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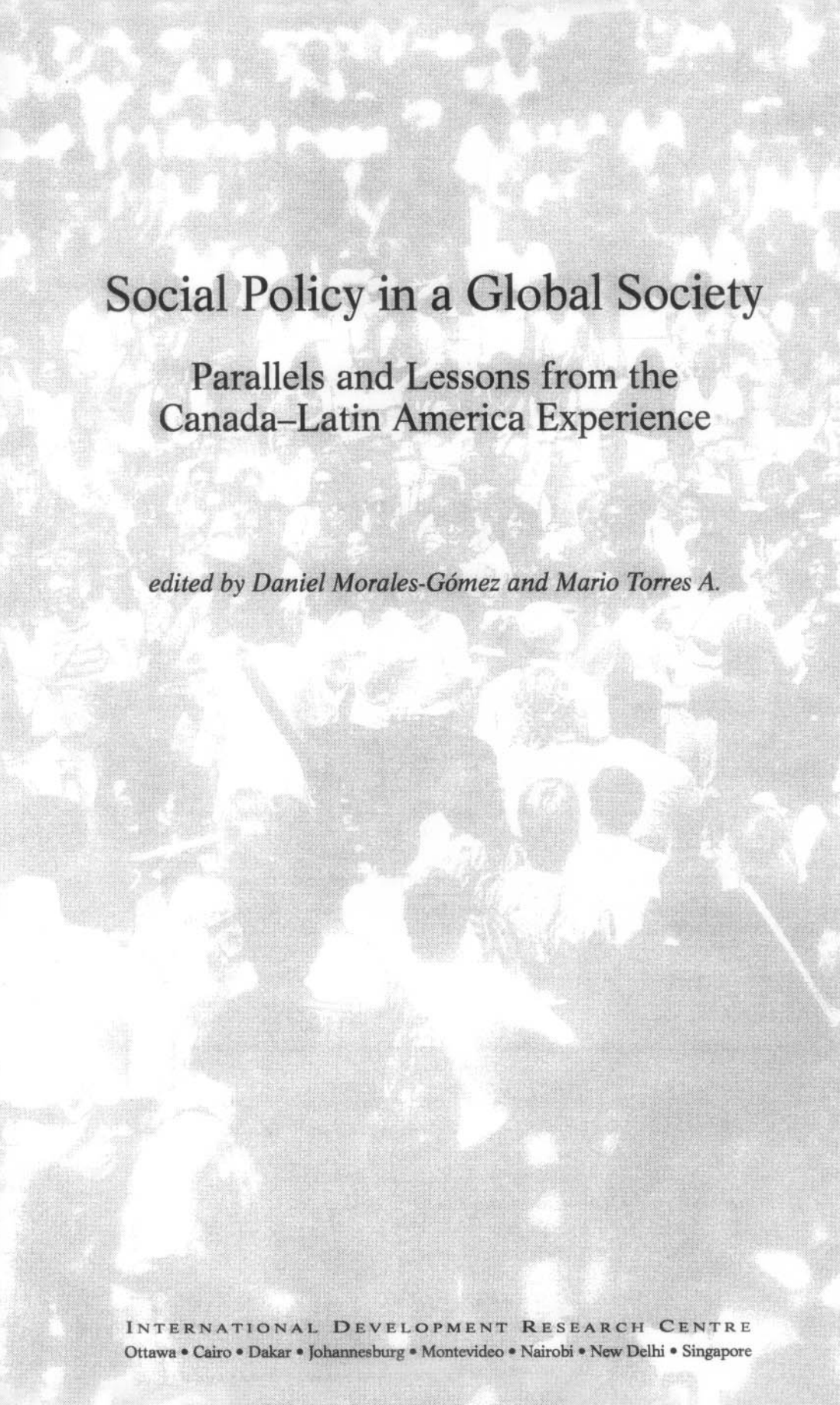
# Social Policy in a Global Society

Parallels and Lessons from the  
Canada-Latin America Experience

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edited by Daniel Morales-Gómez and Mario Torres A.



