**The End Game of Social Policy in a Context of Enduring Inequalities: Assessing ‘Postneoliberalism’ in Latin America**

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**Abstract**

Post-neoliberalism opened up new possibilities for understanding the end-game of social policy in Latin America. As a political economic project, it promised to uphold the dignity of all citizens in the face of markets, human rights, and a transformation in the values that underpin production and the management of national assets, as well as the creation of socially responsible economies. As a social project, it refocused the purpose of social policy towards improvements in terms of citizen inclusion, in both a distributive and in a political sense. Inevitably, the extent to which post-neoliberalism has delivered on these potentials has fallen short. In this chapter we focus on the challenges to the project of welfare provision as transformation and a vehicle for inclusion and citizenship under new left regimes in the early twenty first century. We argue that despite changes in labor markets and innovative social programs, new ideas of social policy were not been sufficiently embedded in political economies and did not create the social policy consensus necessary to move away from the neoliberal model and to address the structural determinants of poverty and persistent inequalities in Latin America.

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The battery of pro-market policies introduced in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s that become known as the Washington Consensus decisively shifted the regional paradigm of development. Governments dismantled tariffs, cut public spending and dramatically reduced the role of the state, both in terms of driving the economy and in the promotion of wellbeing and human security. But, despite the sweeping ambitions of neoliberal development, the achievements of this period were, in fact, chiefly fiscal in character, namely deficit reduction and inflation control. Trade liberalization encouraged exports, it was true, but it also meant much higher levels of imports, partly as a result of currency over-valuations but, more significantly, due to the region’s declining manufacturing performance in the face of global markets.[[1]](#footnote-1) Meanwhile, the failure to create opportunities for decent work combined with the reduction in public investments over a sustained period had both dramatic social costs, most notably greater concentration of income and a major rise in poverty. By 2002, 226 million Latin Americans lived in poverty, with over 11 million living in extreme poverty or destitution, a situation that was significantly worse than at the start of the neoliberal revolution.[[2]](#footnote-2) The top 10 per cent of households in Brazil, to take one of the most extreme cases, possessed 50 per cent of national income while the bottom 40 per cent had only 10 per cent.[[3]](#footnote-3) Clearly, two decades of neoliberalism had failed to produce anything close to equitable development. Instead, it had encouraged governments to ‘solve’ troubling aspects of regional economies without considering how the ‘solutions’ would impact on persistent inequalities of income, ethnicity, gender and place, job creation, and limit investments in health provision, education and public services which were essential for future prosperity.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that the question on the lips of policy makers and development specialists alike was 'after neo-liberalism, what?’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The problem was that there was no consensus as to the answer, at least not beyond the somewhat vague agreement that addressing the social deficit, equity and a redistribution of income and opportunities was needed to deliver governability and growth. The absence of a clear international agreement setting out the way forward in the aftermath of the Washington Consensus had the effect of leaving governments in Latin America with an unusual degree of latitude in the early years of the twenty first century, at exactly the point when the economic fallout and widespread public dissatisfaction with the social costs of market-led development led to demands for political transformation. The result was that a raft of new left governments took office across the region, promising dramatic change. [[5]](#footnote-5)

How would ‘pink tide’ or ‘post-neoliberal’ governments deal with the triple challenges of lackluster economies, skewed and limited welfare provision and the region’s historic inequalities of income, gender, ethnicity? They promised to repurpose the economy not just for growth but for human development by linking new state investments, expanded public expenditure and increased taxation to redistribution and meaningful citizenship.[[6]](#footnote-6) The introduction of new and expanded social policies was central to these promises and social expenditure came to represent over 11 per cent of GDP by 2009, accounting for over 52 per cent of total public spending.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet by 2015, the left was once again losing office and, despite some important social policy achievements, the reduction in inequalities plateaued. 185 million Latin Americans remain poor. In the end, the new left failed to decisively embed a new model of equitable development.

In this chapter, we explore the left’s trajectory from electoral successes to attempts to articulate a new end game for social policy and its ultimate failure to make equity the hallmark of the region’s model of development. We reject the view that the new left lacked genuine transformative ambition and that the introduction of social policies in particular, were just another form of neoliberalism lite or that they were introduced simply as political tool to channel anti-neoliberal sentiment for electoral gain.[[8]](#footnote-8) Instead, we explore two critical and inter-linked weaknesses in the strategy. In the first place, a failure to be clear about the end game of social spending; and secondly, the absence of consensus-building and commitment from across society to a political economy of long-term transformation based on equitable growth, job creation and market regulation. These failures were not, we suggest, simply the result of sectarianism, a lack of vision or will on the part of postneoliberal governments. They rather reflect the profound difficulties of tackling enduring intersectional inequalities amassed since Independence, long standing and profound political frictions over historic and deeply embedded economic and social challenges, which neoliberalism strengthened rather than weakened. These difficulties have become evident once again, as the electoral compass began to move to the left again, from Argentina in 2019 to Ecuador a year later, in a context of persistent inequalities made worse by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our argument unfolds in two parts. In the first section, we explore the rise of the postneoliberalism left, putting it in the context of Latin America’s struggles for equitable development and the region’s tumultuous twentieth century history. In the second section, we explore the focus on welfare and equity that characterized all postneoliberal governments in the first part of the twenty first century, despite their many differences, and their plans for growth. Here, we identify a focus on short term and redistributive gains and examine how the political context and in particular the failure to build consensual and inclusive democratic regimes contributed to the limitations of left-wing governance and, ultimately, account for the persistence of the very inequalities the left had sought to address.

