

# Book Review

## *Aprendiendo o emulando? Cómo se difunden las políticas sociales en América Latina*

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Osorio Gonnet, Cecilia. 2018. *Aprendiendo o emulando? Cómo se difunden las políticas sociales en América Latina*. Santiago: LOM Ediciones. 294pp.

Over the past three decades conditional cash transfers (CCT) have become a widespread instrument to fight poverty. This has led to a massive expansion of CCT programmes, which are now present in several countries. In *Aprendiendo o emulando? Cómo se difunden las políticas sociales en América Latina*, Cecilia Osorio Gonnet addresses the diffusion of CCTs in the Latin American region. Osorio's work differs from other studies on the same topic (Sugiyama 2011; Oliveira 2018) since it focuses on the actors that take part in the process of diffusion and on their motivations, as well as on the mechanisms that allow for the process to happen.

The analysis is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and in an extremely rich literature review. The first two chapters are dedicated to the state of the art both in what concerns the literature on policy diffusion and on CCTs, and chapter 3 contains a presentation of the methodology.

In chapter 4, Osorio uses a data set from 18 Latin American countries between 1990 to 2008 to demonstrate that the adoption of this type of programme is the result of a diffusion process. Diffusion can be understood as a process in which 'the *adoption of innovation by member(s) of a social system is communicated through certain channels and over time and triggers mechanisms that increase the probability of its adoption by other members who have not yet adopted it*' (Levi-Faur 2005: 23). Diffusion is measured in two ways: as a percentage of countries that had CCTs in the year before and as a fixed effect related

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to different waves of policy adoption. The author's hypothesis is tested with a regression appropriated to rare events, controlled by GDP, Gini, ideology of the president's party, and some other sociodemographic variables. The results show that diffusion variables have a significant effect on CCT adoption.

The author's main argument is that a regional epistemic community – a group of actors that gathers around an idea and that promotes it in order to place it in the political agenda (Haas 1992) – has identified CCTs as an interesting instrument to fight poverty and vulnerability and has acted as to encourage governments to adhere to these initiatives. This argument is developed in chapter 5, where the author makes a compelling demonstration of the existence of this community by identifying its members and by discussing its actions to promote the programmes. This epistemic community was able to build a consensus on the importance of CCT, presenting them as the most adequate means of dealing with poverty and vulnerability.

The book draws on two in-depth case studies of the creation of cash transfer initiatives in Chile and Ecuador. These case studies correspond to the last two chapters of the book (chapters 6 and 7). The adoption of *Chile Solidario* in Chile and of *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (BDH) in Ecuador are compared in order to shed light on the diffusion mechanisms that can be identified in this specific diffusion process. The author claims that in these two cases three different mechanisms were used – learning, emulation and moderate coercion.

In the Chilean case, the programme was adopted because there was a domestic motivation to fight poverty. The fact that the country has high financial and institutional capacity makes it more capable of designing its own programme and less dependent on external financial loans to fund its implementation. The high institutional capacity also accounts for *Chile Solidario's* complexity – which is considerably higher than the regional average – and for the innovative elements that it comprises. For example, in terms of innovation, the programme's most interesting feature is its psychosocial component. Learning is an important mechanism since policy makers were able to look at other experiences implemented locally and abroad and to absorb knowledge regarding this instrument and then make the necessary adjustments to the context, resulting in a programme that combines both the core elements of CCTs with considerably innovative components.

In the case of Ecuador, an unconditional cash transfer was implemented to face a major economic turnover (*Bono Solidario*). When transformed into BDH and into a CCT, international financial organisations played a major role in its formulation, since financial loans were conditioned on the adoption of specific measures. The programme displays a series of features that are related to this international intervention rather than the result of domestic debates. At this time (2003) there was already a significant consensus regarding the importance of CCTs in the region. Thus, two mechanisms were identified in the formulation of BDH – moderate coercion and emulation.

The comparison of the two cases allows the author to suggest that diffusion mechanisms vary according to the actors and institutions that take part in the process of policy formulation. In the presence of high institutional capacity, there is a tendency to identify

a learning mechanism. Conversely, where institutional capacity is low, the trend is to emulate or to be subjected to moderate coercion.

This book makes a huge contribution to the field of diffusion studies. Osorio recognises the existence of an epistemic community involved in the diffusion of CCTs and its actions to place this instrument as the most interesting option to fight poverty in the region. The case studies provide insights on why and how models are disseminated, as the author is able to identify the motivations behind the adoption – which can be domestic or external – and a variety of diffusion mechanisms – coercion, emulation and learning – which will be more or less important according to the level of institutional capacities and the actors involved in the process.

Departing from this study, future research agendas could focus on the diffusion of cash transfers beyond the Latin American region, in order to understand whether the epistemic community that has been identified has branches elsewhere. Additionally, future studies could advance the understanding of epistemic communities and their characteristics, the types of ideas advocated and the relation of these groups with other actors.

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