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# BOOK REVIEW. *INFORME DE EVALUACIÓN DE LA POLÍTICA DE DESARROLLO SOCIAL EN MÉXICO 2008, CONEVAL*

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**T**he Evaluation Report on Social Development Policy in Mexico was published by the National Council for Social Development Policy Evaluation (*CONEVAL*) in 2008. The Council is one of the constituting elements of the new institutional framework to evaluate the public sector performance, particularly social development policies that were put in place mostly during the first decade of this century. This report is undoubtedly an example of the efforts to create instruments of governance that encourage the dissemination of information, transparency, and mechanisms to make the Mexican federal government accountable.

To understand the significance of this report it is worth remembering the composition and structure of the Council. Even though *CONEVAL* was born as, and still is, a decentralized agency of the federal government—according to the 2004 General Social Development Act (*LGDS*), certain peculiarities in the decision making structure convey an interesting degree of autonomy. The internal governance structure of this agency includes a group of professionals made up by the head of the institution, in this case the Executive Secretary, representatives of the Federal Executive Power (*SEDESOL*, *SHCP* and *SFP*), and a majority made up by six independent academics from renowned public and private research and teaching institutions. This group of academics contributes, debates, discusses, and makes decisions concerning methodologies for evaluating social development policies and programs, as well as for measuring poverty. They also analyze and interpret the results of internal and external evaluation studies of different social policy areas and programs.

It is precisely this structure of internal governance of the institution that makes information published by *CONEVAL* different both in tone and scheme from government reports in the traditional sense. Furthermore, the 2008 report, the first of its kind, includes information that was generated based on two basic pillars that represent the functions of this organization; first, the measurement of poverty and, second, the evaluation of social programs. In addition, a variety of national and international statistical information sources, which include extremely relevant data, are used to evaluate the situation of social development and related public policies. The *CONEVAL* evaluation report is attractive for academics as well as for citizens interested in topics concerning social development because of the amount and quality of the information provided. But, above all, it should become a tool for decision makers and for those responsible for designing social policies in this country.

The report has two basic chapters and one chapter for conclusions. The first describes several social development indicators and compares the beginning of the 90s with the mid-2000s. The second chapter presents an evaluation of social development policies using different studies and evaluations that were coordinated by this organization.

The first chapter shows the current situation and evolution of a group of indicators that are essential to understand Mexican social reality. It presents a wide array of indicators ranging from the basic and essential, such as life expectancy, to basic service coverage and different education measures for the Mexican population. The information provided undoubtedly reveals some significant improvements in the provision of basic infrastructure. An example of progress is the percentage of households with no electricity or water among the poorest 20 percent of the population, which decreased from 19.9 to 3.1 percent, and from 43 to 23 percent, respectively, during the period 1992-2006. In addition, education figures show improvements in terms of school attendance and student permanence among the poorest sectors of the population.

The report highlights some of the most visible deficiencies in social development such as maternal mortality, middle and high education coverage, and quality of health and education services.

An important part of this report focuses on describing the results of measuring poverty using income. The document describes the figures resulting from using the methodology for measuring poverty using income with National Household Income and Expenses Survey (*ENIGH*) data for different years. It is worth mentioning that when this report was published *ENIGH* 2008 data were not available and neither were multidimensional poverty measurement results, which became available in 2009.

The report also includes a section that compares poverty measurement results for different periods of time. This is an essential starting point for a productive debate on the accomplishments and failures of social development policies in Mexico. Other commonly used poverty measurements, such as those used by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, are also shown. Even though they differ from *CONEVAL* figures as a result of methodologies used, the same tendencies are observed.

Of particular interest to understand the situation of millions of Mexicans who live in poverty as well as the impact of social policies on this situation is a decomposition of the variation in household income sources, and the relationship between economic growth, poverty and the behavior of the different sources of income.