**Postneoliberalism** **in the context of Latin America’s ‘entangled’ inequalities**

The emergence and electoral appeal of the postneoliberal new lefts in Latin America in the early years of the twenty first century should be understood in the consequences of three distinct but related political phenomena: the region’s limited success in tackling historic inequalities rooted in both colonialism and post-Independence politics; the nature of democratization during and after the 1980s and the social and political pact that underpinned it; and the brutal impact of neoliberalism in term of poverty and inequality in Latin America.

The history of state formation in Latin America is directly linked to struggles for Independence against colonial powers, which was only achieved in the nineteenth century. Decolonization led to independent nation states profoundly shaped by the interests and ideas of the new national elites, not society as a whole, cementing inequalities inherited from the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in place. As Huber et al note, ‘inequalities in landholding and political power originating in the colonial order are at the center of theoretical explanations for the deep roots of inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Extreme inequalities in terms of access to land were reinforced by elite dominance of political institutions well into the twentieth century, supported by racist ideas and practices that reproduced power asymmetries between and within the small number of elites and the mass of the population. These ‘entangled inequalities’ inherited from the past remain critical for understanding contemporary social inequalities and determine who has voice – and whose voice is heard - in national decision making.[[10]](#footnote-10) The inequality inherited from the past in Latin America is not, in other words, a matter of individual disadvantage; it is rather a reflection of structures and systems, whether political, social, economic or cultural, that actively re-create intersectional group advantages and disadvantages. They are what Tilly (1998) calls ‘categorical’ inequalities: black/white, formal/informal workers, rural/urban, men/women, citizen/migrant etc[[11]](#footnote-11) and as, lived experiences, are reinforced by the interplay between them, shaping access to housing, water, energy, employment, justice, health and education, the building blocks of a dignified life.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The nature of the region’s ‘entangled’ inequalities, and their persistence over time, makes them very difficult to resolve. Inequalities based on race and ethnicity intersect and are reinforced by economic and political inequalities creating obstacles, even in contexts of reform. Anthias (2018), for example, details the difficulties of redressing the historical exclusion of Latin America’s indigenous communities from land ownership, showing how the Guarani in Bolivia have encountered persistent opposition and found structural impediments put in their way when trying to claim land that this now recognized as legally theirs; some of these obstacles are embodied in apparently neutral land boundaries and maps that form the basis of landowner resistance to change.[[13]](#footnote-13) Similarly, in Brazil, Cavalho[[14]](#footnote-14) and Villen-Perez et al[[15]](#footnote-15) have shown that, despite a progressive constitution that recognizes indigenous communities’ right to land, lack of voice and disenfranchisement mean that their claims indigenous claims are in practice excluded from the policy process. Oliveira (2013) reveals the heterogeneity of policy making in Brazil which means that the government enables illegal land grabs of indigenous land whilst simultaneously trying to encourage land titling.[[16]](#footnote-16) And, in relation to health provision, again in Brazil, Riggirozzi (2020) shows how racialized, gendered inequalities are rooted in institutional arrangements and power relations that trump official discourses about the ‘right to health’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Despite the difficulties of sustaining a reform agenda, tackling inequalities, promoting just social, economic and political relations and reforming government in ways that incorporate the voice of groups traditionally ignored in policy has historically been the territory of the Latin American left.[[18]](#footnote-18) But in practice, the left, in Latin America and elsewhere, has focused on some kinds of inequalities more than others. We can see this historically, if we look at two neighboring countries in the Southern Cone, Chile and Argentina both of which embarked on ambitious reforms in the mid twentieth century. Here, two quite different lefts, one based on coalitional party politics and the other in the form of a populist/corporatist movement, both focused on institutional reform and new social policies to redress the grievances of the same constituency, namely male formal workers in large cities, including those in the growing public sector, and ‘traditional’ unionist sites of employment such as mines, whilst ignoring other inequalities based on race and gender.

