

The impact of political conditions on social work: Welfare policies as a framework for the practice

Mayra Carolina Lemus Way*

Abstract

In this article, we analyze how the political conditions of a country affect welfare policies, which are the framework in which social work is carried out. We explore how different factors affect and shape welfare policies and why this is of vital importance for the practice and study of social work. We put analytical emphasis in Latin American emerging welfare states and we explain how they manage to promote the well-being of their populations despite having a weak tax base and the most unequal distribution of income in the world.

Keywords: Welfare policies; Latin America; emerging Welfare States; democracy; Mexico

O impacto das condições políticas no Serviço Social: as políticas de bem-estar social como estrutura para a prática

Resumo

Neste artigo, analisamos como as condições políticas de um país afetam as políticas de assistência social, as quais são o quadro em que o trabalho social é realizado. Exploramos como diferentes fatores afetam e moldam as políticas de bem-estar e por que isso é vital para a prática e o estudo do Serviço Social. Colocamos ênfase analítica em Estados emergentes de bem-estar latino-americanos e explicamos como eles conseguem promover o bem-estar de suas populações apesar de ter uma base tributável fraca e a distribuição de renda mais desigual do mundo.

Palavras-chave: políticas de bem-estar; América Latina; Estados emergentes de bem-estar; democracia; México

Recebido em: 25/05/2017

Aprovado em: 29/06/2017

*Licenciatura em Psicologia Social; mestranda em Serviço Social com famílias e crianças, (ISCTE), University of Stavanger, Noruega; University of Gothenburg, Suécia, mclwem@gmail.com

Introduction

In this paper, we will try to explain what are welfare policies and which are its functions. We will also explore how welfare policies are shaped in Latin America, Mexico specifically, by factors such as democracy record, presence of the left in the legislature and tax base strength. Finally, we will reflect on the issues that result from the close relationship between social work and welfare policies.

Why are the political conditions of a country relevant for Social Work practice?

In order to draft an answer to this question, it is necessary to go back to the origins of our profession. The industrialization was the period where states created the needs and means to provide to the its citizens. This gave as a result the creation of the firsts welfare states in Europe (Esping-Andersen, 2007). Goldstein (1976) suggests it was also this period the one that brought the conditions that gave birth to Social Work.

The initial aim of our profession was to incorporate practices of social justice in the institutions and in society to ensure that people's rights were distributed fairly and without prejudice (Colby, 2013).

Thus, our profession developed precisely from a change in the political conditions of a region and it is important to understand how these continue to affect the people we work with and therefore our practice.

The focus of interest of Social Work is the interaction of people with society, its practices are grounded in principles of social justice, human rights and collective responsibility (International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), 2000). These principles shape the goals of the profession, and one of these is to provide people with means and opportunities to deal with internal or external conditions affecting their well-being (Zahl, 2003). Because of this, social workers work hand in hand with welfare policies developed by the state to be distributed to its citizens.

To understand more about the interaction between our profession and welfare policies we must understand why they exist and what they are. A country's welfare state is responsible for providing health, education, pensions and social security to its citizens (Gough & Therborn, 2010). Welfare policies have their nest in the responsibility of the state. These have been defined as the explicit or implicit standing plan that a government uses as a guide for action. They establish a set of program procedures (Baumheier & Schorr, 1977), consider the distribution of resources and its effects on people's social well-being and its function is to create a plan of action directed towards defined problems (Titmuss, 1966). Social work incorporates the practices of these welfare policies in the institutions and societies in which it works to ensure that they reach all people equitably.

Changes in a country's political conditions lead to changes in its welfare policies and with it, the private lives of all the citizens are subject to alterations (Chambers, 1986). Our role as social workers is to adopt these policies and, as mentioned above, make sure to distribute its practices to the people.

Finally, according to Zahl (2003) we can consider welfare policies as the context upon which social work is carried out. Therefore, the more active welfare policies are, the more penetrating the practice of social work will be. For all of the above, it is important to be aware that welfare policies are a significant feature in the clients' surroundings and it is important to be informed about them as well as the social and political conditions of the country or region where we are working in.

How political conditions in Latin America affect Social Work practice?

