

**POLICY APPROACHES TOWARDS POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN MEXICO.
¿HAS IT MADE ANY DIFFERENCE? ¿IS POVERTY A WICKED PROBLEM?**

(Draft)

Jose-Luis Mendez

El Colegio de Mexico

jlmendez@colmex.mx

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Introduction

Research on the so-called “wicked” problems started in the policy sciences since the late sixties. In general terms, such problems have been seen as complex issues quite difficult to face. This paper aims at discussing poverty as one case of this type of problems using the Mexican case.

Social justice was one of the most important goals of the Mexican Revolution of 1917 and has been a central aim of all Mexican governments since then. In this way, from the 1930s to the 1970s thousands of hectares of land were redistributed among the rural poor. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Mexican state established free public education for all children and social security for workers at both the private and public sectors (in a rather corporatist fashion). Public agencies were established to distribute food and provide housing for the poorest sectors of the population. Beginning in the late 1970s, state programs specifically aiming at the extreme poor were designed. Thus, for almost 40 years now, these programs have been providing cash transfers to poor communities or families.

Despite all these programs, almost one century after the end of the Mexican Revolution poverty and inequality remain as a characteristic feature of the country. It is true that Latin America, Mexico included, had an “equality moment” from around the late-1990s to the early 2010s, during which poverty and inequality decreased. However, the region still remains as the most unequal of all, with Mexico as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with about a fifth of its population in extreme poverty and close to half in moderate poverty. Furthermore, in recent years inequality in Mexico and other Latin American countries seems to have started an upward trend once again.

The goal of this paper is to show that poverty is a wicked problem in two ways: first, by presenting three different approaches which have been used for the study of this issue, involving diverse conceptions of such problem, its causes and solutions; and second, by describing the way some of these approaches have been applied in Mexico to confront poverty, in all cases showing only partial results.

Wicked problems

Although the term “wicked” as applied to a public problem was mentioned for the first time in 1967 by Churchman in an article, Rittel and Webber would be the first ones to more explicitly describe the concept in 1973, contrasting "wicked" problems with "tame", soluble ones. They defined wicked problems based on ten characteristics, namely:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good or bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation", as there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error and every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be considered.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The discrepancies associated to wicked problems can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The social planner has no right to be wrong; that is, planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate.

Since the publication of Rittel and Webber’s work, however, the very definition of this type of problems have become somewhat “wicked” in itself, as it has been defined by different authors in different ways and based on a wide array of features (Head 2008). In this paper, I will use a rather simple but more parsimonious definition of this type of problems, by focusing, first, on the lack of clarity and agreement on

three features of a public problem (its definition, its causes and its solutions), and second, on the difficulty for the resolution of the problem itself (under any of its conceptions).

Poverty as a wicked problem

Brashaw (2007) has identified at least five different theories of poverty. These theories place its origin in (1) individual deficiencies, (2) cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty, (3) political-economic distortions, (4) geographical disparities, or (5) cumulative and circumstantial origins. This author further shows how each of these theories can find expression in different community development programs.

In this paper I will refer to three approaches towards poverty. The first one is related to theory number 1 and is usually known as the human capital approach, which leads to solutions based on the government's support for health, education and nutrition. The second one argues that poverty is related to the lack of enough expansion of social rights, thus relating to Brashaw's theory number 2. Finally, I will refer to a third theory, which I can call the self-sufficiency approach, which aims at solutions related to combining job training, financial development and job creation, which relates to several of the abovementioned theories.

Human Capital approach

The first approach, based on human capital, has led to the so-called Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs. These programs conceive poverty as an income below a certain line, usually defined as one in which a person is able to fulfill basic needs of food, dress, housing, education and health. The devised solution involves delivering conditional cash stipends targeted only to extremely poor families, who in return had to send their children to school and regularly attend health clinics. By linking cash transfers to regular school attendance and health clinic visits, the program makes poor families in rural and urban communities invest in the "human capital"—education, health, and nutrition-- of their children, expecting that this would

lead in turn to the long-term improvement of their economic situation and a permanent reduction of poverty. This approach is based in the presumption that poor families cannot afford investing in their children's human capital because they need them to contribute to the family income as soon as they reach an age in which they can work, and are thus caught in a vicious circle of intergenerational poverty.