Mid-way through the twentieth century, Chile’s extremely limited and exclusionary democracy gradually gave way to an era of center-left government under the Popular Front, elected in 1938. Until then, Chile’s parliamentary model of politics had exclusively served the interests of the landed elite and the mining bourgeoisie. The numbers of Chileans entitled to vote were kept low, with estimates of under 10 per cent of the population enfranchised as late as 1949.[[19]](#footnote-19) But in 1938, a Popular Front, composed of a centrist party and the left won the Presidency, promising reform. Its most notable achievement was CORFO, established in 1939 as part of a response to a devastating earthquake, designed to be a motor of economic growth and national development, through support for industrialization and business and, therefore, of job creation in the cities. At the same time, a pension system, especially for public sector workers, was introduced and the trade union movement was recognized as a political and economic force, which, alongside the incorporation of the Socialists and Communist parties into the political system, extended democratic inclusion considerably. But it did so at the cost of leaving rural relationships and the authority of landowners relatively untouched. The country’s significant indigenous population in the south of the country also remained excluded.

Meanwhile in Argentina, just a few years later, Peronism (1946-1955) expanded social and economic incorporation to the growing numbers of urban workers, via a populist strategy of incorporation. Peronism imposed a strategy of development that combined a more ambitious approach to welfare spending than in Chile, along with state-sponsored industrialization. Economically, a version of the *desarrollista* (developmentalist/nationalist) school of political economy associated with the Economic Commission of Latin America (ECLAC/CEPAL), Peronism aimed to foster national-owned capitalism. Nevertheless, as Barbeito and Goldberg show, Peronism sought to deal a decisive blow to the political dominance of the upper class rather than building a social consensus for development.[[20]](#footnote-20) This was to lead ultimately to the downfall of Peron in 1955.

These limited and uneven attempts at tackling inclusion and historic manifestations of inequality came to an end in the 1960s and 1970s, in Chile and Argentina and elsewhere in the region, as political instability and military dictatorships took power across the region. These governments introduced a combination of fierce repression of trade unions, the elimination of left-wing parties and a violent policing of public and civic life, radically reshaping the parameters and expectations of ordinary people for more than a generation. Inequalities were made worse by brutal suppression of human rights, and increasing economic hardship, a process intensified by the intensification of market-led development in the 1980s and 1990s, exactly as the cycle of military dictatorships gave way to a new era of (re)democratization.

The survival of democratic institutions across the region since then is, in many ways, remarkable. But at the same time, Latin America’s democracies initially proved very timid in terms of tackling the inequalities they inherited. Efforts to reform tax or introduce financial reform were resisted.[[21]](#footnote-21) Democratization did not lead to the creation of inclusive or labor-friendly regimes[[22]](#footnote-22) and the social policy agenda focused on addressing the needs of the very poor, rather the creation of an inclusive welfare state. As Cruz, shows social and economic elites continued to live in the grip of fear of revolt and mass mobilization from below and that it was precisely the ‘deficits’ in the quality of regional democracy that enabled it to survive [[23]](#footnote-23).

One of those tacit silences referred to inequality. One consequence of timid democratization was that it became difficult, if not impossible, to speak of inequality, class conflict or question the fundamentals of economic policy after the transitions to democracy. The introduction of market-led governance produced little overt opposition in the 1990s.[[24]](#footnote-24) This social silence grew as the privatization of public assets, the reduction in public services and deregulation of the labor market led to a period of relative macroeconomic stability, even though both also intensified poverty and deepened the intersectional inequalities on which the region’s nation states, had been built on.[[25]](#footnote-25) And the silences were not only around class and economic inequalities. Latin American governments were exceptionally slow to tackle gendered inequalities,[[26]](#footnote-26) inequalities based on disability[[27]](#footnote-27) and of course the multiple ways in which race and ethnicity impacted on inequality. [[28]](#footnote-28)

The Centre-Left, meanwhile, traumatized by the era of repression and uncertain how or even if, to challenge the new pro-market policies, chose to put their commitments to an expansion of social rights, welfare entitlements and labor reform on ice. Instead, in an era where the zeitgeist was shaped by economic liberalism, they also discursively linked democracy to the market.[[29]](#footnote-29) In terms of people’s everyday lives, this means that market-based incentives and personal economic resources came to determine the extent and nature of political and social inclusion, and shaped access to education, health, housing, etc.[[30]](#footnote-30) At the same time, collective identities were replaced with concepts of individual – or household – responsibility. These dramatic changes also directly shaped the nature of contentious politics in the first stage of democratization. On the one hand, the return of liberal democracy and the introduction of the (partial) rule of law made protest a considerably less dangerous endeavor than in the past; and, on the other, the introduction of sweeping market reforms gradually opened up a new era of contestation as the neoliberal roll-back of the state, and the rise of labor in security created a constituency of economically and culturally disenfranchised citizens.

