

Revisión

Evaluation of sociopolitical categories in nutritional programs and policies in Latin America

Categorías sociopolíticas evaluadas en programas y políticas nutricionales en América Latina

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Abstract

The evaluation of nutritional programs and policies has traditionally focused on analyzing the impact and biological outcomes of interventions. **Objective:** Examine whether the evaluations carried out to nutritional programs included the following sociopolitical categories: (a) the right to food, (b) the construction of citizenship, (c) citizen participation in public policy, (d) the empowerment of women, and (e) territoriality in the planning of policies. **Methods:** Comprehensive review of the literature, articles, and documents published between 2005 and 2013 including evaluations made on food and nutritional programs in different Latin American countries. **Results:** It was found that these categories were generally not examined in evaluations, and when they were, the application of their conceptual development to the evaluation process was still in its early stages. **Discussion:** The main finding is that the right to food, the construction of citizenship, citizen participation in public policy, the empowerment of women, and territoriality in the planning of policies are not among the priorities in the evaluation of nutritional programs in Latin America, although they are intended to constitute the foundation of these programs. **Conclusion:** Nutritional programs of social protection are demanding new goals and interventions. So, it is necessary to apply evaluation criteria to account for the new foundations in order to establish consistency between the discourses of governmental institutions and the reality of their actions.

Key words: Program Evaluation, Health Care Evaluation, Nutrition Policy, Policy Making.

Resumen

La evaluación de programas y políticas nutricionales se ha enfocado tradicionalmente al análisis del impacto y resultados biológicos de las intervenciones. **Objetivo:** Examinar si las evaluaciones a programas nutricionales incluyen las siguientes categorías socio-políticas: (a) El derecho a la alimentación, (b) La construcción de ciudadanía, (c) La participación ciudadana en las políticas públicas, (d) El empoderamiento de la mujer y (e) La territorialidad en las políticas de planificación. **Métodos:** Revisión integrativa de la literatura sobre artículos y documentos de evaluaciones a programas alimentarios y nutricionales en países de América Latina publicados entre 2005 y 2013. **Resultados:** Se encontró en general que en las evaluaciones no se indaga por estas categorías; en los casos en que se hace su desarrollo conceptual aplicado a los procesos de evaluación es incipiente. **Discusión:** El principal hallazgo es que las categorías sociopolíticas analizadas no se encuentran entre las prioridades en la evaluación de programas nutricionales en América Latina, aunque en la mayoría de los casos son la base de estos programas. **Conclusión:** Los programas nutricionales de protección social demandan nuevos objetivos e intervenciones. Es necesario aplicar criterios de evaluación con nuevas bases, con el fin de dar coherencia entre los discursos de las instituciones gubernamentales y sus acciones.

Palabras Clave:

Evaluación de programas, evaluación en salud, políticas de nutrición, elaboración de políticas

Introduction

In Latin America, the role of evaluation was placed in the service of state reform during the 80s and 90s [1]. During these decades, the demand for the evaluation of public interventions and the need to develop new policies arose as a strategic question in response to a period marked by a severe economic crisis with critical consequences, such as an increase in unemployment and the impoverishment of much of the population. These realities called for greater rationality in decision making based on evaluation processes to increase the actions used to minimize problems [2, 3].

According to Solarte, evaluation processes are based on two paradigms: *Post-positivist* and *Constructivist*. The first of these paradigms proposes the need to approach reality from different perspectives using modified experimental methods complemented by qualitative methods. The Constructivist paradigm, in contrast, questions the difference between the subject and object and the distinction between the internal and external aspects of the individual. Constructivists use dialectical and hermeneutical approaches in which individual construction is performed through the interaction between the researcher and the research subjects, looking for a consensus in the construction of knowledge [2].