Human Rights approach

The human rights framework is based on the value of the inherent dignity and worth of all persons and argues that fighting poverty is not just a demand for humanity or charity, but rather for justice as a moral duty. Getting people out of poverty will require thus addressing and changing certain structural and historical conditions involving race, class and power (Pogge 2005; 2007). Often, the advocates of this perspective promote establishing certain rights in the constitution (the right to education, to health, to housing, etc.), either at the national or state level, and then establishing the policies required for the whole population to enjoy those rights, thus adopting a "universalistic" vision rather than a "targeting" one. Furthermore, it promotes a more participatory model for the design and implementation of social policy. Thus, for this approach, poverty does not involve only a lack of capacity to fulfill the usually considered basic human needs, but also the broader context (although often it is not completely clear what it means by this).

Self-sufficiency approach

This approach aims at enabling the poor to create wealth for themselves in a sustainable way as a means of ending poverty permanently. It was inspired by the so-called georgism movement dating back to the nineteenth century. The conception of poverty in this approach is similar to the second one to the extent that it goes beyond satisfying basic needs, as it relates to structural factors present in a society keeping persons and families from getting a source of income and labor security. In this view, the most important factor to alleviate poverty is a simultaneous increase in employment opportunities and labor productivity, as a study by researchers at the Overseas Development Institute of 24 countries that experienced growth found in 18 cases (Melamed, Hartwig and Grant 2011). However, employment is no guarantee

of escaping poverty, as jobs can be insecure and low paid and thus offer no chance to accumulate wealth. This could be the result of a negative relationship between employment creation and increased productivity, when a simultaneous positive increase is needed. That is no easy task, as increasing labor productivity may have a negative impact on job creation. In this way, increases in employment without increases in productivity can lead to a rise in the number of "working poor", which is why both "quality" and not "quantity" in labor market policies is often promoted. As a result, this study suggests a more nuanced understanding of economic growth, quality of life and poverty alleviation is needed.

Poverty as a public problem in Mexico

The Mexican CCT program for poverty alleviation

As it was already mentioned, in the following decades after the 1917 revolution, the Mexican government developed several corporatist social programs, which provided benefits mostly to the social sectors within the official party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). However, after several economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s, income inequality grew significantly and the PRI governments put in place several programs aimed to the poorest social groups. In his way, PRI president Carlos Salinas introduced the National Solidarity Program (PRONASOL), which supported public works and social welfare projects. Nevertheless, this program was strongly criticized for distributing benefits in a highly clientelistic fashion (Grimes and Wängnerud, 2009). In response to these criticisms, in 1997 president Ernesto Zedillo introduced the PROGRESA program, which was designed to avoid the pitfalls of PRONASOL while maintaining the emphasis on targeting.

This last program was conceived by a group of highly credentialed government officials at the social development ministry. It was a pioneering conditional cash transfer (CCT) program delivering cash stipends to mothers (who in most cases are the caregiver directly responsible for children and family health decisions) in extremely poor families, who in return had to ensure their children attend school and

health clinics regularly. If families were unwilling or unable to meet the program conditions the benefits were suspended, with the possibility of removal from the program. Although the targeting mechanisms employed by the program have been the subject of much discussion and have varied across time, in general it has targeted beneficiaries using a three-tiered mechanism: 1) the selection of marginal communities according to ad hoc marginality index, 2) the selection of poor households using a multidimensional poverty line and 3) community validation of the list of beneficiaries at a town meeting. Household surveys for all households in eligible communities are used and families are chosen through the analysis of socio-economic information. Cash payments are made from the government directly to families to decrease overhead and corruption. As it is a centrally administered program, the program allows for low operational costs and comparatively higher efficiency in the distribution of benefits. The program covers now more than 4 million families. Other countries that have instituted similar CCT programs in Latin America include Brazil, Peru, Honduras and Chile.

The program has three components: education, health and nutrition. Under the first one, monetary educational grants are provided to participating families for each child under 22 years of age who is enrolled in school between primary's third grade and the third grade of high school. The grants increase as children progress to higher grades and, beginning at the secondary level, are slightly higher for girls than for boys (as then the former tend to have higher drop-out rate). The health component provides basic health care for all members of the family, with a particular emphasis on preventive health care. This service is provided by the government public health institutions. The last component includes a fixed monetary transfer aimed at improved food consumption, as well as nutritional supplements for small children as well as pregnant and lactating women.