We have described how political conditions and welfare policies affect Social Work practice. In this part, we will analyze the same topic, but focusing in Latin America, specifically Mexico. After describing this country's welfare state, we will try to comprehend the relationship between social work and political conditions in this context, for that reason we will explain two things. First, the interaction *democratic record - left wing parties' strength in the legislature - welfare policies*. And second, the impact that the base tax has on the social spending of a country.

Mexico's welfare state

In Mexico, we have an emerging welfare state (Cox, 2013) which is a hybrid between the corporatist and liberal regimes. Unlike its northern neighbors, this country did not participate in the first wave of welfare adoption in the first half of the twentieth century. Instead, Mexico focused on nation-building, which was the priority (Cox, 2013). That is why it is not possible to expect that this country has a welfare state similar to the one in the United States or Canada, nevertheless, it does have clear influences of these.

In the work of Gough & Therborn (2010) on welfare states different from those described by Gosta Espig Andersen (2007), some Latin American countries like Argentina, Costa Rica or Uruguay have the best welfare models of non-OECD countries. Mexico and countries like Colombia, Peru and Bolivia have the second-best type of welfare outcomes and social service outputs, even with low levels of social spending. This combination suggests that security and welfare are mitigated by rapid growth in average incomes and by other non-domestic institutions.

Countries with this type of welfare are mainly but not always low-middle income, with high growth rates but undemocratic and unequal.

Interaction democratic record - left wing parties' strength in the legislature - welfare policies.

The interaction between these three factors and welfare policies is important for the understanding of Social Work practice. Firstly, because the level of democracy in a country directly affects income inequality (Lee as cited in Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010). In a democratic country, income inequality rates are low. Inversely, in non-democratic countries or countries with flawed democracies the opposite happens. Secondly, because a strong presence of left wing parties is associated with lower poverty and inequality in Latin America (Huber as cited in Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010). Therefore, we can expect welfare policies aimed to attack income inequality in countries with high levels of democracy and a strong presence of the left in the legislature

We have understood the interaction of these factors, now let's explore how Mexico performs in these aspects and the impact in its welfare policies. Latin American countries have had oscillations between democracy and authoritarianism (Markoff & White, 2009). Additionally, according to the Democracy Index, Mexico has a flawed democracy (IU, 2015). Meaning, that it has free and fair elections and in general, civil liberties are respected. However, "there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation" (IU, 2015:30).

In some Latin American countries, Mexico included, the revolutionary left has been demoralized by post-coup repression (Markoff & White, 2009). Additionally, in the last fifty years, this country's leftist representatives have not been in the executive power.

In Table 1 we can see the comparison of the Gini Index in Mexico and in Uruguay in the period of 2000 – 2015. We have chosen Uruguay as comparative because it shares some historical characteristics with Mexico. However, this country has high levels of democracy (IU, 2015) the best model of welfare of non-OECD countries (Gough & Therborn, 2010) and low levels of inequality in comparison with other Latin American countries. Our hypothesis is that this is because the leftist parties have ruled the country for the last twelve years.

In the case of Mexico, it is observed that the level of net inequality remains steady and high compared to Uruguay, which since 2005 has continuously decreased its levels of inequality and which in the same year until now, has had representatives of the left ruling the country.