Cavalcanti classifies the evaluation models of social programs based on an analysis of contemporary authors, proposing the following groups: 1) *classical analytical or quantitative*, 2) *global alternative or qualitative*, and 3) *mixed (global analytical, classical alternative)* [4]. The first group includes models that emphasize quantitative information, which is outlined through explanatory epistemological paradigms and objectivist positions. The models included in the global alternative or qualitative group were developed to understand, interpret, and provide meaning to the actions and activities occurring in social programs. These models can also be regarded as naturalist, and one of their main features is their emphasis on the role of beneficiaries or participants as key players in assessing what is being evaluated. The third group includes the

so-called mixed models (global analytical, classical-alternative) and combines the characteristics of the two previous groups. It combines quantitative and qualitative information in addition to giving a central role to the users of the programs [4].

Based on the above, we find that evaluations models classified as traditional, analytical, or quantitative are mainly used in the public sphere. This type of evaluation aims to make judgments on the specific aspects of a policy, program, or project and, based on its conclusions, make recommendations to contribute to their improvement. To this end, a set of ordered and related information is used as a methodological framework [5].

An analysis of the evaluation methods of large-scale nutritional programs in Latin America found that most evaluations focus on the impact and outcomes of programs using quantitative studies and biological indicators [6, 7]. Other studies have established that this type of evaluation emphasizes the technical, economic, and financial aspects of programs, tending mainly to determine the cost-benefit ratio and compare the profitability of interventions [7-11]. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) the impact evaluation is the most commonly used method to evaluate social programs in Latin America. This type of evaluation aims to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions, adopting an outcome-based public administration model [9-12].

This trend has led to serious criticism based on the lack of socio-political and cultural dimensions, which are difficult to translate into quantifiable terms, in the evaluation processes [8]. Some authors argue that the applied evaluation and monitoring tools or approaches are often ineffective and overlook information that can help to understand the dynamics related to social change [13].

Nutritional programs in Latin America today

In Latin America, it is increasingly common to find social programs, sectorial policies, and reforms designed following the “social investment” approach [14], which is based on the development of human capital perspective emphasizing on: children and mother education, health and nutrition status [15].

Programs that seek to develop human capital construct a particular notion of law and citizenship, as mentioned by Serrano: “social policy not only operates to administer social services or repair the damage generated by the market but is also a system that builds national integration, citizenship, and community” [16]. Cecchini and Martinez refer to this trend as “social protection as a guarantee of citizenship,” and it ultimately seeks the realization of the economic, social, and cultural rights of the population [17].

The objective of this study was to examine whether the evaluations carried out to nutritional programs included the following sociopolitical categories: (a) the right to food, (b) the construction of citizenship, (c) citizen participation in public policy, (d) the empowerment of women, and (e) territoriality in the planning of policies. These categories were selected for the following two reasons. First, as mentioned above, most food and nutritional programs developed in Latin America claim to be committed to the promotion of rights, human development, and the fight against inequality. Second, we believe that these programs have a direct effect on the building of relationships between the state and citizens, with a particular impact on the lives of women, who are usually their beneficiaries and/or co-managers. The mentioned sociopolitical

categories make part of a model proposed by us to evaluate large scale nutritional programs. A wider definition of the model as a whole and each category is described elsewhere [18].

The right to food

The right to food is defined as “the human right to consume food in a dignified manner.” It means that all members of society should have constant access to food that is sufficient not only in terms of quantity but also with regard to adequate nutritional quality, safety, and cultural acceptability for the person who consumes it. “It is equally crucial that access to food be stable and ecological and socially sustainable” [19, 20].

Construction of citizenship

Citizenship is the result of relations between state and people in a specific territory. It constitutes a set of rights, privileges, and duties, creating a system that determines the nature of the relationships between individuals and the government’s systems [21]. Although other entities are part of social protection systems and participate in social programs, it is clear that the state is the main actor, serving as the leader and executor [16]. Thus, among the ultimate goals of any social policy is the creation and preservation of a social space belonging to the socio-political community [22].

Citizen participation in public policy

The participation of citizens refers to intervention of civil society entities on public issues to transform the power relations as well as material, social and political conditions [23]. People participate to obtain goods and services and participation as the same time is a tool to democratize social bonds and influencing state structures and public policies [23, 24].