In the end, the attempt to successfully re-engineer state-society relations through market reforms at the end of the twentieth century failed in the face of the fact that markets reproduced the entangled inequalities of the past, igniting both trades union and social movement-based protest.[[31]](#footnote-31) The impossibility of reconciling neoliberalism with popular expectations became clear at the end of the 1990s. Although economic growth resumed in the 1990s (averaging 3.3 per cent a year for the region during 1990-98) after the disastrous decade of the 1980s, governments failed to reduce poverty; roughly 70 million more Latin Americans were living in poverty, in 1997 than in 1980[[32]](#footnote-32), and inequality increased across the region (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Poverty, Inequality, and Per Capita GDP Latin America, 1992-2010**



 Source: Gasparini and Cruces (2013: 54)[[33]](#footnote-33)

**The neoliberal social policy revolution**

Neoliberalism rested on a profound critique of state-sponsored welfare, with arguments that ranged from the fact that it created a fiscal burden on states to the view it created moral hazard and set up incentives for the poor to avoid their individual obligations to exit poverty through behavior changer, responsibility and education. Welfare, it was argued, discouraged ambition.[[34]](#footnote-34) So, it might seem at odds with the neoliberal vision that pro-market regimes in Latin America invested as heavily in social policy as they did. But they did so with a twin vision of encouraging the poor to adapt to the market and investing to improve the region’s human capital. The purpose of welfare, now, was not to address inequality, still less ‘entangled’ inequalities. The end game of social policy, in other words, dramatically shifted. The ‘point’ was not to ensure equality of citizenship or opportunity, but to meet basic needs and encourage integration into a flexibilized labor market.

At the policy level, this meant a shift away from investments in public provision and the introduction of greater privatization of health and education, as well as services such as energy and water. Social policy in particular now aimed to tackle not inequality but poverty and extreme poverty though extensive but small-scale, targeted programs.[[35]](#footnote-35) There was a shift to targeted, conditional welfare provision which were designed exclusively for the poor. Rather than promoting shared services and the collectivisation of social risk, the new social policy paradigm accepted that the poor would face greater insecurity because of their greater vulnerability in the market, especially in the context of weakened trade union power. While policies were intended to encourage the poor not to evade their individual obligations, the absence of universalism contributed to tiered citizenship through a selective and hierarchical model of inclusion.[[36]](#footnote-36) This social policy transformation was not just of course the result of the dominance of ‘new right’ welfare framing; it was also driven by real world imperatives, including a lack of l funding into the state due to the impact of debt and structural adjustment. This was interpreted to mean that there was little choice but to design social policies in ways that ensured a minimum of stability and prevented a social backlash. [[37]](#footnote-37)

The result was the rise, above all, of targeted conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) in the 1990s, which were discursively wrapped up on the vision of behavior change and human capital but increasingly were implemented as sticking plaster solutions to in address some of the worst effects of austerity, labor market deregulation and privatization of education, healthcare, pensions and services. CCTs were marketed as a cost-effective way of combining the notion of improving ‘human capital’ with the principle of pro-poor targeting. They were consistent with the ‘logic of the market’ and the view that direct handouts or subsidies distorted relative prices and should therefore be avoided.[[38]](#footnote-38) They worked as income-support and safety net schemes through monthly allowances for the poorest households, contingent on school attendance and medical checkups as a way to improve human capital.[[39]](#footnote-39) And they became in inescapable part of the social policy landscape across the region, enabling many of the poorest families to survive but also condemning many to dependence on welfare, since opportunities for decent work remained limited.

At the same time, with social policy redefined as targeted welfare for the poor, lower middle classes communities became more market-dependent than in the past. These groups were generally not covered by CCT programs, despite also experiencing the effects of service privatization. It is no surprise that lower middle communities were key in making demands for a return to state-funded investments, in education for example, as the example of Chile after 2010 demonstrated.[[40]](#footnote-40) Lower middle-class families, many of whom took on debt to access higher education, experienced particular and new forms of social exclusion that ultimately led young Chileans to organize to demand not only well funded public education but a wider rethink of the regional model of development. From their perspective:

neoliberal economies in Latin America have… created a vast number of young people who are doomed to failure, either by being unable to complete school, attending the ‘wrong’ college or university, or simply being unable to find decent employment after graduation. As a result, young people living in a neoliberal democracy [found] themselves negotiating a very confusing, uncertain and contradictory landscape in which the pervasive and dominant ideas about how to be a ‘citizen’ contradict their own experiences of insecurity and even impoverishment.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Particularly once growth began to slow after 2012, these young people and their families found themselves vulnerable to low paid employment and inflation, yet were outside the reach of social policies where the underpinning philosophy was based on safety nets for the poor.

The remarkable electoral success of the new Left across the region in the first two decades of the twenty first century - in Venezuela (1998), Brazil (2002), Argentina (2003), Uruguay (2004), Bolivia (2005), Ecuador (2006), Nicaragua (2007) and, for shorter periods, in Paraguay (2008), El Salvador (2009) and Peru (2011) – has to be understood in this context. It was a response not only to the widespread exhaustion and dissatisfaction with market-led development but to the failures of market-compensatory welfare schemes, aimed only at the poorest. Whatever judgement we make now in hindsight, it is crucial that we recognize that this suite of governments came in on a wave of enthusiasm, promising the beginning both of neoliberal roll-back and a new approach to citizenship, inclusion and welfare. They offered a politics of hope to middle class citizens made vulnerable through marketisation and uncertainty in a context of rising levels of poverty and inequality, as well as to the poor.[[42]](#footnote-42) And a new approach to social policy, a new end game, was a key part of their offer.