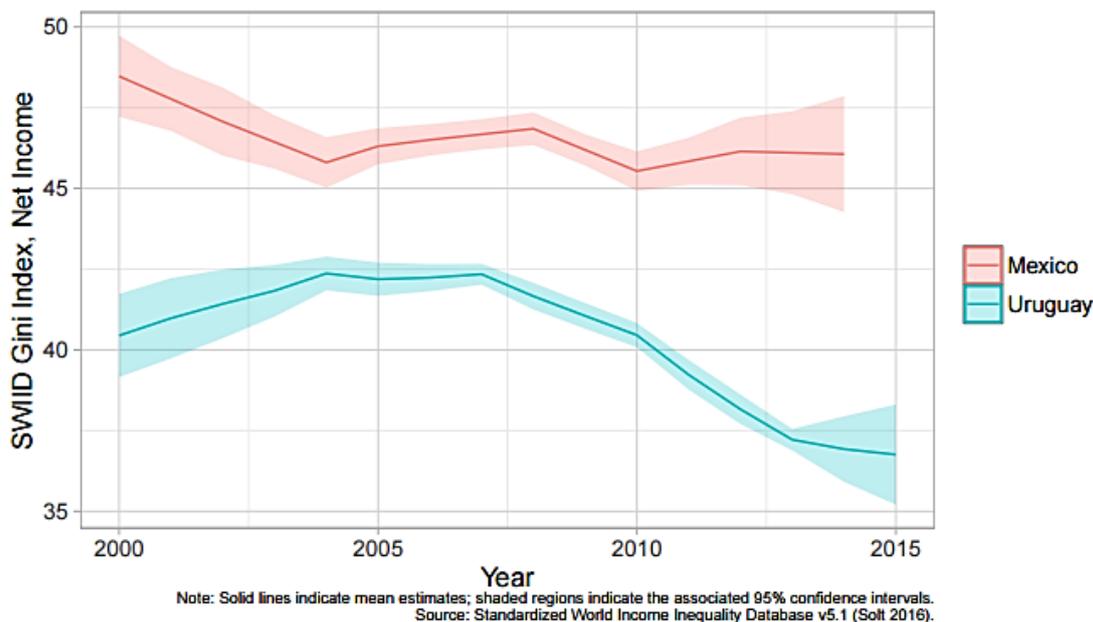


Table 1

With what we have seen we would expect Uruguay to have more policies aimed to attack inequality than Mexico. This is because the level of democracy and the strength of the left in Uruguay are much more elevated than in Mexico.

The impact the base tax has on the social spending of a country

Now let's look at this second important aspect to understand the relationship between social work and political conditions. According to Huber and Bogliaccini (2010), in Latin America, social expenditure is comparatively low. In Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico the total spending on social security, welfare, health and education in the period of 2002-2003 was 11-15 percent of their GDP. This low social spending is directly related to the tax-base weakness.

In the specific case of Mexico, the weakness of the tax base has its roots in many factors. One of these is the great amount of people working in the informal job sector. In the period of 2005-2006 about 60 percent of workers had an informal employment relationship and most businesses were operated informally (OECD, 2014). Less than half of the population had tax obligations. Therefore, following the logic of Huber and Bogliaccini (2010), social expenditure in these conditions could hardly have been outstanding.

Having understood the relationship between all these factors, we can comprehend why Mexico is not able to devote enough resources to the battle against inequality. As social workers in the Mexican context we must understand that welfare policies we will work with will be underpinned by the strength of centrist or right-wing parties. Likewise, we will come across with a

large number of people who do not have access to social security, and perhaps, not even to our services. But if one of the objectives of our profession is to equitably distribute the rights and promote social change, how do we do then if the people of Mexico do not even have access to our counseling and interventions? In this context, this is precisely one of the greatest challenges for the practice of Social Work.

Social transfer expenditures

With a flawed democracy, a weak left in the legislature and a fragile tax base one may wonder what Mexico has done to tackle the problem of income inequality. According to Huber et al. (2006) this problem can be also alleviated with social transfer expenditures. This happens when governments make a redistribution not by overall higher expenditures, but by the allocation of these expenditures (Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010). Mexico has developed non-contributory programs for those outside the formal labor market. These are called conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) which, in this country, devote less than one percent of its annual GDP (OCDE, 2017) to attack poverty through providing money to the head of the household in exchange for keeping the children in school and under regular medical supervision (Lindert et al., as cited in Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010).

In Mexico, these programs were launched in 1997 under the name of *Progresa* (Cox, 2013) and its implementation continues to this day. Some evaluations of these in Latin America show they are effective in reducing poverty and in improving school attendance and health outcomes (Rawlings and Rubio as cited in Huber and Bogliaccini, 2001). In opposition, other analysis (OCDE, 2017) indicate that in Mexico, these programs haven't had a real impact in diminishing poverty level, that the low percentage of GDP devoted to the same has resulted in neglect of those living in extreme poverty and its access to social protection and that the level of inequality continues to be solid (OCDE, 2017).

It is necessary to specify that in Mexico these programs are administered and implemented by social workers. If we were in the position of some of them, how would we interpret all the information above? Are the programs working or not? What can we do to improve welfare policies aimed to tackle inequality? Although these programs address the obvious consequences of poverty, we must remember in Mexico the level of income inequality cannot only be alleviated with a welfare policy focused on improving the economic situation of a single sector of the population. The

solution is not obvious. There are many other factors that influence the phenomenon of income inequality, one of these is gender inequality, which in this country remains high (OCDE, 2017).