Empowering women

The empowerment of women is defined as “a personal and political process whose personal, intimate, and corporal lines cannot be separated from its political connotations to challenge power relations lived within family relationships, where the subjects live daily and in turn are part of the social order” [25]. Empowerment is the most important strategy for women to gain position, individually or collectively, through participatory and transformative actions [26] and, as mentioned by other authors, refers to “the awareness of their rights in order to participate from a more solid position in decision-making and be able to influence those decisions” [18, 27].

Territoriality in policy planning

The territorial policy approach aims to conceive and build the social development in a different way. It seeks to intervene the neighborhoods taking into account the wider range of community needs instead of the traditional sectorial planning. Through its multidimensional character, “the recognition of this feature should lead to strategies to overcome purely sectorial goals and to address the comprehensiveness of the multiple variables that make up a more participatory and co-managed society in its own development” [28].

As mentioned earlier, the objective of this study was to identify whether the socio-political categories described were included in the evaluations of food and nutritional programs in Latin America. The study also examined how these categories are conceived by the different evaluation

actors, such as the institutions that develop programs, the scholars who carry them out, and the beneficiaries of the programs.

This article is part of a larger study named: "Elaboration of a model to evaluate food and nutrition social programs by combining methods" aimed to propose a model that overcomes some weakness found in the most used methods of evaluation of nutritional programs [18].

Methodology

A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted, based on scholarly journal articles and reports from governmental and non-governmental institutions. The comprehensive review method allows for the inclusion of research using different methodological approaches, including experimental and non-experimental works as well as practical experiences and policy analysis. Its objective is to develop a theory and provide practical information [29, 30]. There are various methods for performing comprehensive reviews; however, some patterns should be followed when carrying them out [31]. In this study, the following steps were performed:

1. Identification of the research questions. The examined questions were the following: Do the evaluations of food and nutritional programs developed in Latin America include the socio-political categories of the right to food, construction of citizenship, citizen participation in public policy, women's empowerment, and territoriality in policy planning? If so, how are these categories conceived by the different actors in the evaluation? The assessed actors were defined as the institutions performing programs, the scholars conducting evaluations, and the program beneficiaries.

2. Definition of the criteria for selection and search. The databases used to search for the articles included Scielo, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and BIREME. The following Spanish and English key words were used: "*Evaluación and políticas públicas,*" "*Evaluación and políticas sociales,*" "*Evaluación and programas sociales,*" "*Evaluación and seguridad alimentaria,*" "*Programas de transferencia condicionada,*" "*Public policy and evaluation,*" "*Social policy and evaluation,*" "*Social programs and evaluation,*" "*Food security and evaluation,*" and "*Conditional cash transfer and evaluation*".

The criteria for inclusion and exclusion are as follows. First, articles published between January 2005 and December 2013 in English, Spanish, or Portuguese and available in full text were selected. The search yielded a total of 719 articles. Second, items with evaluation programs focusing on countries outside Latin America, those that did not assess population programs but interventions for small groups or groups with a specific health condition, clinical studies, evaluations not focusing on food and/or nutritional aspects, and repeated items were excluded. This process resulted in the selection of 52 items (Figure 1).

