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The Dominance of a Method of Impact Evaluation in Latin America

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Introduction

The evaluation of public policies and programs implies an interdisciplinary research process aimed at collecting information, analyzing it and assessing it considering a set of contextual conditions. It is essential to improve public policies and programs by analyzing and assessing their design, implementation and results. However, its final objective is to help the population enjoy higher levels of well-being. To know if this is being achieved, it is essential to evaluate the impact of the '…positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended' (Development Assistance Committee - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010: 4).

Although this definition can be discussed in relation to the long-term effects indicated, it clearly shows that the outcomes should not be confused with the outputs produced by the interventions, but rather they are the consequences of the output on the quality of life of the population. In contrast, in Latin America the concept of impact is usually implicit, but it is considered universally accepted (García y Cardozo, 2017). Despite this, there is consensus that its evaluation tries to test, as if it were an explicit or implicit hypothesis, whether or not a given intervention has been capable of causing the expected effects.

The world of impact evaluation, like all the fields in which the social sciences play an important role, uses different theoretical and practical approaches. However, Latin America (Chile, Colombia and Mexico, mainly) continues to adhere to those promoted by United Nations agencies and the experience of the United States of America (USA).For example, the Evidence-based Policy (PBE) approach, with a positivist background, has been noted for its wide dissemination in countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Mexico. (Cardozo, 2021[1]). Latin America ignores other approaches used in the USA and what has been done for many years in other parts of the world.

EuropeandCanada, other ways of organizing evaluation processes have been emphasized: the constructivist approach, the pluralist approach and social participation, the meta-evaluation of the quality of the evaluations, and also the non-experimental impact evaluations, with alternative approaches.

I consider as 'colonization' the imposition of a single theoretical approach (positivist, quantitative, experimental, etc.), which ignores or underestimates the contributions of other approaches.Decolonizing implies confronting the different modes of modern domination (De Souza, 2022).

Consequently, the objective of this work is to briefly present the advantages and disadvantages of the diversity of approaches and experiences of impact evaluation, developed in other regions of the world and little known in Latin America, where the Evidence-based Policy is the widely dominant paradigm.In our region, particularly in Mexico, there has been a tendency to simplify evaluation processes, with the risk of falling into excesses that make them irrelevant. In the case of impact evaluation, this simplification has been based on the PBE, fourth wave of evaluation (Vedung, 2010).

Evidence-based Policy

In the philosophical evolution of the West there are multiple concepts of evidence linked to different currents of thought, spanning from those identified with the indisputable truth and certainty of ancient times (Thales of Miletus, Heraclitus of Ephesus and Democritus, in the VI to IV centuries B. C.), to those of the present day that can be characterized mainly as the result of the application of models and solid statistical tests.In addition, in the communicative processes of policies in Latin America, the use of 'evidence' has become a recurring authoritative argument, a powerful symbol of persuasion within the framework of a discourse with positivist roots that is rarely defined and often leads to confuse itwith the idea of full certainty.

Since the end of the last century, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, promoted the PBE (Modernising Government, 1999). Thisapproachexploresthe causal relationships between a program and its supposed effects through experimental and quasi-experimental work, which emphasizes the quantitative analysisof processes that it characterizesasrational,objective, rigorous, robust, standardized and scientific, among others, which would justify the discarding of any methodological alternative of impact evaluation.

[1]The article refers to documents, congresses, courses, slogans, etc., that show the dominance of 'evidence' approach.

But, the conclusions of the evaluations are never self-evident in the sense of offering certain, true and sufficient information that can be expressed in a unanimous judgment (Cardozo, 2021), rather their conclusions and proposals can be improved through dialogue and discussion. In a constructivist and pluralistic approach, we consider that the evidence could be conceived as the joint effect of data, tests, arguments and emotions that coincide in pointing out a similar performance of a policy or program, within a discourse in a context of power.For example, when we evaluate a social program, the evidence of its effects is made up of data on income, consumption and public services, tests of attribution of effects to the program, qualitative arguments and perception of greater subjective well-being.

In Latin America, the PBE enjoys a wide consensus among national assessment bodies in countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Mexico. In the latter, the evidence discourse has been widely developed, especially in reference to impact evaluation and the use of quantitative datafrom the Mexican National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (Coneval). It has been assumed without much discussion by the majority of local state bodies and evaluation professionals. It should not be forgotten that the slogan of Coneval is 'what is measured can be improved', reducing evaluation to simple measurement.

