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CHAPTER 8

Sustainable Development Goals on Poverty and Inequality and Their Relationship to Social Policy in Mexico

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted on September 28, 2015 at the summit in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As mentioned by other authors in previous chapters, the road to the SDGs involved different groups of stakeholders (government representatives, civil society, and private sector) who deliberated on the definition of the new goals in the UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals between March 2012 and July 2014, when this group released its "Zero Draft." Among the aspects that have attracted the most attention are the inclusion of such issues as sustainability and inequality. Nevertheless, the aim of eliminating "ultra-extreme poverty"—the name that the author has given to the phenomenon called "extreme poverty" by the World Bank, as it refers to a population living on less than US $1.90—remains the primary objective. In

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addition to halving ultra-extreme poverty, "ending poverty in all its forms everywhere" has now become a goal. To better understand the scope of the SDGs with regard to poverty and inequality, and their possible impact on social policy in Mexico, this chapter first necessary reviews what the establishment of such an agenda means in terms of the recognition of socioeconomic rights. Then this chapter discusses the degree to which the original MDGs, with an emphasis on poverty reduction, have been achieved, both on a global scale and in Mexico. Based on this reflection, the issues most relevant to matters of poverty and inequality shall be examined, as well as their possible link to social policy in Mexico.

From Socioeconomic Rights to the "Right" to Live on Just Over One Dollar

Poverty is not the result of a lack of resources, but of persistent inequality. Nonetheless, increasing the resources available to the poorest members of society is often presented as a great challenge. This was the case with the establishment of the MDGs. However, this agenda for the new millennium turned back the clock on commitments regarding issues of socioeconomic rights by governments who had signed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948. The latter had, for example, established the right to social security (Art. 22), the right to work and a decent wage, which would ensure a life of dignity for workers and their families and which was to be complemented by other means of social protection (Art. 23), the right of all people (not just workers) to a standard of living that would guarantee theirs and their families' safety, health and wellbeing, especially as regards food, clothing, housing, medical attention and necessary social services; and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (Art. 25) (United Nations Human Rights. Office of the High Commissioner 1948). By establishing as the main goal (MDG1) a reduction by half in the number of people living on less than one dollar, taking 1990 as the base year, the rights included in the Declaration were outright excluded.

While the new SDGs are broader in scope, they are still not sufficient to overcome the deprivation faced by many in our society, as this chapter goes on to explain. As such, the first objective includes the complete

eradication of ultra-extreme poverty in the world by 2030 (SDG1.1); it also proposes to "reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions" (SDG1.2); this objective opens the door for a broader discussion about what are the dimensions in terms of human needs, which must be considered, beyond income, when poverty is measured, and to "implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable" (SDG1.3). As far as reducing inequality within and between countries is concerned (SDG10), its proposals include raising income growth for the bottom 40% of the population to a rate above national income growth by 2030 (SDG10.1), the adoption of fiscal, wage and social protection policies to achieve greater equality (SDG10.4).

Before examining the new proposals, it should be noted that the MDGs were set using the World Bank's (WB) estimates of ultra-extreme poverty as a parameter. In its first report on world poverty, the WB defined poverty as "the inability to attain a minimal standard of living" and suggested that this must include "two elements: the expenditure necessary to buy a minimum standard of nutrition and other basic necessities and a further amount that varies from country to country, reflecting the cost of participating in the everyday life of society" (World Bank 1990, 26). It affirmed that it was "relatively straightforward" to define the first element, as it was enough to look at the "the prices of the foods that make up the diets of the poor." On the other hand, the report declined to establish a normative parameter for the second element due to its being considered, at best, "more *subjective*," arguing that certain goods, such as indoor plumbing, are in some countries "a luxury, but in others [they are] a 'necessity'" (ibid., 27). By this, the WB implicitly assumed that defining poverty beyond the determination of nutritional requirements is a prescriptive exercise, and as such engages in moral debate or a subjective search for the way things should be (accordingly, questions might be: What should the contemporary standards be? How do I feel about all this? and so forth). This position has been criticized by Amartya Sen who argues that social conventions are hard facts (What are the contemporary standards?) available to anyone who studies and measures poverty. This can be achieved by taking note of the prescriptions made by members of the community, and in this way Sen affirms that "to describe a prevailing prescription is an act of description, not prescription" (Sen 1992, 314). Sen, taking his lead from Adam Smith and Karl Marx, considers that there is a set of goods that are necessary to avoid the shame of being unable to cover the demands of social convention and to be able to participate in the activities of a community. This set of goods should define the poverty line.