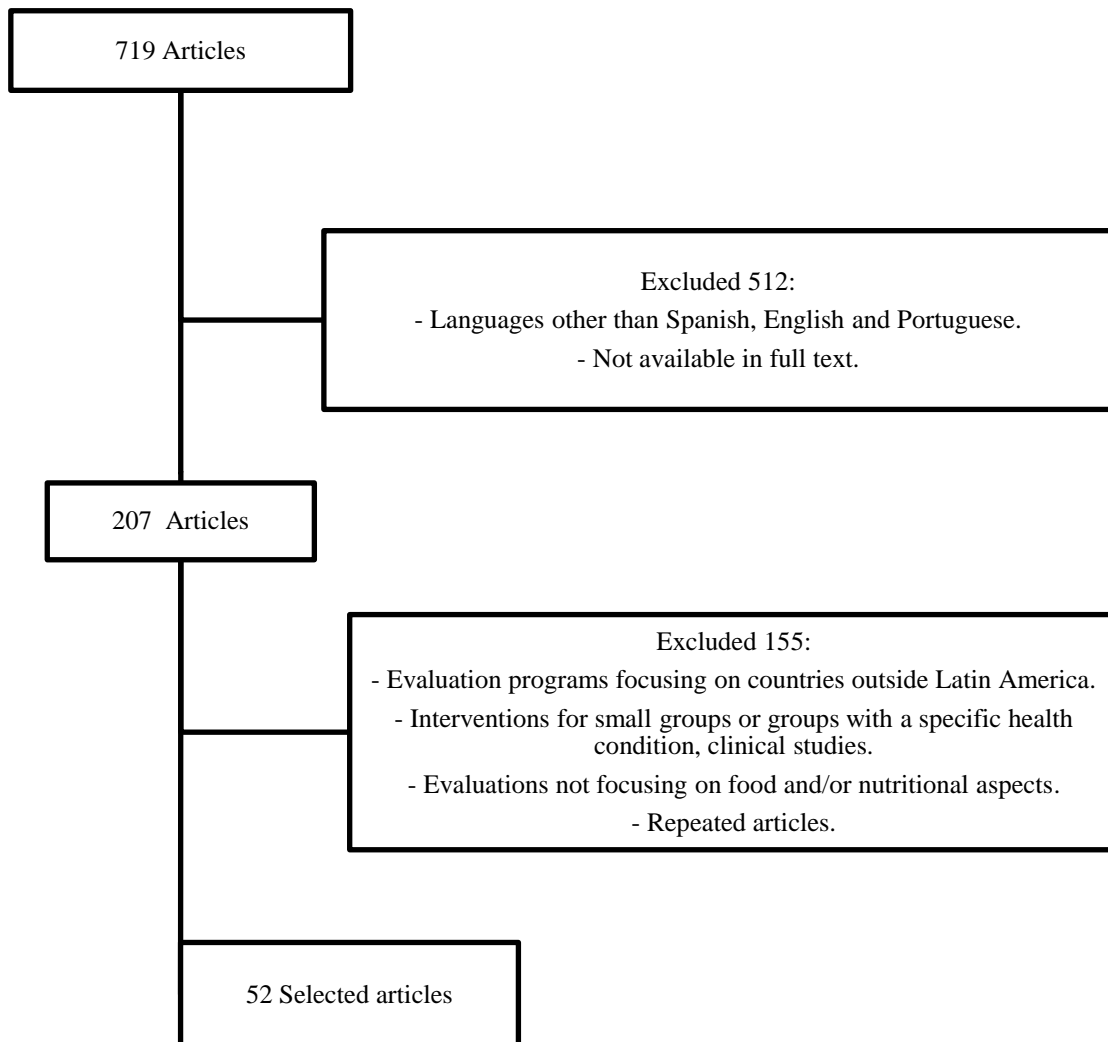


Figure 1. Flowchart of literature review process

Source: Author's elaboration

To search for reports on the subject from governmental and non-governmental institutions, the public websites of various organizations were reviewed using the deliberate search strategy. Evaluations of social programs on some aspects of nutrition during the established time period were selected. In addition, a Spanish language Google search was conducted using the exact words “*evaluación de programas sociales*” (“evaluation of social programs”) and including specific time intervals according to the inclusion criteria; 332 articles were found. In *Google Scholar*, a search with the same words “*evaluación de programas sociales*” (“evaluation of social programs”), restricted to the established time period, in the Spanish language, and excluding references and citations was performed and obtained 751 records, for a total of 1083 documents. In both cases, the exclusion criteria set out in the preceding paragraph were applied, leading to a final total of 82 reports from institutional websites and Google.

3. *Evaluations of the studies included in the review.* After applying the criteria mentioned above, no other conditions were applied for the inclusion of evaluations in the analysis, nor were specific methodological requirements formulated.