**Welfare under postneoliberalism: how far did the end game change?**

The extent to which the ‘post-neoliberalism’ set out to deliver a genuine alternative to the neoliberal basic needs for the poorest and create new forms of inclusive and distributive welfare is subject of contentious debate. We have argued elsewhere that the initial ambition was to radically reform the basis of welfare and to refocus the economy in order to combine growth, fiscal stability and some forms of income redistribution within the context of capitalist economies.[[43]](#footnote-43) Without abandoning many elements of market-focused development, the new Left nevertheless tried to articulate a political economy that changed the purpose and role of welfare. Discursively, welfare was no longer seen as a simple matter of compensation for the rigors of the market. It was tied to a vision of equality of citizenship. Key elements of universalism crept in, such as universal child benefit or old age pensions.

But it is equally the case that this vision was not delivered. Indeed, in many ways policies fell considerably short. The CCT model, on which the survival of the poor now depended, was not abandoned. Markets, it was recognized, were not going to generate ‘decent work’ and for many of the poorest. In this context, government made choices based on a combination of principle – to extend coverage and introduce some new forms of universalism – and pragmatic and electoralist concerns, taking advantage of rising export prices to fund expenditure.[[44]](#footnote-44) The end-game shifted; policies were no longer designed to regulate and discipline the poor to the rigors of the market. But neither were they going to be the basis of wholesale societal transformation. Change *and* continuity, reform and accommodation sat alongside each other.

What quickly became evident was a change in the language and purpose of social policies. Social policies under the postneoliberal left were couched in a new language of human rights.[[45]](#footnote-45) New ideas and commitments to greater inclusion and recognition of human rights transformed the language around how the duties of the state itself were understood, shifting the pendulum of welfare responsibilities back once more from the individual to the state. New left governments, especially in the Southern Cone and the Andean region, began to use the idea of human rights as a basis for social policy and, at the same time, as a way of challenging conservative norms in an effort to engineer wider normative and ideational changes in society. This change would also, of course, be more likely to favor the left electorally. At the same time, income supplement programs, new pension entitlements, social insurance schemes and child benefits began to be couched in the language not of safety net or human capital but as socio-economic rights. This discourse came to underpin redistributive and public spending, serve as the foundation of new forms of social incorporation[[46]](#footnote-46) and establish a ‘“floor” of social rights which cannot be left up to market forces’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

As such, a raft of new initiatives emerged. In Bolivia, where social coverage was previously very poor, reforms have included the introduction of a minimum non-contributory pension scheme (Renta Dignidad), which offers a pension to the self-employed and workers in the informal sector for the first time prove education and infant and maternal health have also been set up (*Bonos Juancito Pinto and Juana Azurduy*). Similar schemes were introduced in Ecuador. New types of welfare programs targeted at specific sectors were also established, such as Discapacitados in Ecuador (for people with disabilities). In Uruguay, where social coverage was already high for the region, access has been expanded and primary care strengthened. A new national system of care (*Sistema Nacional de Cuidados)* emphasises gender equality, gender rights and recognition of the unequal burden of care upon women and girls as the basis for care provision*.[[48]](#footnote-48)* Argentina extended pension schemes for new beneficiaries into its pension schemes for citizens who failed to pay entirely or part of social security contributions during working life, including women in the care economy and informal workers or unemployed.[[49]](#footnote-49) The government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (2006-2015) also introduced in 2010 a non-contributory targeted program for children, the Universal Child Benefit (*Asignación Universal por Hijo or AUH*). AUH provides a monthly allowance for nearly 4 million children and families conditioned upon schooling and health targets, mainly vaccination.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Spending on CCT programs grew and they acquired unprecedented significance. Coverage expanded to include families in rural areas, with school-age children, pregnant women and women with care responsibilities for disabled people.[[51]](#footnote-51) The number of individuals living in recipient households increased from fewer than 1 million in 1996 to 131.8 million in 2015, or 20.9 per cent of the region’s total population (see figure 1). Overall, CCT programs increased household consumption, reduced both poverty and inequality[[52]](#footnote-52) and were critical vehicle to improve inclusion of the poor through health and schooling programs.[[53]](#footnote-53)

**Figure 1: Latin America and the Caribbean: Population of households participating in CCT programs, 1996-2016**

Source: Cecchini, S. and B. Atuesta (2017: 22)

Fiscal space for the new social policy expenditures came from economic growth as a consequence of a 2003–2007 commodity boom and improved terms of trade, supporting economic growth and increasing the tax/GDP ratio. Renewed state activism and state spending thus sat alongside an increase in commodity prices that between 2002 and 2012 allowed leftist governments to access revenue for social spending.[[54]](#footnote-54) This involved tax on export and renegotiation of contracts and concessions to foreign investors, especially in the commodity sectors where growth and expansion made a higher tax burden more palatable to them. All of this was positive, at least fiscally, in that traditionally, welfare in Latin America has been financed by external borrowing because of historic difficulties in collecting income tax and taxes on assets and wealth, due to non-compliance, tax avoidance, and concessions to foreign investors.[[55]](#footnote-55) But it created a vulnerability: how would governments continue to spend at these levels once growth began to decline? Would their electorate accept reductions in expenditure, or would government continue to fund social policies by other means?