Social experiments

A social experiment requires building a counterfactual situation that allow to estimate what would have happened if the intervention in question had not been carried out (World Bank, 2004). Its design implies randomly forming two groups among the recipients of the evaluated activities, which statistically guarantee their equivalence. A single difference is introduced in them: the program to be evaluated is applied to one (case or treatment group) and not to the other (control or witness group). The foregoing allows initial and final measurements to be made in both groups, and to identify the activity developed only in the case-group as the cause of the differences in the evolutions followed by them.

But the formation of equivalent groups in the social sciences has been notoriously difficult, both due to technical and ethical problems, which is why a more flexible, less rigorous, but more realistic method has been introduced: quasi-experimentation. It maintains the general characteristics of the previous design, but accepts that the groups be constituted in the most similar way possible (matching methods, for example), renouncing the equivalence based on random selection. Obviously, there is the risk that extraneous variables, not controlled in the quasi-experiment, cause errors that affect the results. To avoid them, it is recommended to analyze these possible extraneous influences before concluding the probable existence of a causal relationship between the action and its supposed effect (Campbell & Stanley, 1973).

Experimental and quasi-experimental analyzes can be precise and rigorous when they adequately capture the situation, but the problem is that there are few cases (pilot tests, for example) in which it is possible to have an equivalent control group that, together with the experimental group, are kept complete and uncontaminated for the required time and that sufficient measurements are available to calculate the impact of the evaluated program as the sole cause.

They are also very expensive, they do not recover qualitative variables typical of human life in society, they do not explain how the causal links that connect the program and the levels of impact measured operate, they run a high risk of not considering unexpected effects, and they face important ethical problems like the exclusion of the benefits of the program in the control group.

Furthermore, evaluative experiments do not rigorously meet the criteria required by the theory. The counterfactual does not refer to an identical (comparable) reality to the one that occurs with the intervention, since the individuals are not the same. In addition, the recipients of the programs (human beings with values, beliefs and interests) introduce factors of variability and particularity that experiments can hardly control.

Even in the cases in which it could be considered a successful approach, another disadvantage of this approach is that it measures the changes generated by the program, but does not explain them, which reduces its usefulness for suggesting modifications thatcould improve the effects achieved.

This perspective on impact evaluation is the one that has received the greatest promotion in Latin America, from the hand of international organizations, foundations, think tanks and prestigious research centers that have presented it, not as a methodological alternative, but as the only rigorous option to obtain conclusions with scientific validity. Table 1 shows the adherence to the quasi-experimental design of some of the countries. In the case of Mexico, Oportunidades was the most evaluated program with this approach in 2007-2010.

Table 1: Impact evaluation methods in Chile, Colombia and Mexico

Period	Country	Number of impact evaluations	Number of quasi-experimental impact evaluations
2004-2016	Chile	24	19
2001-2011	Colombia	96	96

2007-2016	Mexico	18	15

Source: Own elaboration with data from García y Cardozo(2017)

Alternative approaches barely used in Latin America

A first alternative to evidence-based evaluation is the Program Theory or Change Theory. It covers different derivations of Chen's (1994) first formulation, but all seek to reconstruct the chain of results generated by the hypotheses underlying the intervention, verifying the relationship between the program and its effects, framed in the specific context of the intervention. The theory has been used by the Center of Excellence for Evaluation of the Canadian government, the European Commission andthe International Initiative for Impact Evaluation. Evaluations using this approach, for example, in the Anti-Drug Abuse Program in Taiwan (Chen, 1997), the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (White and Masset, 2007), and the evaluation of the Joint Program on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Accelerating Change (United Nations Population Funds-United Nations Children's Fund, 2013). (García y Cardozo, 2017). Their knowledge would allow Latin America to have an alternative to the expensive and complicated experimental processes.

A second very promising approach is that of Participation and Pluralism (Guijt, 2014; Rogers, 2009). The debate of those who are for and against this modality does not always use rigorous information,but participation has the advantage of allowing a complementary and plural vision to that expressed by the public administration, understanding the problems as they are experienced by the stakeholders. In addition, it can provide credibility and legitimacy to the evaluations. Monnier (1995) proposed a pluralist model based on the commitment of the parties and achieved through multiple mediations between heterogeneous actors. In this way, it renounces reaching scientifically verified conclusions in order to negotiate a politically acceptable agreement (García y Cardozo, 2017).