4. *Definition of information to be extracted from the selected studies.* After having the selected articles and reports we proceeded to make a first level analysis with a descriptive approach in which these general criteria were identified: name of the program, country, type of program, level of implementation (National, regional, local), year of publication, object of the evaluation, the institution that made it, the methods of the evaluation, the approach of the evaluation, the methodological design and the moment of the evaluation (ex-ante, ex post). It is important to highlight that the above mentioned criteria were applied to all the texts. Nevertheless it was not possible to identify some components of the analysis in few cases.

A second analytical level looked for the core concepts prioritized of our study: the right to food, the building of citizenship, citizen participation in public policies, the empowerment of women and territoriality in policy planning.

To identify this information, coding of all texts was performed using the AtlaTi6.0 program, which allows for encoding text and the subsequent recovery of the coded key citations. Categories and sub-categories for analysis were created, and a network of relationships between the codes, categories, and text extracts was established. Additionally, quantitative information found in the analyzed texts was exported into Microsoft Excel for analysis.

Finally, the codes and the quotations identified in texts were classified depending on their origin in the following groups: a) Characteristics of the program, b) Theoretical basis of the evaluators, c) Findings of evaluators and d) Opinions or recommendations of the evaluators.

The research protocol of this study was approved by the Bioethical Committee of the Sede de Investigación Universitaria (SIU) of University of Antioquia in the document: Acta de aprobación número 13-11-546.

Results

Interpretation of the results.

Characteristics of the analyzed evaluations

In total, 52 articles between 2005 to 2014 and 82 reports 2005 to 2013, were analyzed. Reports are defined as published evaluations in documents found on the web, specifically on the pages of governmental and non-governmental organizations. It was found that evaluations published in academic journal articles were carried out by universities (80%), then by governmental organizations (12%) and finally by organizations of experts (8%). On the other hand the evaluations published in reports are more heterogeneous: most were made by the organizations of experts (58%), followed by universities (25%), governmental organizations (7%) and finally international agencies such as the I.D.B. (Inter-American Development Bank), the WB (World Bank) and FAO (10%).

Characteristics of the evaluated programs

According to the percentage of completed evaluations by type of program, it was found that 66% of the evaluations corresponded to conditional transfer programs, mostly belonging to Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* and Mexico's *Opportunities* programs. The other evaluated programs were maternal-infant and food support or food security programs (10% each), supplementation and support programs (6%), and food and nutritional education programs, programs for workers and other programs (less than 5%).

Socio-political categories analyzed in the evaluations

The following socio-political categories were found in the evaluation processes of food and nutritional programs in Latin America.

The right to food

The inclusion of the right to food as a category in the evaluations of nutritional programs was found only in two cases. One was in the evaluation of the Universal Allowance per Child Program in Argentina, and the other was in evaluations carried out by the Food and Agriculture Organization "FAO". First, it is highlighted that for some evaluators, the right to food should be integrated with other rights to make them effective in practice. For example, an evaluation of school food programs conducted by FAO in eight countries highlights the need to progressively integrate the role of school food as an important policy for food and nutritional security toward the fulfillment of the human right to food, which is also linked to other children's rights such as education and health.

In this sense, we also found a debate on the role of conditionalities, with some authors arguing that these are obstacles to guaranteeing human rights and universal programs and policies.

"From a rights-based approach, conditionalities represent important limits to be considered, particularly when these limits are punitive in nature, while their non-compliance affects the full receipt of the benefit or becomes grounds for exclusion." PIIAR Theoretical basis of the evaluators.

A proposal to evaluate rights is presented from the point of view of the progress of a specific policy or program toward universality as a right without restrictions or conditionalities.