Dependence on the natural resource export sector also had other weaknesses. It intensified a series of environmental crises across the region, from deforestation for soy production to incursions on indigenous land. It has also created a fiscal trap for the region by reinforcing dependency on growth based on the export of primary goods. And it created political weaknesses in that it made governments vulnerable to pressure from extractive industries, whether from domestic producers and landowners, as in Argentina or from corporations, as in Brazil and the Andean region. Ultimately, the Left failed to balance the need for welfare with the need to invest in the long-term management of the region’s natural resources for sustainable and inclusive development. As Riggirozzi (2020) argued, welfare regimes highly dependent on income from extractive economies created ‘tensions between the socio-economic and ecological spheres that undermined inclusive citizenship and democracy’,[[56]](#footnote-56) where delivering welfare reliant on resource rents meant that progressive governments have been more successful in adopting redistributive policies to reduce socio-economic inequalities than redressing other forms of inequalities that intersect with gender, disability, race, ethnicity. The result was, far from addressing the entangled inequalities inherited from the past, new left governments sought to push extractivism even sometimes through the introduction of repressive legislation and the criminalization of indigenous protest, curtailing, sometimes violently, rural and indigenous communities and environmental activism.[[57]](#footnote-57) These difficulties were manifested in the fact that poverty alleviation programs were delinked from fundamental questions of resource and land distribution, fiscal planning and seeking to create a national consensus around welfare and taxation.[[58]](#footnote-58)

In short, the real criticism of the new left’s social policies is not how social policies were delivered or the underpinning philosophy of its welfare approach. It is the over-focus on redistribution in the cities, for the urban working and lower middle classes failure to address the long-term challenge of how to finance welfare sustainably and over time.

**The challenges of incorporation through welfare: how far did the new model address the region’s enduring inequalities?**

A central lesson conveyed here is that while post-neoliberalism articulated an important critique of neoliberalism and put in place social policies driven, at least in part, by a renewed vision of welfare as rights, enduring inequalities remained entrenched within societies and economies and as highly politicized forms of political and economic governance. New left governments chose not to challenge these inequalities head-on – and in some instances such as inequalities based on ethnicities did not challenge them at all – but to provide economic compensation for them. New social policy approaches were ultimately designed not to disrupt or reform the operation of markets. Tax rises to fund welfare, though often very contentious as in Argentina, were focused above all on the export sector. In this context, welfare under new left regimes got stuck in a paradigm that was unable to fundamentally redefine the dominant model of market-led development in the region.

Social expenditures, and the CCTs in particular, did not produce the redistributional effect that new left governments had hoped for. In fact, they turned out to be distributionally neutral*.* Income inequality in the first decade of the 2000s significantly declined, it is true, in the majority of countries in the region. From an average of 0.530 in the late 1990s, the Gini coefficient for household per capita income fell to 0.497 in 2010; 20 per cent of this fall being attributed to cash transfers and 60 per cent to a decline in wage inequality.[[59]](#footnote-59) But the decline in income inequality stagnated after 2012[[60]](#footnote-60)a process the Inter-American Development attributed primarily to the fact that social expenditures, even in their expansionist phase, failed to address the intersectional inequalities that characterize the region.[[61]](#footnote-61) The refusal to openly address the historic roots of the region’s inequalities also meant that governments did not tackle adequately the philosophy of welfare inherited from the neoliberal era, with its focus on the behavior of the poor. Rights were grafted onto ideas of welfare and conditionality loosened; but CCTs remained a primary mechanism to link welfare with behavioral change in education, health and the workplace. Welfare programs did not change the fact that the poor were encouraged to continue to work in uncertain and less protected labor markets, typically for low wages.[[62]](#footnote-62) Poverty remained a personal, individual failure, not an outcome of structural injustices and as such it remained a source of social stigma.[[63]](#footnote-63) Meanwhile, the reforms did not tackle the segmented social protection that has consistently characterized the region, leaving even some considerable groups of the middle-class unprotected and vulnerable to the risk of poverty.[[64]](#footnote-64)