Participatory Evaluation is widely used in works of less technical complexity. In various countries (Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Canada, among the main ones) it is a widely accepted strategy. In Latin America, and especially in Mexico, it is always mentioned as a valuable component (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2013-2018, Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024), but in reality, it has not been utilized very much, as will be shown later. In 2021-2022, Conevalreported that a half of the programs have social participation mechanisms but not in their evaluation (Coneval, 2022).

Contributory Analyzes constitute the third alternative. This approach considersontologically and epistemologically impossibleto distinguish the net effects of a program from those caused by other factors that affect the same issue and population. Also, they critic the high cost implied as unjustifiably expensive. The evaluator's job then consists of examining the change produced by various causes and approaching to identify the contribution of each one of them to the impact of the whole, without attempting to measure it. Given the impossibility of having absolute certainty about the attribution of the impacts to the program, it aims at least to reduce uncertainty.

This approach was developed in Canada during the 1990s; currently its most prominent exponent is Mayne (2001). It has been taken up, among others, in a manual published by the Scottish Government (2009) and in a study carried out in the Australian public health sector (Biggs *et al*, 2014). A similar approach was tried with limited success in Mexico (Consejo de Evaluación del Desarrollo Social del Distrito Federal, 2011).

The fourth alternative, Complexity Approaches, are 'far from offering a unified, complete and consistent theory' (Mier, 2007: 33), but they allow overcoming extreme simplification. It is not just about multi-causality but about the interrelationships between its causal variables, which can show non-linear, turbulent, uncertain and unpredictable behaviors, and cause impacts different than the sum of the partial effects, in cases such as climate change, the pandemic of Covid 19 or the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There are few theoretical publications on the matter (Forss *et al*, 2011; Cardozo, 2011; Maldonado, unpublished) (García y Cardozo, 2017).

One of the best-known approaches is that of Complex Systems and Nonlinear Dynamics, with a strong quantitative content, developed by the Santa Fe Institute in the USA, the Brussels School, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the Autonomous University of Mexico City(UACM). Another approach, of a more qualitative nature, corresponds to complex thought, promoted in Europe mainly by Morin (2001) and Le Moigne (1999), based on constructivism. Finally, García (2006), who initially worked with Piaget, had discrepancies with the previous two approaches and developed his own complex systems approach at UNAM. In addition to those already mentioned, the complexity approach has been developed in USA by Bamberger (2021), in Netherland by Vaessen (Bamberger *et* al, 2015)and in Latin America by authors such as Carlos Eduardo Maldonado in Colombia and Carlos Reynoso in Argentina (Cardozo, 2011).

The complexity approach has been used in evaluations such as the smoke-free strategy in Ontario, Canada, the construction of highway infrastructure in 2007 in Tanzania, as well as in similar cases in Jordan and Rwanda (Forss *et al*, 2011). In contrast, no evaluation is known in Latin America that has applied it.

Participatory management and evaluation in Mexico

Of the four alternatives presented, the Program Theory or Change Theory has slowly come into use in Mexico in recent years; the Contribution approach has rarely been applied because only the Attributive Impact Measurement approach is considered rigorous; while only recently there has been some consideration of the complexity that characterizes most evaluations; and the fourth, Participatory Evaluation, to which I will refer more extensively, is mostly used on political discourse and barely applied on impact evaluation which uses the alternative quasi-experimental method.

In 2008, an article reviewed different settings: international bodies, governments and civil societyin Latin America and in particular, Mexico, concepts of participation as understood by different stakeholders, as well as their discourses and practices. Its shared insights from other national contexts (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy) and included what could constitute the best research experience on the topic: from Quebec, Canada (Cardozo, 2008).

At the time, it concluded that while there was a consensus between the theory and the political discourse in relation to the importance of developing processes of social participation and citizenship, the reality in Latin America is far from effective. In the specific case of Mexico, I added that 'progress in social participation and citizenship is only observed in its legal standards and planning, but in practice, there is no evidence of participatory management or evaluation' (Cardozo, 2008). Finally, I alluded to what I felt would be required to increase participation: 'the government should show itself willing to hand over power to civil society so that it can make decisions about its future and know how to design favourable channels; academics should help generate formal training on participation and carry out systematic research on the levels of success for processes; and, finally, citizens would need to trust in the effectiveness of their work and benefit from socioeconomic conditions that are good enough to enable them to dedicate time to association work' (Cardozo, 2008). However, lessons can always be extracted from obstacles discovered and even from errors made and so I write this article from this stance.