# Social Policy in a Global Society

## Parallels and Lessons from the Canada–Latin America Experience

*edited by Daniel Morales-Gómez and Mario Torres A.*

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE  
Ottawa • Cairo • Dakar • Johannesburg • Montevideo • Nairobi • New Delhi • Singapore

Published by the International Development Research Centre  
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

February 1995

Morales-Gómez, D.A.  
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IDRC, Ottawa, ON CA

Social policy in a global society : parallels and lessons from the Canada-Latin America experience. Ottawa, ON, IDRC, 1995. 250 p.

/Social policy/, /social development/, /social reform/, /Canada/, /Latin America/ — /Caribbean/, /policy making/, /economic resources/, /human resources/, /regional integration/, /social research/, /information technology/, /training/, /integrated development/, /comparative analysis/, /conference reports/, references.

UDC: 304 (71:8)

ISBN 0-88936-761-2

A microfiche edition is available.

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Gopher: [gopher.idrc.ca](mailto:gopher.idrc.ca)

World Wide Web: <http://www.idrc.ca>

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# ROLE OF INTEGRATED SOCIAL POLICY ADVICE

*Javier Abugattás and Jorge Chateau*

The purpose of this chapter is to open a preliminary discussion on the role of policy advice as a support mechanism for the integration of research into the social policymaking process. As an exploratory effort, the ideas presented here require further conceptual and empirical analysis. In this chapter, the notion of social policy advice will be discussed, avoiding the mechanical view that it simply is a transfer of knowledge. Instead, the interactive process required in policy advice will be stressed, a feature that has rarely been taken into account by traditional research (Brunner and Sunkel 1993).

The limitations found in the perception and description of the social reality are expanding with the enormous changes brought about in recent years by globalization, which have made it necessary to rethink almost all aspects of the relationship between knowledge and society. The concept of development, for example, forces us now more than ever before, to integrate economic, social, and environmental factors that, until recently, were dealt with separately.

Trends in national and international social policy agendas have generated many questions that have, as yet, not found their way into how social policy is actually made (Morales-Gómez 1993, p. 4). The examination of social issues is a very complex undertaking, especially if it is placed at the centre of an analysis of development. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED 1992) in Rio de Janeiro and its follow-up can facilitate the discussion of issues such as this including the clash of different interests in formulating and integrating policies and the lack of clarity in orienting decision-making processes in the social economic, and environmental spheres. In this context, the terms “social policy” and “development policy” are used interchangeably in this chapter.

Two principles should, therefore, be present throughout this discussion: knowledge is an instrument for interacting with the social reality, and the need to integrate policies given the growing complexity of development and the impact of globalization. Both principles are intimately related to the approach to decision-making processes being discussed here.

### **Social policy and the decision-making process**

Why policy advice, and what is it for? In answering these questions, it is assumed that the objective of social policies is the full development of the capabilities of all human beings and that "it is the lives which [human beings] lead that are intrinsically important" (UNDP 1993). A number of international declarations have attempted to make human beings their focal point. The 1948 Declaration of Human Rights is one of them. More recently, the Declaration of Rio '92 establishes: "Principle 1: Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a health and productive life in harmony with nature" (UNCED 1992).

The process of making policies with the aim of enhancing human development is an essential starting point for improving the process and content of policy advice. In practice, little has been done to promote overall development from an integrated perspective. In many cases, for example, economic stabilization policies or programs have been designed without taking into account this essential aspect.

The need to integrate policies emerges, quite literally, from Agenda 21: "Prevailing systems for decision-making in many countries tend to separate economic, social and environmental factors at the policy, planning and management levels. This influences the actions of all groups in society, including governments, industry and individuals, and has important implications for the efficiency and sustainability of development. An adjustment or even a fundamental reshaping of decision-making, in the light of country-specific conditions, may be necessary if environment and development is to be put at the centre of economic and political decision-making. In effect achieving a full integration of these factors" (UNCED 1992, AGENDA 21, Chapter 8, 8.2).