Taking all this into account we can analyze this problem in the practice of social work from a wider perspective. A country's political position towards the problem of inequality should not only have an impact on economic policies but on gender policies, for example. Therefore, the practice of social work aimed to finish with income equality in the Mexican context, should not only be supported by a single policy, but by more comprehensive welfare policies. As social workers, our duty will be to combine different practices that work together to promote equality.

Understanding the political struggles over welfare policies in Mexico, is important theoretically and practically (Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010). As social workers, it helps us to reflect about better models of welfare state development and how these impact our practice and the people we work with.

Issues in the relationship between social work and welfare policies

The close relationship between social work and welfare policies has its advantages and disadvantages. In this part, we will explore some of them.

Welfare policies are developed to act on defined problems. On the one hand, those who need it receive the necessary resources to promote their well-being. On the other hand, there is no welfare policy that totally matches the specific goals or needs of each individual in the target group (Zahl, 2003). This leaves social workers in a complex position and with potential dilemmas.

Simultaneously, social workers are expected to get involved in solving problems at a societal level and to take part in processes that change the situation of those in challenging positions (Zahl, 2003). This may end up in divided loyalties as impediments to achieving this involvement may be underpinned by public services or even by welfare policies.

As we see this relationship is not simple, but it is necessary. As social workers, we will have to accept it and get the most out of it.

Conclusion

The impact that political conditions, specifically welfare policies, have on social work is of paramount importance in the research and practice of our discipline. When we analyze this interaction, it is important to consider all the conditions of the context we are focusing on. As we

have reflected, welfare policies are not the same in different countries despite being in the same region and sharing more or less same history. The practice of social work taking as a framework welfare policies aimed to end inequality will not be a simple job in countries with low levels of democracy. However, this gives social work the opportunity to do more research on the subject and challenge itself to seek solutions in these contexts.

References

- BAUMHEIER, E. C., & SCHORR, A. L. *Social policy*. In J. Turner (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work*, 17th ed., pp. 1453–1463, Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1977.
- CHAMBERS, DONALD E. *Social policy and social programs: a method for the practical policy analyst*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986.
- COLBY, I. C. *Social Work Education: Social Welfare Policy*. NASW Press and Oxford University Press. 2013. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.619>. Date accessed April 27, 2017.
- COX, R. Welfare states in North America. Social Citizenship in the United States, Canada and Mexico. In *The Routledge Handbook of Welfare State* (pp. 213–221). London: Routledge, 2013.
- Esping-Andersen, G. The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. In C. Pierson & F. G. Castles (Ed.), *The Welfare State Reader* (pp. 160–174). Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- GOUGH, I., & THERBORN, G. The Global Future of Welfare States. *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, pp. 703–720 Oxford University Press, 2010.
- HUBER, E., & BOGLIACCINI, J. Latin America. In Castles F. et al. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, pp. 644–655, Oxford University Press, 2010.
- International Federation of Social Work (IFSW). Definition of Social Work, 2000. Available at from http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw_33158-4.pdf. Date accessed: April 25, 2017.
- IU, Democracy Index 2015. *The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited*, 2015. Available at http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_INDEX_2007_v3.pdf. Date accessed: April 25, 2017.
- MARKOFF, J., & WHITE, A. The Global Wave of Democratization. In C. W. et al. Christian W. Haerpfer (Ed.), *Democratization* (pp. 55–71). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- OCDE. *Estudios Económicos de la OCDE México*, 2017. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/mexico-2017-OECD-Estudios-economicos-de-la-ocde-vision-general.pdf> Date accessed: May 2, 2017
- OECD. *OECD Economic Surveys Mexico*. 2014. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/Mexico-Overview-2015.pdf>. Date accessed: April 15, 2017

ZAHL, M.-A. (2003). The Impact of Social Policies on The Formation of Social Work. *Journal of Social Work Theory & Practice*, Vol. 5, 2002/2003. Available at http://www.bemidjstate.edu/academics/publications/social_work_journal/issue05/articles/zahl1.htm. Date accessed: April 10, 2017