At the same time, social policy reforms were not accompanied with tax reforms. Governments avoided introducing personal income or wealth taxes to fund social expenditures, with Argentina standing as something of an exception to this trend [[65]](#footnote-65) This was a failure with consequences. Major shifts in inequality can only be engineered alongside a process of fiscal redistribution. In turn, in democracies, this requires the forging of a new social and political contractwith sufficient public trust in government to allow the state to collect new taxes and new strategic distributive forms of spending. In the case of the new left in Latin America, rather than embarking on this risky project, it relied on export taxes. The result was that own long term capacity to carry out a radical welfare overhaul that would last beyond their term of office was fatally undermined, while the region’s dependency on a growth model based on the export of primary goods was simultaneously increased. In turn, this enabled agrarian elites to gain extraordinary power and to oppose any attempt to introduce progressive tax reforms [[66]](#footnote-66) As such, and perhaps ironically, postneoliberal governments increased the political influence of the extractive industries and the large landowners[[67]](#footnote-67), setting off a cycle of contentious politics that would in many cases ultimately bring the new left era to a close. [[68]](#footnote-68)

That said, there were of course successes and innovation. Some communities did find their needs addressed, really for the first time. Program such as *Descapitados* in Ecuador or the reforms to the care system in Uruguay, acknowledge the social and economic rights of the disabled and care workers for the first time. Similarly, some health reforms, including the extension of reproductive health rights in Argentina under President Fernandez, elected in 2019 in an apparent return to the left, were an attempt at gendering citizenship, dignity and human rights claims.[[69]](#footnote-69) And yet, these changes fell short of redressing historic intersectional inequalities. This was certainly the case with regards to many indigenous communities whose claims for land rights were often sidelined to make way for infrastructural projects and investments in natural resource exports.

It is also hard to avoid the criticism that that the needs of low-income men were prioritized over those of poor and minority women and girls. Grugel and Fontana found that women’s rights in general were one of the most neglected of areas of reform under post-neoliberalism.[[70]](#footnote-70) This was a significant omission since gendered inequalities in labor markets and in unpaid care, compound poor women’s social and economic inequalities in Latin America. [[71]](#footnote-71) In Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru more than 80 percent of women have informal jobs .[[72]](#footnote-72) Domestic workers, who make up to almost 12 percent of women in the region in employment, are severely affected by the [absence of regulation](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-santiago/documents/publication/wcms_746274.pdf) and collective bargaining, leaving them exposed to abuse and with limited access to a social and health safety net. [[73]](#footnote-73) Yet, with the exception of Uruguay, no efforts have been made by the new left to address these issues. Indeed, as Molyneux pointed out CCTs have reinforced gendered inequalities, making mothers responsible for education, health and nutrition. [[74]](#footnote-74) Canavire and Ospina (2015) also show that the Colombian CCT program *Familias en Accion* increases the leisure time of boys and men while reducing their paid work, but reduces the leisure time of females while increasing their domestic labor[[75]](#footnote-75) while CEPAL (2016) reports gendered inequities of *Oportunidades* in Mexico and other social programs in the region. [[76]](#footnote-76)

In sum, welfare and rights changes need to be durable if they are to be transformative, and they need to address inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon. This requires, as we have argued here, a mix of policies that go beyond concrete welfare programs to include tax and labor market reform; and policies to tackled manifestations of inequality that have traditionally been ignored by public policies and reach communities that may not necessarily be seen by government as part of their electoral constituency.

T**he limits of postneoliberal welfare**

The challenges and limitations postneoliberal governments experienced in tackling inequalities through social policy give rise to some reflections about the future policies at a moment when the direction of regional politics is uncertain.

In the first place, whether cash transfers, which have been part of the social policy landscape in Latin America for thirty years, contribute to reducing inequalities is unclear. Any future social policy agenda must redress durable inequalities by tackling three main problems that affected durable and social transformative policy - and that affected the credibility of the postneoliberal project: the fact that social policy became caught up in partisan politics; implementation challenges; and making CCTs work as a vehicle for tackling inequalities, not a substitute for it.

This chapter highlighted these issues and vested politico-economic interests that have affected opportunities for expansion of progressive and redistributive policies, particularly if these are attached to tax reforms, but also can create a stalemate in terms of funding social policy. According to Costa (2018), progressive governments that tried to promote shifts in existing social hierarchies, faced the opposition of local elites that often reacted by destabilizing these governments. This happened in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. The Brazilian case in particular is paradigmatic. Here, cash transfer policies halved poverty rates in about 10 years. Real increases in the minimum wage and new economic opportunities created during the cycle of economic growth also started changing inequalities in everyday life, inasmuch as “newcomers” disputed spaces and goods of distinction reserved hitherto for the established middle classes. This was precisely the point at which oppositional forces mobilized. Their rejection of the prospect of sharing political spaces and public goods that had previously been demarcated exclusively for elites, especially in the context of the country’s economic recession in 2015, led to the parliamentary coup d’état of 2016 (Costa 2018).[[77]](#footnote-77) The political strength of the government and state capacity was also tested in Argentina, this time in 2008, when the government of Cristina Fernandez Kirchner too the decision to increase agro-export taxes to capture the gains of rising commodity prices and to fund social spending, landowners and farm-based groups organized lock-outs, road blocks and the destruction of crops bound for market, until the export tax was settled.[[78]](#footnote-78) To this day, conservative and reactionary rural factions play a massive and direct role in shaping policy.