An integrated vision of development that place human capabilities at the centre of the policymaking process demands enormous efforts. Observing the crises that have brought about the deterioration in the quality of life of large segments of the population in Latin America, the need for "interlinking" becomes clear. It becomes necessary to link the policies and the processes that have given rise to these policies, with aspects such as the satisfaction of basic needs, the tendencies of demographic growth, and with employment and the activities that affect the environment.

Although the social policymaking process requires further research, the perception exists that it is necessary to improve the way in which society as a whole makes development policy, organizes itself, and assigns its resources. Efforts in the area of policy advice, therefore, should be concentrated mainly with

improving a society's capacity to formulate, apply, follow, and correct development policies.

### **Context of social policy advice**

Social policy advice, like any activity linked to any human endeavour, takes place in a context in which social, political, and economic factors interact and where social actors have different agendas with competitive needs and goals. This context puts conditions on the development of policy advice. In examining policy advice as an instrument, it is necessary to keep in mind the type of considerations discussed in the following.

First, societies do not exist in a vacuum. The world is experiencing globalization that translates, at the regional and national levels, in phenomena such as regional integration, social and institutional reforms, and structural and liberalization policies. The process of social policy advice should take this situation into account, but avoid imposing recommendations upon the agendas of governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and research centres. An important part of any process of policy advice is to understand the specific characteristics of each national or local reality to foster the development of the local capacities of understanding and analyzing social phenomena.

Second, the Third World, in general, and in Latin America in particular, is experiencing the deterioration in living standards for a large part of the population, not only as a consequence of preexisting structural characteristics, but also as a product of the crisis of the 80s and of adjustment policies.

In some countries, poverty is reaching new lows, and the distance between the rich and the poor is growing. In absolute numbers, the poor have increased dramatically in many countries. In many cases, the traditional middle class is disappearing, and the number of families living below the poverty line has grown in comparison with that which existed fifteen years ago. In some parts of Latin America, this assumed dramatic proportions. (Morales-Gómez 1993, p. 8)

Placing the failure to satisfy basic human needs aside, poverty has intensified because of globalization and the transmission of certain patterns of consumption from the First World to underdeveloped countries, which, in turn, generate expectations that cannot be met. The implications of this phenomenon must be considered, not only for ethical reasons, which are immediately evident, but also because of the consequences that they have on the viability of development as a whole and on the existence of societies themselves. The conditions of misery in which an enormous percentage of the population lives, as well as the



intensification of the differences in standards of living and life styles, poses grave doubts as to the real possibilities of development and growth for these societies and the viability of civilized life within them in the years to come.

The extreme deterioration in living conditions can bring about biological and psychosocial damage of such a magnitude as to render helpless, in the medium and long term, the ability of an important part of the population to insert themselves within the life of society, to carry out effective, productive activities. In relation to the possibility for civilized life to emerge and be sustained, it is worth mentioning the conflicts between different nationalities or groups subscribing to different beliefs, conflicts that may be unrelated to differences in income. Examples of such social inviability are the cases of the former Yugoslavia and that of Rwanda. In a holistic development framework, it is necessary that the people and institutions providing policy advice make an effort to integrate an understanding of these different aspects into social policymaking.

Third, there is a need to improve the social mechanisms of decision-making as part of the policy advice process. The demand for social policy advice can originate from different levels of society (local or central government, the community, etc.). In some cases, the need to improve the decision-making process, as well as the implementation of these policies, may originate as a "self-criticism" from within the system. In this case, policy advice takes the form of demands for external consultancies. These requests may vary a great deal in form as well as depth: problem-solving, policy design, evaluation of policies and programs, design of strategies, diagnoses, development of indicators, etc.