“It is time for conditionalities to be reviewed and mechanisms strengthened so that the state can ensure effective access to social policies that are universal in nature and unconditional for every person, whether child, elderly, disabled, formal worker, or informal worker.” P11AR Opinions or recommendations of the evaluators

Construction of citizenship

In our review, we found that in general, the most common form in which the programs conceived of their actions toward the “beneficiaries, is *welfarism*. These programs do not conceive their participants are citizens; by contrast, they are seen as individuals with particular disadvantages who require targeted intervention, as expressed in one of the analyzed evaluations:

“The beneficiaries of this system of social protection are people living in structural poverty, are under the poverty line, and belong to groups with special needs.” P150BRA Findings of evaluators

When examining the notion of citizenship held by evaluators, it is perceived that they consider the programs and interventions to be welfarist strategies aimed at the most vulnerable and poorest populations, following a similar line to that expressed as the basis for the programs. For this reason, evaluators focus their research on the registration and targeting processes of the programs, as presented in an evaluation of a program in Brazil:

“Problems of a lack of inspection in the transfer of benefits were evidenced in this work; once the families met the profile required by the program, they received benefits. Nevertheless, it seems that the Bolsa Familia Program serves, in fact, the neediest families.” P30BRA Findings of evaluators

The beneficiaries of the programs also have their own notion of welfare:

“There is another similar element here, both among the recipients of Families in Action and the beneficiaries of Bolsa Familia: the beneficiaries of these two programs do not contemplate the benefits they receive as a right; on the contrary, they consider them “aid given by the government” or “that fell from the sky” when asked whether they would classify the programs as a right or as aid.” P34BRACOL Findings of evaluators

Citizen participation in public policy

The reviewed evaluations identified the actions of participation and social control, in which the beneficiaries take part in the verification of compliance with the provision of the programs. In evaluations in Mexico on the supplements provided by the Opportunities program, it was found that:

“in all the studied communities, there are committees composed of community members, almost always women, tasked to report, monitor, and supervise the proper distribution of supplements and other benefits granted by the program.” P86MEX Findings of evaluators

Beginning with the conception stage of the programs, it can be seen that the participation of citizens is regarded as a responsibility that rests largely on them because:

“the proper functioning of the Social Accountability Committees depends on the will and motivation of the beneficiaries to participate; an area of opportunity is found in the propagation of the importance of social accountability toward the beneficiaries in the form WMF (Working Mothers and single Fathers).” P132ME Findings of evaluators

More democratic participation perspectives are also found:

“the government’s mission is to guide, conceptually and programmatically, social policy around social integration (strengthening the social fabric, promoting bonds of solidarity) and social inclusion (building inclusion ramps) in order to effectuate and exercise rights through the genuine participation of the social whole. From this perspective, it is possible to make advances in the construction of citizenship and the consolidation of democracy.” P37AR Attributes of programs

Some evaluations investigate social participation in municipalities and neighborhoods by examining whether people belong to or at least know about committees to participate:

“Knowledge of the bodies of participation is assessed by a) knowledge of the existence of the Municipal Health Council; b) participation in the Health Council; c) participation in a discussion forum on health problems.” P36BRA Theoretical basis of the evaluators

We also found that some nutritional programs are created to strength coordination and to create networking among institutions from the public and private sectors, likewise civil society organizations, educational institutions, universities, and international agencies:

“Crecer (proper name meaning Grow) was a national strategy of social development created in 2007 through the cooperation and partnership between public authorities (national, regional, and local governments) and private entities (NGOs, international cooperation organizations, and civil society) working together on issues of poverty reduction and social exclusion. The Crecer strategy coordinated many institutions, ministries, and programs in the field of social development.” P151PE Attributes of programs

Empowering women

The analysis of this category in the evaluations, found some debates regarding the role of women at the program strategies and the ways in which gender equity is evaluated. The leading role played by women in the programs is generally considered to be a part of women’s empowerment and is presented as an advancement and recognition; nonetheless, it was also questioned because, according to some evaluators, this central role requires women to perform domestic activities and care for children, limiting their ability to venture into other areas such as employment and education.