Using *ENIGH* data for the period analyzed in the report we can appreciate that among the different factors that can explain the slow reduction of poverty in the country we find the absence of growth in real salaries, which have practically remain unchanged for 14 years despite significant employment growth, particularly in the informal sector. In fact, the report states that probably the most significant reason for the slow decrease in poverty between 1992 and 2006 is the fact that economic growth, which generates formal employment and increases real salaries, has been extremely low.

The section on social cohesion is brief due to a certain extent to the obvious theoretical and methodological complexity of the concept itself. Its inclusion as a topic related to social development is the result of the inclusion of this topic in the *LGDS*. Three topics are included here; first, economic inequality, second, the participation of women in elected positions, and third, perceptions of discrimination.

The report includes a summary of valuable instruments created by *CONEVAL* for decision making in social policy; they are the 2005 state and municipal poverty level maps, which were prepared using the econometric procedure by Elbers et al. (2003), since at that time there was no state level information available. With the application in 2008 of the *ENIGH* Socioeconomic Condition Module (*MCS-ENIGH 2008*), and in accordance with *LGDS*' mandate to measure poverty at the state levels, starting on this year multidimensional poverty will be measured biannually at national and state levels. This information will be available at the *CONEVAL* Web page by the end of 2009.

Readers can also find relevant information on the following topics: social development gaps and inequalities, environment, and situation of the indigenous population. The social development gap index is an indicator estimated by the Council based on the method of principal components using indicators for education, access to health services, basic services, housing quality and space, and household assets. The source of this information is the Second Population and Housing Count 2005.

The aggregate assessment of governmental social policy instruments in the first chapter includes two topics; the first is an analysis of the impact of government transfers on the income of poor households; the second is social security and protection.

The report clearly indicates that the objectives of transfer programs for which information can be obtained using *ENIGH* data, i.e. *OPORTUNIDADES* and *PROCAMPO*, are structural or long-term objectives. Despite the fact that neither program was designed to reduce poverty through an immediate increase in household income, but to improve the situation of producers and increase human capital in households to break structural factors, an estimate of the impact of these programs on poverty using income shows that this kind of programs contribute very little, particularly in rural areas, to increasing household income to help families overcome poverty in the short term.

On the subject of social security and protection, the data show the great challenges faced by this country. In 2006, the percentage of household heads who were not affiliated to social security institutions (*IMSS*, *ISSSTE*, *PEMEX*, *SEDENA* or *SEMAR*) was 71.0 percent. The situation of the poorest population is even more precarious. Even though the social programs that include certain social security elements such as healthcare have expanded their coverage over the last fifteen years in order to include the poorest sectors, they do not represent a coordinated and complete structure capable of ensuring a minimum floor of social protection and health for large sectors of the population.

In the second chapter, readers will be able to find a general assessment of current social development policies and programs in the country. The main topics presented are government expenditure and its evolution, challenges in the institutionalization of social development policies, issues in defining social development, existing regulations and failure to observe social rights, program dispersion, the distributive incidence of expenditure and federal programs, and lack of institutional coordination.

As regards to evaluation, one of the greatest innovations during the last decade is undoubtedly its institutionalization, understood as mandatory by independent agents. This report presents a summary of the results of the 2007-2008 independent evaluations of federal programs. This summary is very useful to identify the specific challenges of social programs to be addressed in order to improve government performance but, above all, to transform social development policies into an effective means to improve social development indicators in the country.

The report ends with a series of punctual recommendations grouped in several ways: one is by type of institutional actor responsible for the improvements, e.g., Federal Executive Power, States and Municipalities, Congress, Social Development Commissions (Intersecretarial and National), another is by topic (education and health), and the last is by program.

In my opinion, one of the greatest challenges in the evaluation of government programs anywhere in the world is to be able to generate, based on studies, research and strict high quality analysis, information that is useful to make government actions more transparent and ensure accountability. It is CONEVAL's duty to keep preparing this kind of documents, which provide an integral assessment, precise critique, and tangible recommendations to serve the fundamental purpose of evaluation of the public sector.

## References

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