The need for improvement may, in other cases, arise from outside the system. Policy advice, in this case, takes forms that can help to place certain issues on the public agenda to be considered by the system. Activities and strategies developed and carried out to place issues in the public agenda may entail different kinds of alliances, including the search for "influence," public presentation of the problems, etc. These are very different ways of approaching the issue from those that usually come into play in the context of a specific consultancy, which is usually carried out according to specific terms of reference. Even specific consultancies, however, can be avenues to place issues on the "agenda." In the course of a given consultancy, opportunities often arise for shedding light on aspects that may previously have gone unnoticed.

### **Areas for social policy advice**

This section examines various areas where advice can be most useful. It should be stressed that the basic purpose of social policy advice is to upgrade the quality

of the processes (especially design and analysis) of social policymaking aimed at promoting integrated development.

Some of the main functions and elements that should be included in any social policy decision-making process are presented in the following sections. They serve as a general framework, offering a perspective of the overall process including policy decisions, coordination, support mechanisms, analysis, follow-up, and the implementation of the policies.

### **Policy decisions**

The aim of policy advice regarding how decisions are made is to examine the purpose in developing the policies that are being implemented, as well as the extent to which their design and execution have been coordinated. Peru provides an illustration. In 1991, in addition to the long-term goals set for social development, two urgent courses of action were proposed: (a) safeguarding human potential through urgent actions to avoid further damage of populations at high social risk, and (b) urgent local investment programs. The reason for this dual set of aims was to avoid the irreversible, long-term damage that could prevent part of Peru's infant population from actively integrating into society over the long term (Abugattás 1993, pp. 48–51).

### **Coordination**

The effectiveness of social policies is greater when these are directed toward common aims, which can be integrated to reinforce each other. This is not achieved merely by integrating them on paper. The coordination of policies must take place not only between teams of professionals, but also between those in charge of directing them. This points to the need for teamwork, for integrated decision-making capacity and the will to make this coordination between individuals and groups truly effective.

### **Support mechanisms**

It is not enough to define and design policies with clear aims and suitable mechanisms for coordination among those responsible for their implementation. In addition, the support mechanisms that will make them effective need to be considered in detail, in areas such as information, personnel, training and general administration (financial administration, equipment, and acquisitions, etc.). Three of these areas are discussed in the following sections in relation to social policy advice.

*Information*

The design of policies and their successful implementation require that several types of information be taken into account. Information is a key feature in two respects: (a) satisfactory decision-making at all levels, orientation and coordination, support mechanisms, analysis, follow-up and execution, requires information systems that provide clear, reliable, and timely data; and (b) by orienting the user and society in general. The availability of effective information systems can help to increase social cohesion, facilitating the creation of consensus on basic social policy issues to transform them into part of society's "common knowledge"; for example, simple documents on basic policy guidelines to be consulted widely.

Frequently, information is scattered, of uneven quality, organized at different conceptual levels, or not entirely up-to-date. There is, therefore, a pressing need to organize and deal first with existing information and then to gather fresh data to achieve a satisfactory design of policies.

*Personnel recruitment*

The development and implementation of specific policies often demands personnel with specific specializations and abilities. One important task is to define the profiles of specialization and training for the personnel that will be responsible for different aspects in the implementation of the policies. This will also facilitate the logistics of future recruitment.

*Training*

Apart from the need for permanent in-service training, which any institution, public or private, requires for its staff, the implementation of new social policies requires special training for all those involved in their design, implementation, and evaluation. Otherwise, it would not be possible to ensure that the policies will develop as they were designed and, consequently, that they fulfil the aims proposed.

Training efforts should not be restricted to "technical aspects" or to a mere job description for the different staff members and levels involved. It is wise to involve participants from the beginning, in defining the aims of the policies in question, as well as the rationale behind them. This will make them feel that they have a stake in the execution of the policies.

It can even be useful to discuss with them the different levels and stages of the design, as participants may be able to make important contributions, on the basis of their own administrative experience, to a more optimum implementation of the policies. This presupposes special training for policy and project directors,

insofar as they perceive the advantages of capitalizing on the full cooperation and participation of their staff members.