Several provisions have helped to ensure the identity and independence of this CCT program. Some of them, for instance, prevent the program from being used for political campaigns. In 2000 and 2003 (and the following federal elections) program officials were prohibited from signing up new beneficiaries within the six months

previous to elections. These and other provisions allowing for an image of a non-partisan program no doubt helped the program to pass the test of the transition between the Zedillo administration and the following one (Vicente Fox) and facilitated the long-term sustainability of the program. Furthermore, by the time this latter president took office there were impact evaluations showing good results and several international organizations promoted its continuation.

In this way, despite being from a different political party (the PAN), president Vicente Fox continued the program, now rebranded as Oportunidades (Opportunities). Fox expanded the program significantly into urban areas, in part thanks to a US\$1 billion loan from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) obtained in 2002. In 2004, the Ley General de Desarrollo Social (General Law of Social Development) established the requirement for independent evaluation for all federally run Mexican social programs and for this purpose the Consejo Nacional de Evaluación (National Council on Evaluation, CONEVAL) was set up. Such law also guaranteed all citizens the full exercise of social rights as enshrined in the constitution as well as that the budget for social programs could not fall below the level of the previous year, while also providing for greater transparency, accountability, inter-agency cooperation and additional mechanisms to prevent the use of social programs for electoral purposes. Although this program focused originally on primary and secondary education in the rural areas, it was slowly extended to poor urban areas. Education grants were also extended to the high school level. Furthermore, the Fox administration developed “Youth with Opportunities” (Jovenes con Oportunidades), a savings plan for participating high school students. It also started a health and social security program aimed at the self-employed or unemployed people, called Seguro Popular (Popular Social-Security).

Under the following administration of Felipe Calderon (also from the PAN party), three new components were added to Oportunidades: cash transfers to seniors (2006) (the ‘70 and Over Programme’, which provided an economic support of 500 pesos a month for older adults in towns of 30,000 and above), an energy subsidy (2007) and a Food Assistance Program (2010) (the latter provided cash transfers for

food purchases to 700,000 poor families in remote locations that did not qualify for the Opportunities program).

Also, beginning in 2008, the government grouped together a diverse range of programs under the so-called Vivir Mejor (Live Better) strategy, as part of an 'integrated social strategy of inter-institutional cooperation' aimed at eradicating poverty taking into account the 'entire life cycle of individuals and their families' (Lopez and Blanca 2011: 293). In addition to Oportunidades, the Calderon administration developed a 'Child Day-Care Center Program to Support Working Mothers' and expanded the coverage of the Seguro Popular program.

In 2012 Enrique Peña, from the PRI, won the presidential elections. In January 2013, this president launched the Cruzada contra el Hambre (National Crusade Against Hunger), a program aiming to reach 7.4 million Mexicans in the 400 municipalities with the highest levels of hunger and extreme poverty. Some critics have charged, however, that the Crusade meant a return to the PRI's clientelistic past, as several of the municipalities listed among the 400 selected would not qualify as among the poorest in the country (for instance some cities in the state of Baja California are included, but the poverty rate there is only 3.5%. Mexico City was also included although the levels of extreme poverty there are also low (Gil Zuarth 2013).

At the same time, under Peña's administration, Oportunidades was renamed Prospera, and included three new components: productive inclusion, employment inclusion and financial inclusion, aimed at better facing intergenerational poverty by a greater articulation of social, economic and financial policies. As to the first component, Prospera is now implementing 15 social programs, although most of them were created before the start of the Peña administration. Furthermore, it has developed a pilot program with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) called "Productive territories", which consists on the articulation of production programs, capacity building of local producers and social organization. With respect to the employment component, Prospera seeks to increase the purchasing power of beneficiary families and promote training and employment policies that lead to

improved welfare conditions. Finally, a scheme was created aiming at promoting a greater financial inclusion of Prospera beneficiaries, specifically targeting women, including aspects such as savings, credit, insurance and financial education. As we can see, with these new components the Mexican CCT program has somewhat moved from a human capital approach to a self-sufficiency one.