By rejecting the possibility of defining the elements necessary for basic living by claiming the inability to establish whether the elements contributing to wellbeing are a "luxury" or a "necessity," the WB brings into question the very existence of human need. However, as suggested by David Wiggins (2002), the term "need" has an irreplaceable role in the political-administrative process that forces one to capture the special content from which it obtains its strength. The author explains that when, in phrases giving vindication of necessity, the word "need" is substituted by words such as "want," "wish for" or "prefer," the result not only lacks rhetorical force, but even any particular meaning, coherence or contextual logic. Using logic shows the existence of needs by supposing that a person needs X (absolutely), if and only if any morally and socially acceptable variations that can be visualized (economically, technologically, politically and historically), as occurring in a given period would mean harm to said person, were they to be deprived of X. Avoiding harm to human beings is the factor that gives strength to claims of needs.

Additionally, the fixture of the International Extreme Poverty Line (IEPL) by the WB masks a minimalist ideology regarding how households "should" satisfy their needs under the principle of economic efficiency and cost minimization. This is because, in practical terms, in 1990, the WB defined the IEPL by taking the extreme poverty lines of eight of the 33 poorest countries in the world (Pogge and Reddy 2009); in 1993, it modified the threshold by taking that of the ten poorest countries; Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion (2008) in their review chose that of the 15 countries in the same situation. The value of the IEPL was originally set at US $1.02 per person per day and was modified in 2000 to US $1.08, and then again in 2005 to US $1.25. The IEPL was upgraded in October 2015 to US $1.90; however, it has practically the same value as that of 2005 in terms of its purchasing power (Ferreira et al. 2015).

But what does it mean to live on such a low income? To calculate the extreme poverty line, the WB estimates its worth in national currencies using the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) instead of commercial exchange rates. PPPs show the apparent relationship between the purchasing power of US $1 compared to the purchasing power of local currencies in their own countries. For example, in Mexico, in 2014 the commercial value of one dollar was around 14 pesos, while the PPP dollar was worth eight pesos. In this way, the PPP equivalency assumes that eight pesos in Mexico can purchase the same amount of goods as US $1 in the United States. Therefore, the threshold of US $1.25 was equivalent to ten pesos in Mexico. The price of one kilo of tortillas in that same year was 13 pesos, which shows the inadequacy of the threshold, even to buy the required foods to obtain adequate, yet minimal, nutrition.

Even Martin Ravallion himself, in his response to Sanjay Reddy's criticism (2008) of the WB for using the same IEPL for all the world's developing regions, including Latin America, recognizes, with a certain degree of effrontery, the inability of this threshold to identify the ultra-extreme poor on a global scale. According to Ravallion (2008):

> The $1 a day line was explicitly designed to be representative of the poverty lines found in the poorest stratum of countries, none of which are in Latin America. [...] The first MDG is implicitly saying that we should start with the definition found in the poorest countries, and give priority to bringing everyone in the world up to that standard. Once that is (hopefully) done, we can move to the task of bringing everyone up to the level of living needed to escape poverty in Latin America, by Latin American standards. We have a long way to go.

By following this procedure, the WB hugely underestimates the amount of extreme poverty on a global scale, but also, by using the thresholds of the world's poorest countries as a baseline, it created its IEPL using circular reasoning, by taking as a parameter the phenomenon it wished to observe: extreme poverty. As Sen points out (1984), when minimal-cost diets are chosen to meet nutritional requirements, the thresholds built are exceptionally low, and alien to nutritional habits in households, which are not determined by a cost-minimization exercise.

As such, the WB's threshold has created a false perception of poverty, by reducing it to the identification of its most tragic symptom: hunger. In fact, even if households had just enough income to buy the food accounted for in the basic food basket, they would have trouble actually eating it, as they would not have enough income to be able to cook it, being unable to afford fuel, utensils and other goods necessary for consumption in humane conditions (dishes, pots, a table, chairs, and so on), and would therefore have to eat on the ground, with their hands, outdoors and naked. Therefore, the threshold of US $1.90 does not give recognition to a single human right, by being insufficient even to satisfy of the need for food.

The Degree to Which the First Millennium Development Goal Has Been Met, and How Much Further We Have to Go

In 2012, the World Bank's report on ultra-extreme poverty was cause for great surprise, following Chen and Ravallion's claims using updated data (2012): "Using the $1.25 a day line, the developing world as a whole reached the MDG1 in 2010." The incredulousness sparked by these claims was founded on the fact that in 2008 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2008) had announced that, as a result of increases in food prices (in 2006), 75 million more people in the world suffered from hunger, a fact that reversed the positive trend toward the achievement of the MDGs. In 2009, the WB's own progress report on the MDGs confirmed this fact, the document affirming that the housing and financial crisis of 2008 made it doubtful that the goal would be achieved. While it was acknowledged that the increase in the number of people in ultra-extreme poverty had been less than expected (50 million), the organization stressed that the crisis "poses serious threats to the hard-won gains in boosting the economic growth of many developing countries … as well as achieving progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," and that "poor countries are especially vulnerable, as they have much less cushion to withstand events" (World Bank 2009, xi). However, only a year later, in its 2010 report, the WB presented a more optimistic outlook, assuming that the goal would be reached by 2015 in all regions, except Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2010, 15).