### **Analysis**

Experiences in several countries of the region show the need for integrating general aspects, such as economic, social, and environmental considerations, into the analysis. They have also underscored the need for greater coordination of time frames, between the permanent, medium- and long-range planning and more urgent, short-term issues. With regard to this last area, enormous efforts are being made toward finding an equilibrium between government action in long-term programs, particularly those aimed at developing human potential (education, health, etc.), and programs that address immediate needs to prevent further damage (for example, safeguarding infants under 3 years of age or other high-risk groups).

### **Follow-up**

Although there is a consensus in the literature about the need for evaluation and follow-up of social policies, satisfactory and efficient mechanisms designed for these purposes are rarely found. Moreover, frequently these activities are not even carried out. The need for both follow-up and evaluation cannot be stressed enough in their relation to policy advice.

The design and execution of a rigorous follow-up phase is one way to obtain the feedback to make "timely" corrections in the implementation of a policy or program. No matter how careful or how well-informed their design may have been, there are always unexpected factors that may introduce distortions. Continuous feedback allows for the corresponding adjustments, and also serves as a learning experience about the real conditions affecting the implementation of the policies.

The same holds true for the evaluation of the stages, processes, and impacts of policies and programs. If an evaluation is not carried out, and the effects of policies are not known, the policies become routine and are maintained simply through inertia. Conversely, they may be changed for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with their effectiveness.

The need for follow-up is an area of social policy advice that can be particularly attractive and fertile. There is a need to establish creative, flexible systems of evaluation and follow-up, capable of generating information within the time allotted for corrections and adjustments in the implementation of the policies. The assumption that quantitative data can be the sole point of reference for assessing policies should be set aside. Often it is better to use qualitative information to take into account elements that are difficult to measure.

## Implementation

Sound information should also be applied to the definition of strategies for actions. It is quite common to assume that normal follow-up systems provide sufficient information for decisions about the implementation phase. The experience of some countries, however, shows that internal diversity, even within small geographical areas, can be an obstacle to the formation of the general body of knowledge that makes it possible to move from the design of a policy to an appropriate course of action.

In some countries, it is common to find that general norms are set in policy implementation that assume a homogeneity that, in practice, does not exist. In others, there is a tendency to leave such decisions to the local level. The need for first-hand knowledge of the implementation stage, on the part of those responsible for decision-making, may make it necessary that the process of policy advice pay special attention to the implementation phase. In practice, this can be dealt with through planning visits to those responsible for design at the local level, coordination, and evaluation. In any initial approach to the issue of implementation, the need to know the local situation should be stressed. It is at this level that integration of the economic, social, and environmental factors takes place naturally.

## What is social policy advice?

Having analyzed the range of issues involved, it seems appropriate to ask what is social policy advice all about. The purpose is not to arrive at a precise definition, but rather, to at least identify the dimensions of this concept.

*Social policy advice as the intended use of knowledge to obtain results.* This dimension of social policy is achieved using available knowledge to help to improve decision-making processes (by means of their redesign), or to help existing processes to work better. The main concern is to improve social policy processes, both by collaborating in their redesign, and by helping to maximize the functioning of what already exists.

*Social policy advice as creative interaction to generate new knowledge and skills.* There is a tendency to see social policy advice as a means of transferring know-how from the social sciences to society's institutions, with the aim of solving certain problems. This notion is often erroneous and may lead to confusion.

It is clear that, with the exception of some areas of economics, no coherent, defined body of knowledge (theories) exists that is universally accepted by all practitioners of the social sciences. Even resorting to a comparison with the "hard" sciences, those that "produce technology," it can be argued that the

production technology cannot generally be reduced to the mechanical transfer of knowledge. There is always appropriation of technology by the user, who discovers and rediscovers ways of utilizing it producing new knowledge. Social policy advice triggers interactions between the persons and institutions involved in the policy process, by which each one makes knowledge available, giving place to something very different and quite superior to the sum of the individual contributions. This is the optimum result of such interaction.