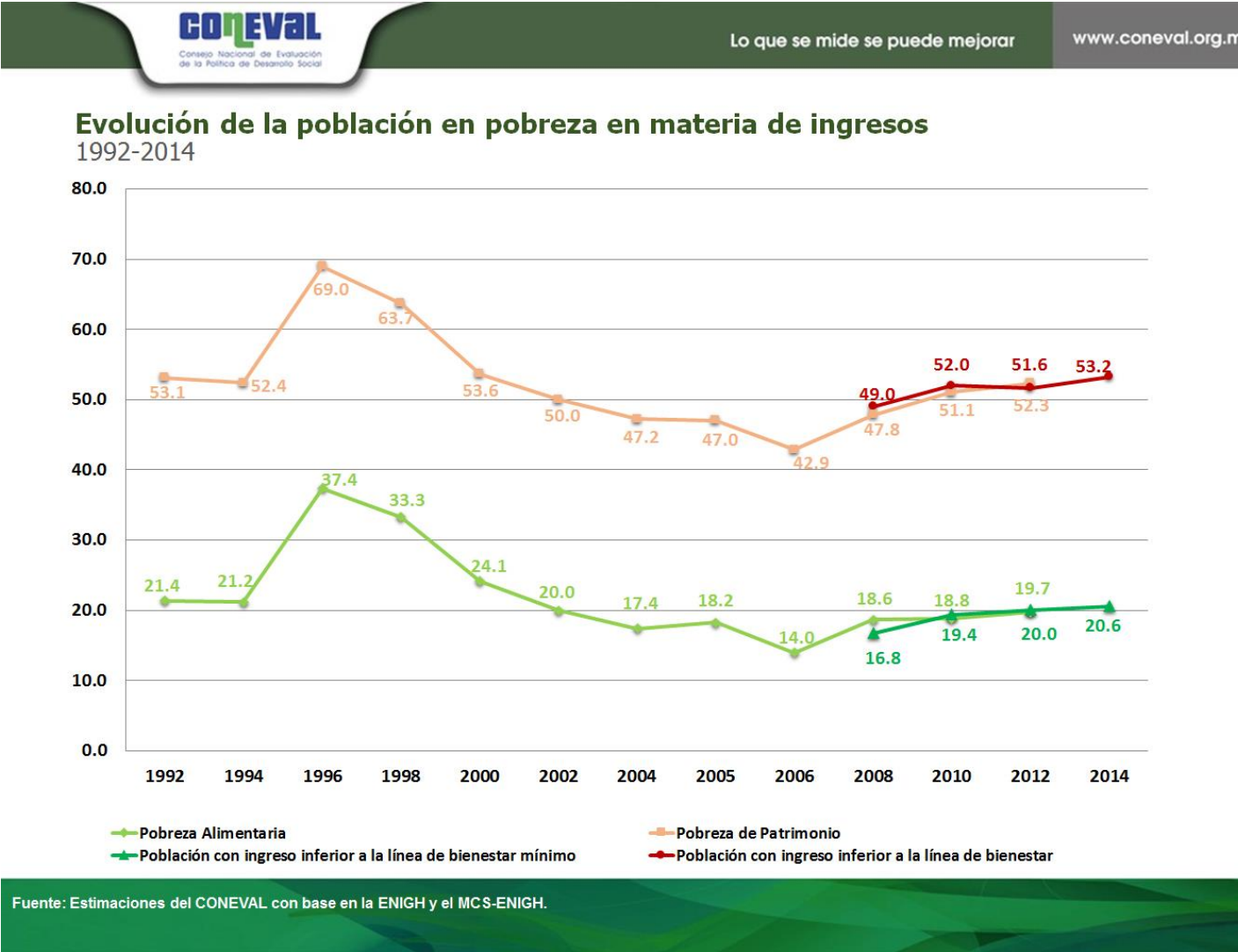
Results of the Mexican CCT program for poverty alleviation

The Mexican CCT program was the first social program in Mexico subject to independent impact evaluation including randomly assigned treatment and control groups. For that purpose, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) was hired in 1997, along with some academic economists. The results showed that after only three years, poor Mexican children living in the rural areas where the program operated had increased their school enrollment, received more medical attention, showed lowered incidence of disease, had more balanced diets and increased growth. After 2002, the Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (National Public Health Institute, INSP) and the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology, CIESAS) have carried out evaluations of program operations and impact. The CONEVAL website contains a listing of the various evaluations of the Mexican CCT program.