“There is a tendency of public policies with a gender bias to strengthen the value placed on women's traditional reproductive role; however, in the design of each program and in official documents, women are given preference as beneficiaries of the policy, seeking the possibility of expanding their power (empowerment) and autonomy.” P34BRACOL Findings of evaluators

Some evaluations show signs of progress in gender equality issues but also support the existence of certain problems faced by women. In Mexico, a study of processes in the Daycare Centers program showed the following:

“The role of women in the workplace has changed dramatically in recent decades. In the 1950s, the participation of this sector of the population in economic activities in Mexico was 13.5%. By 1995, it was 36.8%, and in 2009, the participation of women reached 40.8%. The increased participation of women in economic activities does not mean, however, that men are taking on more care and domestic activities. This has led to the problem known as the “care crisis,” in which paid wage work and domestic non-paid work are not balanced within families.” P132ME Findings of evaluators

With regard to how the empowerment of women is evaluated, we found that women are generally expected to achieve empowerment as a result of the actions of the social programs and its proper operation. This effect should be considered an outcome in the family and social conditions in which they live. However, the results can vary depending on country conditions and the programs themselves. In Haiti, for example, the following was expected from a strategy based on conditional transfer programs:

“This measure refers to the principle of “anti-exploitation,” which refers to leading a life free from all types of economic dependence that make women vulnerable to the misuse of their bodies by others.” P154CE Attributes of programs

In Brazil, in contrast, based on the activities and functioning of the *Bolsa Familia* program, it is noted that its interventions had the following effects:

“increased transparency of the beneficiaries as consumers because the benefit provided them with greater purchasing power; affirmation of the authority of those women in the domestic space, derived largely from the purchasing power provided by the benefit, which necessarily causes changes in traditional gender relations; and changes in the beneficiaries' perceptions of themselves as citizens, mainly due to the regulation of their documents as a prerequisite for the connection to the program.” P14BRA Findings of evaluators

Territoriality in policy planning

Regarding this aspect, it was found that evaluations inquire first about the physical infrastructure and human resources of programs to meet the conditionalities of education and health as part of conditional cash transfer programs. Second, they evaluate the connections achieved by the programs and policies to provide better care for families. Finally, it was found that studies are conducted on the coverage achieved by the programs relative to the population of a given geographical area.

The most commonly evaluated social services in the territories of the reviewed studies are health and education. One possible explanation for this is that these two factors are the foundation for the future achievement of appropriate human capital development in these countries. This is demonstrated in the evaluation of the Universal Allowance per Child program in Argentina as follows:

“It is also essential to discuss the institutional capacities of the health and education sectors, both in terms of their national leadership and the provincial jurisdictions, which are responsible for effective provision. This is in the context of the deterioration and lack of continuous investment it has caused, impacting coverage, quality, and social inclusion.” P11AR Opinions or recommendations of the evaluators

In relation to the distribution of policies and programs that occurs within a territory, it was found that this trend has been developing to provide people with better opportunities, making these interventions more assertive and comprehensive.

“The relation between the Bolsa Familia program and other public policies reinforces the concept of poverty as a complex phenomenon that is not restricted to inadequate income; therefore, their struggle should not be limited to the transfer of financial resources. Along these lines, it becomes essential to link this program with actions and complementary services that enable the development of the families’ capacities and the expansion of their options, which significantly contributes to their social inclusion.” P130CEP Attributes of programs

Finally, on the issue of territoriality, it was found that some studies evaluate program coverage by geographic area as well as the mechanisms used for selecting territories in which the programs are run. The selection of the territories in Mexico begins with the information acquired on the programs implemented to develop new strategies to reach populations that do not have social interventions:

“The program operates in locations that are not part of the service range of the Opportunities Program or the Diconsa Program. For this sector, the Administration of the Opportunities Program submitted the list of locations where it will not intervene to the Responsible Administrative Unit (Unidad Administrativa Responsable - UARP) for the operation of the program. For the first year of operations of the Food Program in Marginal Areas (Programa Alimentario en Zonas Marginadas - PAZM), the Opportunities Program reported that it would not intervene in 90,492 locations.” P94MEX Attributes of programs

Discussion

The main finding of this study in that sociopolitical categories analyzed: the right to food, the construction of citizenship, citizen participation in public policy, the empowerment of women, and territoriality in the planning of policies are not among the priorities in the evaluation of nutritional programs in Latin America, although, in most cases, they are intended to constitute the foundation of these programs. It appears that the institutions that promote program evaluations, such as international financial institutions and government agencies in each country have not developed evaluation models to incorporate these new program objectives within the dimensions to be evaluated. However this study also found that contributions made by some evaluators may be considered an initial step toward more clear ways to evaluate those aspects.