This creative interaction among people who contribute their knowledge often occurs, regardless of the form that social policy advice takes: consultancies, the placing of issues upon a "political agenda," or others. In some cases, those who are at the receiving end may or may not choose to accept the advice, precisely because of their knowledge of the situation.

*Social policy advice as a unique mix of disciplinary and nondisciplinary knowledge.* Another dimension implies to ask what kind of knowledge is used in policy advice. The knowledge of those involved in a process of social policy advice surpasses, by far, that of a regular disciplinary training as a "corpus."

Training in a given discipline, and the body of knowledge that this implies, is important, but an education within a discipline is more than a corpus of knowledge. It is made up of other elements, sometimes intangible, such as perspectives for confronting problems, working styles, working methodologies, willingness to question the "obvious" or that which is accepted merely on the basis of common sense, the tendency to consider certain sets of variables as significant, and dealing with unusual associations of meaning.

In social policy advice, there is more involved than mere professional training. One's "stock" of knowledge is also made up of other elements, which are added to those acquired or to one's professional training. These include practical knowledge in certain areas, the ability to generate confidence among those for whom the work is intended, experience in leading and coordinating teamwork, and familiarity with certain types of computer software, etc. It is this set of elements that comes into play in the case of policy advice and that interacts with other knowledge. It can be argued that the broader the "nondisciplinary" experience, the greater the possibilities of entering into creative interaction, and the greater the chance of success in the task at hand.

It is clearly essential to be aware that, in these activities, it is not "the science" or "a discipline" that delivers or contributes knowledge. We are dealing with people and institutions, trained in one or more disciplines, but also equipped with certain "baggage," in terms of experience and knowledge in other areas that intersect with professional know-how.

It is precisely this "mix" that can make the difference in social policy advice between one person and another, even if they come from the same professional background. That "difference" may turn out to be an advantage, but it may just as easily imply deficiencies and limitations. For this reason, the choice of the person who provides the advice is crucial.

Finally, it should be noted that different types of knowledge and abilities are required for different types of policy advice. This is especially true with relation to the aspects that are not directly related to the discipline, but rather, to other types of knowledge, abilities, and expertise.

At this point it, a definition, albeit a preliminary one, might be proposed as to what social policy advice is:

It is an activity, limited in time, that directly or indirectly supports those responsible for the social policy decision systems to improve the functioning of existing processes or the processes themselves. This may imply the generation of new processes or the coordination of the existing ones.

This activity may be carried out in either direct or indirect ways. Consultancies can be considered "typical" when the support is demanded directly by the institution that is to benefit from the advice. Social policy advice becomes "indirect" when the issues emerging from the process are placed upon the public agenda.

## Strategy

If social policy advice is considered to be a means for improving the life of society, particularly in the area of social policies, then it is necessary to explore ways in which it can be carried out in the most productive manner. Some considerations are presented in the following of what could constitute a strategy for carrying out social policy advice.

*Considering the poverty in which a large part of the population lives, it is necessary to set minimum goals in the area of social policies to be taken into account in the process of social policy advice.* Setting minimum goals of well-being responds to the need to avoid further negative effects on the capacity of those segments of the population with the most limited resources. This means at a global, social policy level ensuring, for example, minimum standards of food, education, and health for the entire population, particularly in age brackets that are critical for personal development.

Should these minimum standards not be guaranteed, the vicious circle of poverty and marginalization will not only be maintained but will actually increase.

This, in turn, will curtail the development of different social sectors and lead to unsurmountable levels of conflict, or to mechanisms of segregation that would render life in society impossible. Awareness of these concerns helps to develop the best and yet the simplest response mechanisms for achieving those minimum standards and avoid irreparable damage. Ensuring that health, education, and justice are available for the entire population is not merely a way of preventing irreversible damage but also of allowing the entire population to satisfy these basic needs without delays and with access to high quality services.