Another issue at stake in terms of implementation is whether delivery of social programs opens space for misinformation and discretion on the part of political brokers and financial mismanagement by local operators. There is no doubt that this has contributed in several countries to enormous difficulties of implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, giving way to cases of mismanagement and corruption. In many cases, social policies became a political tool for local party elites and clientelist brokers to manipulate.[[79]](#footnote-79) For Fischer (2020) social policy itself almost inevitably becomes a political tool by either left or right-wing and/or authoritarian movements or governments channeling reactions and to fashion social order along ideological lines or to support political strategies, resources and (vested) interests.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Under the new left in Latin America, as elsewhere, there are also politico-administrative barriers in the implementation of programs - and in particular, abrupt changes in certain operational processes - that tend to have negative impacts on some groups of beneficiaries. Specifically, documentation requirements, changes in the criteria for non-compliance with the conditionalities and problems in management and communication have been identified as factors that contribute to excluding the most vulnerable sectors. [[81]](#footnote-81) Likewise, all efforts to reduce poverty and inequality require state infrastructure to include and manage extremely hard-to-reach populations and to monitor implementation of programs. Identifying the poor and monitoring implementation that can certainly affect outreach and outputs are highly dependent on national and subnational capacities and on coordination between these levels of governance.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Finally, the use of conditionalities in social programs can miss the point of tackling inequalities and skew delivery of benefits because of biases in the selection process – due to issues of means testing and measuring poverty – or if programs sanction those who do not comply with the conditions. This is not new and not necessarily the result of party interests. But it highlights the fact that the implementation of conditionalities may be imposing an additional burden (for example, social roles, mobility and transportation, infrastructure of poorer quality, or time spent on compliance with behaviors) on the most vulnerable groups and that these burdens and conditionalities have unintended consequences. As we previously identified, the burden imposed by compliance with conditionality can become a factor of exclusion of a certain sectors or groups within society. Certainly, major implementation weaknesses in the provision of social services and policies are a structural phenomenon that long precedes CCTs. Including territorial barriers, geographical distances and sociocultural barriers hinder people from reaching the services to which the conditionalities are tied.[[83]](#footnote-83)Poor households, indigenous communities, women in vulnerable situations face high opportunity costs to comply with conditionalities can be expelled from transfer programs.

**Conclusion**

Governments seek different end games in social policy expenditures, in different times and places. Of course, social expenditure is, at its core, about improving lives. But the detail of social policies varies hugely; and the ‘point’ of welfare does as well. Is the end game to reduce inequalities or attenuate poverty? Is it to build citizenship or create clients? Is welfare envisaged as a universal regime of shared services and benefits or is a compensatory mechanism for those who are otherwise excluded from provision? Is it part of a wider strategy of growth and equitable economic development or is it a compensation for market failures?

Under the postneoliberal new left governments, progressive changes in labor markets, social programs and cash transfers led to improvements in terms of citizen inclusion in both a distributive and in a political sense whilst these governments were in office. But these changes have not been embedded in political economies and social political consensus about development and welfare models focused on enforcing the rules of contribution and responsibility. Furthermore, who contributes and who’s responsible for not simply addressing unmet material needs of citizens but to change the power relations (political and economic) that support and reproduce social inequalities and injustices is still a source of contention across the region.

Looking back, it is clear that the promised transformations of the state, society, the economy did not happen, despite new and in some cases genuinely progressive reforms intended to mitigate the almost unbearable social costs caused by decades of market-led development and austerity. Universal welfare, high-quality public services, the social investment state have always been vulnerable to the capacity of states to offset both the pressures in a capitalist economy and that of greater equality and stability in democratic regimes. As such the end games of welfare regimes took distinctive and pervasive forms: from an ideal of universalism where the state was a regulatory and redistributive actor and fiscal policies support investment in quality of services. But as conditions (resources and political) were never properly rooted in a sustained political economy, a move away to a neoliberal sufficiency-based model aimed at prioritizing the poorest and ensuring basic needs met did not come as a shock in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, economic growth and resource booms produced varied, highly contextual models of inclusion with real limitations that did not satisfy the social demands for change. This is not to say that governments did not offer something new in terms of citizenship; and the reduction of poverty and inequality, suggest that were some, sometimes considerable, successes, as we have discussed above. But the new left also got stuck in a distributive paradigm that was unable to redefine the terms of market-led growth, despite more imaginative and inclusive approaches to welfare. Overall,if the endgame of social policy is to deliver durable solutions to reduce inequality, the path ahead, when the left return to power as it is already beginning to, will need to involve not only tackling implementation and policy issues left unresolved from the past - the contributory system, improvements in the quality of services, etc. but also the challenges of multidimensional and intersectional disadvantage and the need to create a consensus over measures to redress, historical and socially-embedded legacies of socio-economic and power injustices for the long term.

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