The astonishment was even greater in 2012, not only because the main goal had been achieved five years earlier than expected, but also because Chen and Ravallion's data showed that the food and housing crises had not deeply affected the poorest people living in developing countries. This "good news" has enabled governments and financial institutions to continue to express their conviction that the global international economic order is successful, since it allows for the reduction of ultra-extreme poverty even at a time of crisis. That triumphalism over the evolution of poverty has led to a withdrawal of development aid to countries in Latin America, since

they do not show such high levels of poverty any longer. Accordingly, as of 2014 the European Union decided to withdraw bilateral development aid to 11 countries in the region, leaving only six countries as recipients of this aid (Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Paraguay) (Infolatam 2013). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that now a greater emphasis is being given to inequality and environmental challenges. But, how certain can we be that the poor are more immune to crises and there are fewer poor now than there were 25 years ago?

One of the main problems in evaluating the scope of MDG1 is that the WB has updated its IEPL, and by extension, the data on ultra-extreme poverty, on several occasions, also changing the PPP base year (1985, 1993, 2005, and 2011). This has caused variations in the real value of ultra-extreme poverty lines. When it was updated in 2005, Thomas Pogge (2008) observed that the first IEPL ($1.02, 1985-dollar) was equivalent to $2.08, the second ($1.08 1993-dollar) to $1.63 and the third ($1.25 2005-dollar) to $1.40; in other words, the WB is currently measuring ultra-extreme poverty using a lower IEPL in real terms than that used in its first report on poverty in 1990, which is enough to create doubt as to the true evolution of ultra-extreme poverty.

Therefore, when departing from the WB's data on the PPP from 1993, it can be observed that for the period from 1987 to 1999, ultra-extreme poverty in developing countries was reduced by 75.5 million, but if the PPP from 1985 is used, the opposite trend can be observed, since between 1987 and 2001 the number of poor increased from 1.2 to 1.5 billion (Pogge and Reddy 2009). As such, it is difficult to determine whether ultra-extreme poverty in the world really has declined, and if so, to what degree.

In spite of the apparent success claimed by Chen and Ravallion's World Bank report in 2012, the UN pointed out that Africa, the world's poorest continent, is very far from meeting MDG1, with ultra-extreme poverty showing only a small decrease from 56.5 to 47.5% from 1990 to 2008 (UN 2013, 26). Additionally, with regard to Asia, the region which has benefited most from the latest phase in the development of capitalism, characterized by the process of globalization, the UN warns that in spite of the rapid economic growth seen in the region, the majority of its population faces critical levels of poverty and vulnerability, caused by the volatility of food prices and environmental damage (p. vi). In the case of Latin America, the report points out that there have been positive signs surrounding the incidence of poverty; however, the best results have been seen in Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia, countries that embarked on economic and social reforms which go against the recommendations of financial institutions such as the WB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The report also points out that inequality continues to be one of the greatest challenges. In the area of social policy, it points out that targeted programs are showing signs of exhaustion. The latter fact is relevant considering that the *Prospera* program (originally called *Progresa* when launched in 1997, and in 2002 its name was changed to *Oportunidades* and in 2014 was renamed as *Prospera*), developed in Mexico and promoted by the WB as one of the world's most successful conditional cash transfer programs, has spearheaded the transformation of the country's social policy, as will be discussed further on in this chapter.

With regard to the number of people living on less than one dollar per day in Mexico, the MDG1 has been achieved according to official figures. In 1989 (the year closest to 1990 for which information is available), ultra-extreme poverty was present in 9.3% of the population and, while this goal was achieved in 2006, the financial and food price crises of 2008 increased their percentage (to 5.3% in 2008), meaning that the goal was not officially achieved until 2012 (at 4%). Official data from 1989 does not provide information comparing urban and rural settings, but if figures from 1992 are considered, it can be observed that in rural areas (towns with less than 15,000) the goal has not yet been achieved, as ultra-extreme poverty went from 15% in that year to close to 10% in 2012 (INEGI 2013, 4), in spite of the fact that the *Progresa/Oportunidades* programs have been focused on these zones.