*The promotion of social policy advice, to have positive effects on social harmony, should be carried out on the basis of reasonable proposals and carefully elaborated studies.* This implies, among other things, that the proposals must be action oriented and in accordance with the time frame that the solution requires. The latter implies the need to define clearly the sustainability of the proposals, stipulating the degrees of impact that they can be expected to have and their capacity to respond effectively to the demands that were made. To achieve this, it is necessary to be clear, especially in cases of consultancies, as to what is being requested and the extent to which that request can be met.

*One task of utmost importance, although not directly linked to the quality of the product, is the setting of ethical standards.* At least in the case of consultancies, it is desirable (and this may be a part of the ethical standards set), to leave local capacity "installed" among those who requested the advice when the consultancy comes to an end, so that they will be self-sufficient in dealing with the original problems. This also implies that it is advisable that some type of follow-up take place after the end of the consultancy. This would make it possible, on the one hand, to have a vision of the "fruits of one's labours" and, on the other, to carry out any necessary adjustments.

Consultancies should be temporary and limited in time, in keeping with the leaving "capacity installed." This in no way implies that new consultancies are unnecessary. Quite the contrary, new problems may arise, or may become apparent as a result of the work under way, which could require further external support. But the idea of keeping within a specified time frame is of fundamental importance.

*If the body of knowledge required goes beyond the regular training within a discipline, then it would be appropriate to consider a minimum level of training.* Above and beyond the specific knowledge requirements in each country's situation, it may be necessary to train co-workers in the use of several group techniques to enable them to carry out the task more efficiently. It would also allow them to collect more effectively the contributions of the different parties involved, and interact with them productively for the achievement of the stipulated



aims. It may also be necessary to have a working knowledge of certain basic planning techniques.

*It is important to set information systems for the users, and for society in general, to report on the results of the policies being implemented.* This type of communication should be part of a basic strategy for the promotion of issues on the public agenda and for integrating the feedback from the society at large. In regard to those in charge of decision-making, this type of information may assume special forms, such as the creation of networks that distribute this knowledge, or data bases on consultants and institutions, with their respective experience and aptitudes for social policy advice; the organization of conferences on issues of interest, etc. These elements, in turn, can be important in the search for new mechanisms of consensus, participation, and consultation on the international, national, or local level.

*Seek appropriate mechanisms of consensus, participation, and consultation.* Once certain principles and orientations of policy have been established, these should be disseminated freely. Simple documents providing basic guidelines may be distributed to obtain feedback at the international, national, or local level. This process should be supported up by information systems, as well as by the institutions linked to the networks.

Certain theoretical simplifications may also be required to *establish common working hypotheses*, assuming, for example, the homogeneity of interests at a global or a local level. This demands intense interaction between the national and local levels for greater participation and coordination of efforts.

## Conclusions

In today's world, societies often require significant challenges to make them rethink the traditional forms of generating and utilizing knowledge. Globalization and the growth of available information increase the complexity of the social dimensions of the decision-making process. Moreover, there are visible risks for the social development of large population groups if decision-making processes and development policies are not more closely integrated. Social policy advice can be one way to help improve systems of decision-making that each society has for promoting economic, social, and environmental development.

In the application of policy advice, it is essential to maintain a broader, more integrated vision, to avoid the exclusion of the essential elements of coordination, analysis, support, follow-up, etc. Attention and additional research must be focused on the decision-making process to identify problems and alternatives for the adjustment or reshaping of policies. Different courses of action

can be used to support the improvement of decision-making processes, by means of policy advice:

- Set minimum goals in the area of social policies.
- Consultancies should be based on reasonable proposals and on careful studies. This includes supporting the development of capabilities among those who have requested the consultation so that they may ultimately deal with the problems self-sufficiently.
- Training for social policy advice goes beyond disciplinary lines. It requires the development of additional capabilities in individuals and institutions, beyond the obvious requirement of genuine knowledge about the situation of each country.
- An information system needs to be set for the users and for society in general on the results of the policies being implemented. This type of communication is necessary to place issues on the public agenda and for the eventual feedback from society.
- A search for appropriate mechanisms of consensus, participation, and consultation on international, national, or local levels is required.

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