CCT programs have no doubt contributed to alleviate poverty in Mexico. However, it should be noticed that despite a declining trend between 1996 and 2006, according to government figures after 2006 the percentage of people living in poverty (measured as income) started an upward trend, rising from 42.9% to 53.2%, while the percentage of people living in extreme poverty rose from 14% in 2006 to 19.7% (food poverty) in 2012 and 20.6% (below the minimum welfare line) in 2014 (see Table 1 below). This meant that people living in poverty rose from 54,7 million in 2008 to 59,6 million in 2010, 60,6 million in 2012 and 63,8 million in 2014, while people living in extreme poverty rose from 18.7 million in 2008 to 22,2 million in 2010, 23,5 million in 2012 and 24,6 million in 2014 (CONEVAL, 2015, table 1). Poverty is

concentrated primarily in the south of Mexico, in states like Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas, and it particularly affects areas with high levels of indigenous populations.

Table 1
 Evolution of Percentage of People Living in Poverty in Mexico
 1992-2014



Source: CONEVAL, Resumen Ejecutivo, available at http://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/Documents/Pobreza%202014_CONEVAL_wb.pdf

The definition and measurement of poverty in Mexico has been subject to long debates and has varied throughout time, even within the government itself. Nowadays, the government agency in charge of measuring poverty and evaluating poverty alleviation programs in Mexico (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social, CONEVAL) divides poverty into two categories: Moderate poverty and Extreme poverty. If a person has an income higher than the income line set by the Mexican government but has one or more deficiencies related to social rights such as education, nutrition or living standards (related to access to water, electricity or domestic assets such as refrigerators) would fall in the "moderate poverty" category. Extreme poverty is defined in turn in terms of those persons who have deficiencies in both social rights and an income lower than the income line. However, the CONEVAL has also other ways of measuring poverty, rather based on income.

In addition to the various ways in which the government has conceived and measured poverty, other authors have developed alternative definitions, in most cases criticizing the government definitions for underestimating the prevalence of poverty in Mexico (for instance Boltvinik).

Yaschine has provided evidence of the clear limitations of the program as to its main goal, that is, modifying the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality. For instance, she quoted a Rodriguez-Oreggia and Freije study which estimated the program impacts on the young aged 14-24 who participated in the Mexican CCT program and observed only a limited impact on intergenerational mobility. This study found that the program has had a positive impact on labor income in men with elementary school (12.6%) or junior high school (14.6%). However, surprisingly, there is no impact on income for men or women with high school education neither women. Yaschine also mentions another study (by Ibarra and Villa), which showed that the program did not have impact on the young' job quality. Yaschine own empirical study showed that seven years of receiving benefits from the CCT program had no effect on the equality of labor opportunities for young people in rural areas (although she

admits that this may change after receiving benefits for more years, especially if they are more than 10 years).

It is quite obvious then that human capital investment, even if necessary, it is not enough for assuring access to quality jobs, as that depend rather on the labor market conditions, which in Mexico have been characterized by scarce employment opportunities and low remuneration. Furthermore, the Mexican CCT program has promoted children and teenagers going regularly to health clinics and schools, but these services have been quite deficient in Mexico. In general, officials in the Ministry of Health and Education have not been provided with the appropriate incentives to improve their services and work together towards the CCT program objectives.

In other words, young people of the program first cohort of beneficiaries is getting into the labor market with better health and higher education than the one who did not participate in the program, but have had difficulties to find a job; if they do, in most cases they have been only able to get precarious and low productivity jobs. In turn, Barajas (2016) offers some preliminary evidence that the new productive component of Peña's Progresas program is not producing any significant results. In this way, one of the main weakness of the Mexican CCT program is that achieving its ultimate goal –modifying the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality- depends largely on decisions, circumstances and actions which it cannot control.

