cases has been recovered and documented. But, in fact, if one revises these experiences, one notices the slow progress in the processes of construction of a full citizenship and that innovation in terms of citizen participation in the public administration is not a prevailing feature. In the governmental apparatus and considering certain independence from the party that controls the federal, state or municipal Executive, one notices that there is resistance at the different levels of bureaucracy to open to citizen participation. This lack of conviction on the importance of mobilizing the citizens by means of public action is also shared by the political parties which consider it a competence, more than a complement, in the political participation.

To sum up, despite representative democracy in Mexico heads toward its consolidation, the first steps for a participatory democracy, one that provides good quality to democracy, have been very slow. In order to advance in this respect, not only do the statements included in the policies and social programs shall be revised, but the design, operation and evaluation as well; because it is there where broad sectors of the population will be more interested in spending time and efforts for the satisfaction of their basic social needs through an effective and democratic social action of the State.

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5 For instance, the cases documented in the tenders organized by the Federal Electoral Institute in Mexico to award experiences of communitarian participation, as well as the cases that have been shown in the framework of the Prize to the Best Municipal Practices (Premio a las Mejores Prácticas Municipales) which takes place in Chile and Brazil and that in Mexico is organized by the Center for Economic Research and Education and the Ford Foundation.

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