Related to the right to food the main contribution made by some authors is that conditionalities such as those set up in the Cash Transfer Programs and even inclusion criteria such as household poverty or socioeconomic conditions of neighborhoods constitute a negation to this human right. Changes in those requirements to reach universal coverage may be an indicator to evaluate this category.

It is important to highlight that “the right to food” has been developed both from the theoretical and practical perspectives and could be re-examined to develop new evaluations tools [20, 32]. For instance, the social and economic rights agreements signed by most Latin American states have defined that social rights are characterized by being universally guaranteed and that must be progressive, meaning that they cannot weaken the quality of goods and services delivered [33].

About the category Construction of citizenship, in most of analyzed evaluations in this study, beneficiaries are considered as passive recipients of governmental aids due to particular conditions that make them unable to support themselves. According to some authors, this kind of relationship state-beneficiary is called welfarism; it is defined as a strategy of social protection created by European colonialist countries [16, 34, 35] that has been transformed but whose foundations remain the same. In this sense, our findings coincide with the characterization made by Benelli and Costa-Rosa. According to these authors, in some Latin American countries, there is now a renewed welfarism, which they identified as “social care as state policy,” that seeks supposedly “to promote care of individual social rights as a duty of State and society, aiming to eradicate poorness”; however, “it continues to be permeated by a naturalizing vision of the social problems and particularly of the poorness phenomena” [36]. In other words in this new vision the structural causes of unequal opportunities and poverty are not aimed to be removed by social policies.

Related to the category citizen participation in public policies, it was found that beneficiaries do not take part in the top levels where decisions on the nutritional programs are made nor have control on the allocation of financial and physical resources. On the contrary, they are responsible by operative tasks to guarantee adequate functioning of the programs in the inferior levels. The above mentioned: right to food, construction of citizenship and citizen participation in public policy are strongly related each other. Due to welfarism and low participation in the strategic decisions the idea of charity more than rights is reinforced in program beneficiaries.

Special attention deserves evaluation of empowering of women due to they are the beneficiaries in most programs and usually they contribute to carry out the tasks related to the delivery of services and goods. Besides they are responsible of demonstrating the household fulfillment of requirements to improve human capital such as children school attendance and health prevention programs check-ups. Although most programs insist on enhance social and private role of women it is clear that indicators to measure those achievements have not been set up and debates persist on the kind of effects that programs are having in terms of women emancipation because some may reinforce cultural stereotypes that circumscribe women to the private sphere and/or overwhelm them with other domestic duties. Related to the presence of this debate in evaluations a study aimed to explore the gender relations drawn from the program “Oportunidades” in México found that “gender relations are not confined purely to household institutions such as the family and conjugal relationships; they are reproduced across other patterns of social interaction, in this case through the fulfilment of Oportunidades programme requirements” [37].

Another research on the same topic highlight that social programs have to balance their goals in terms of children wellbeing with women needs and expectations: “Above all, women need a reliable income source and sustainable routes out of poverty, ones that are at the same time more realistic and imaginative than the maternalist options that are currently in place. The limits of programs like Oportunidades are evident, therefore, not only in their selective approach to tackling social need, but in their narrow vision of how to overcome poverty” [38].

Our findings are in part similar to those found in a study aimed to explore the relationship between rights and empowerment in social protection programs fighting on hunger in India, Kenya and Ethiopia. The author concludes that achievements on this relationship not always are connected; some programs produce higher impact in terms of social networks and beneficiary participation in program goals and she explains it in part by the particular social, political and cultural contexts and historical processes found in each country analyzed [39]. In conclusion, nutritional programs of social protection are demanding new goals and interventions. So, it is necessary to apply evaluation criteria to account for the new foundations in order to establish consistency between the discourses of governmental institutions and the reality of their actions.

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Conflict of interest

We have no conflict of interest to declare

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