To this we have to add the fact that, while programs like the Oportunidades/Prospera and Seguro Popular have a progressive redistributive impact, the corporatist system of pensions as well as other programs, such as the Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo (PROCAMPO) that support agricultural producers, have mostly benefited middle class sectors (Valencia Lomelí et al., 2012). Furthermore, the failure of fiscal reform in Mexico since democratization remains a major impediment to improving the level of social protection and the quality of education and health services. Mexico remains the Latin American country with the lowest level of taxation through value-added taxes (VATs), with a rate of 3.8% (CEPAL, 2013). More broadly, total taxation

rates are among the lowest in the region, at a rate of around 12% of gross domestic product.

Social Rights programs for poverty alleviation

While the federal administrations belonging to the PRI and PAN parties have designed and implemented policies mostly based on a human capital view, those of the leftist PRD party have advocated programs based on more universalistic approaches to social policy, based on the concept of human rights and have criticized the top-down, targeting and surveillance approach involved in the CCT program. The government of Mexico City has been led by the PRD since 1997, from Cuahutemoc Cardenas to the current mayor Miguel Mancera (2012-2018), resulting in almost 20 years of leftist government in Mexico's biggest city. Partly due to its capacity to raise taxes and its considerable autonomy, the Mexico City government has been able to create its own system of social protection, partly different from the federal one, to which it has channeled an increasing percentage of the city's budget.

Mexico City has a Law of Social Development, the first of its kind in the country (Ley de Desarrollo Social para el Distrito Federal), which provides a broad definition of social policy and aims at going beyond fighting extreme poverty. This Law puts in place a complex legal framework of rights, including economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. It also includes a section on the principles of social policy, such as universality, equality, social equity, gender equality and a mechanism for participation of civil society in policy design.

Among the first examples of PRD's social policy in Mexico City was the Integrated Territorial Social Development Program (Programa Integrado Territorial de Desarrollo Social), launched in the early 2000s by Andrés Manuel López Obrador. It was geographically targeted to benefit people living in areas of medium and high poverty and brought together a number of pre-existing programs, such as support for housing and neighborhood renewal, scholarships for children of single mothers, breakfasts in public schools, compensation for increased milk prices, economic

assistance for the disabled, scholarships for job training, micro credit, and, most notably, a pension and health-care program for senior citizens.

The Food Pension for Seniors program was launched in 2001, as a universal non-contributory pension, based on residency and not citizenship. It was initially geared towards all seniors 70 years of age (later on 68) and older (who have lived in the city for at least three years), based on residency, not citizenship. It includes free health care and public transport, cultural and educational programs as well as a monthly cash transfer. Under the administration of the following PRD mayor, Marcelo Ebrard (2006–2012), the local government introduced Red Angel, which brought together a total of 15 social programs into a single one and added further benefits and discounts in department stores. During this time two additional components were added to the social policy of the city, an unemployment security program and a program of “comedores populares” (community restaurants).

However, opposition parties have criticized these programs as clientelistic, as the local administration has set up at the same time a system of neighborhood assemblies to promote political participation, and many of those attending have been beneficiaries of these programs, as well as regular “visits” to the beneficiaries by the Program’s representatives. It has been also criticized that only a small amount of the Mexico City social programs provides truly universal coverage and that when it does it leads to supporting non-poor people (Luccisano and McDonald 2014).

On the other hand, while several studies have argued that poverty has increased in Mexico City following the trends at the national level, Boltvinik has questioned these conclusions and argued that poverty (measured in a different way) has decreased in the city, what shows the greater efficiency of the social policies of the local administrations. Even for him, however, there is still an important level of poverty in the city.

Final remarks

Based on a definition of a wicked problem as one that involves an unclear definition of its nature, its causes and solutions, as well as an issue quite difficult to solve, this paper tried to show that poverty is an example of such type of problems in two ways. First, by showing that in Mexico quite different approaches to this problem have been devised and used to fight poverty, involving diverse conceptions of the problem, its causes and its solutions, related especially the human capital and social rights perspective (although more lately also related to the self-sufficiency perspective, to the extent that the Mexican CCT program appears to be slowly moving towards this latter approach). And second, by showing how these programs, especially the CCT one based mostly in the first approach, have had only partial results in addressing the problem of poverty.

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