In 2013, a new six-year term (2012 - 2018) began under a centre-right government, PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), and this government continued with the participation pretence in the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2013-2018. In terms of evaluation, its National Coneval continued to request assignments based on documentary information, published or delivered by evaluated programmes; in other words, secondary research. This type of research is obviously characterised by the lack of opportunity that can be offered to programme benefactors and society in general to contribute to the evaluation. In exceptional cases where this has happened, (process evaluations and some impact evaluations; these being a small minority) it usually entails a simple survey with predetermined questions. Furthermore, the results are not fed back to the 'participating' group.

Political change came in 2018 when the MORENA (National Regeneration Movement) party came to power and Andrés Manuel López Obrador became President. The party describes itself as a democratic centre-left party, an opponent to neoliberal economic policies, interested in reducing corruption and high levels of inequality and poverty that exist in the country (48.5% of population in 2018, according to Coneval).

The new Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024 states that it will set up a participatory democracy that will socialise political power and involve society in big national decisions through mechanisms such as general or citizen consultations, the revocation of the mandate and community assemblies as effective participation bodies (p. 12). It adds that 'the federal government will submit strategic decisions of national interest to consultations and will ask its people regarding issues of regional or local interest. It will request the verdict of communities regarding government actions that affect or involve them, thus complying with provisions included in several articles of the constitution and in international treaties of which Mexico is a signatory...' (p27-28).

This political change removed several long-standing programmes such as *Prospera* (formerly known as *Oportunidades, Progresa y Pronasol*, in force since 1988 with minor modifications to content each time the name has changed), and *Seguro Popular* (the popular health insurance programme), childcare facilities, community kitchens, refuges for female victims of violence, etc. The justification was the lack of reduction to poverty, continued high levels of inequality, persistent deficiencies in food items and a limited compliance of social rights left by the last government, along with supposed corruption. It was argued that they would be substituted by other programmes with direct money transfers to avoid intermediation. At no point were citizens consulted to find out their opinion and the population questioned the decisions, especially in the case of early years childcare facilities and feminist demands.

At the same time, new programmes were designed such as *JóvenesConstruyendoelFuturo* (Youth Building the Future), *Sembrando Vida* (Sowing Life) and *Pensión para elBienestar de las Personas con Discapacidad Permanente* (Benefits for Individuals with Permanent Disabilities). The programme directed at Older Adults was expanded and the Institute of Health for Welfare (Insabi) was created. Once again, no participation processes were embarked upon during decision making, nor were they used in subsequent monitoring. For example, people with disabilities have insisted that monetary handouts are not enough; actions

are also required concerning occupational integration, education, capacity building and health. Yet, these action areas have not been considered in the programme. Finally, the Citizen Participation Promotion program will be eliminated in 2023.

The results of the changes made to social programme evaluations at national level remain to be seen. Coneval introduced several changes that meant that 17 new programmes, considered to be the most relevant in the new administration, were studied last year as opposed to the previous model which attempted (often superficially) to evaluate all programmes. The type of evaluation carried out became known as 'Design Evaluation with Fieldwork'. In practice, they also studied processes applied in the first months of the programme implementation, and the fieldwork mentioned in the name referred to this period rather than the design. Nevertheless, the recovery of this opportunity for participation through direct observation, interviews and focus groups is to be applauded (Coneval, April 2020) and merits further examination into the extent of the participation, that I consider strongly limited. Again, in 2021,Coneval has returned to traditional evaluations, without field work and without participation. There was a move towards Decolonizing Evaluation, but it was immediately lost, probably due to its higher cost.

As it has been shown, the new national government has only introduced few effective social participation processes. Regarding evaluation programs, it has only included a temporary andlimited participation of public officials.

Somewhat more encouraging is a process introduced at local level in 2017 concerning the design of a Constitution for Mexico City. However, despite the fact that participation was included, it did not go as far as was hoped(Canto y Vázquez, 2021);but evaluations did include citizen participation through surveys and focus groups.

In summary, the conditions required to propel national participatory processes, proposedin 2008, have still not been met.

Conclusion

The advantages and disadvantages of the exposed alternatives are the opposite of the evidence-based approach: the measurement is not as precise, but they are more feasible, they incorporate the point of view of different actors, they allow to progress in the multicausal explanation and to avoid ethical problems. They can replace or complement experimental designs. Therefore, it would be very useful to spread the theoretical and methodological alternatives of impact evaluation in Latin America with the expectation that they will be discussed and used in decolonized evaluation processes.

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