While Mexico may claim to have met MDG1, this is very likely to be true only on paper (Damián 2010). An analysis of the difficulties in making comparisons using the National Survey on Income and Expenditure in Households (*Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares* or "ENIGH"), the main source to measure poverty in Mexico, maintains that its inconsistencies bring into doubt the results on the evolution in Mexico of both ultra-extreme poverty and poverty in general. Even if the trends identified by the ENIGH are correct (that is, that a reduction in poverty can be observed), MDG1 was reached basically thanks to charity given to the poorest of the poor, since non-monetary income, especially in the form of in-kind gifts, explains over 50% of the real increase in the income of the country's poorest decile between 1998 and 2006 (ibid.). Government transfers (including the *Progresa, Oportunidades and Prospera* programs) are another source, which explains, to a lesser extent, the real

improvement in the income of this decile. This shows that Mexico's poorest populations have become dependent on gifts and handouts.

In order to grasp a historical trend, related to income-based poverty, CONEVAL has defined patrimonial poverty "as having insufficient income to acquire a certain food basket, as well as to cover the necessary expenses in health, clothes, housing, transportation and education, even if the entire household's income were used exclusively for the acquisition of these goods and services" (Wilson and Silva 2013, 3), which saw only a small reduction from 53.1 to 52.3 percent of the total population between 1992 (the first year for which official data became available) and 2012 (ibid., 4). With regard to food poverty (which is another term for "extreme poverty"), denoting "the incapability to obtain a basic food basket, even if using the entire household's available income just in buying the goods in said basket" (ibid., 3), the decline was also meager, decreasing from 21.4 percent in 1992 to 19.7 percent in 2012 (ibid., 4). CONEVAL developed a new methodology for measuring multidimensional poverty in 2008, but in order to make long-term comparisons, CONEVAL continued to report income poverty data calculated with the previous method until 2012. CONEVAL estimated that between 2012 and 2014, the percentage of the population in poverty increased from 45.5% to 46.2%; in the same period, the percentage of the population in extreme poverty fell from 9.8% to 9.5% (CONEVAL 2015). What little progress has been made on the issue of poverty was expressed by representatives from the Specialized Technical Committee on the Information System of the Millennium Development Goals (*Comité Técnico Especializado del Sistema de Información de los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio* or "CTESIODM") in Mexico. This committee, in relation to the presentation of the *UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2014*, acknowledged that for Mexico, the Government's *Progress Report 2013* shows that "despite recorded advances in the fight against poverty, maternal health and quality health services, there are still many significant challenges to be faced in these areas to be able to meet national MDG objectives" (Langner 2014).

Up to this point, this chapter has demonstrated that there is no clarity to be found in the evolution of the data presented by the WB, but even if ultra-extreme poverty has been reduced over the last 25 years, this cannot be attributed to the establishment of the MDGs, as the greatest progress was seen in Asia, which has experienced the fastest economic growth over the last three decades. It is also necessary to consider Thomas Pogge's observation (2014, 7), that any estimate of poverty omits the tally of those who have died prematurely due to causes related to the condition. With information from the World Health Organization (2008), Pogge estimates that these figures reach over 18 million per year, making up a third of all total deaths worldwide. In the case of Mexico, the author made an estimation on the number of preventable deaths in children under one year of age for the period of 2010–2015, and concluded that two thirds of these (31,746 deaths) were related to poverty, and therefore they could be labeled "preventable deaths."

In sum, it is possible to argue that the limited progress on poverty in Mexico is a reflection of neoliberal economic policies and a change in the social policy model, focusing on a transfer program aimed at the poorest of the poor, but which have not brought the success that was promised upon the introduction of these reforms.

New Global Commitments On Issues Of Poverty And Their Links With Inequality

The above section mentions that the reconfiguration of the new agenda has been made under the premise that MDG1 has been met, and therefore more ambitious goals can be set. With regard to SDG1.1, "By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty …," this means broadening the time window for governments and financial organizations to "allow" continued deaths associated with ultra-extreme poverty over the next 15 years. The moral implication of this cannot be ignored, and this kind of poverty should be eradicated immediately. The cost of doing so is very low, and it does not imply any substantial changes to prevailing inequality, as it would be enough to reassign 1.2% of the available income of the planet's richest 10%. Considering that this is such a small fraction of the richest decile's total income, Pogge argues that "it would not be too much to ask those with the highest incomes to give up such a small fraction of their income in exchange for protecting the rights of a third of the population" (Pogge 2014, 7). Similarly, David Gordon (2004, 70) estimates that the magnitude of resources required to provide basic health and adequate nutrition to the whole population in developing countries is less than the total cost of pet food purchased in the United States and Europe. The above reveals that the elimination of absolute misery on the planet is a question of political will, and not of available resources.

It should be noted that maintaining the World Bank's IEPL as a parameter for setting the new goal for 2030 is equivalent to assuming that the requirements for meeting human needs and the social demands placed on individuals (as workers, citizens, parents, community members and friends) has not changed in the last 25 years, an erroneous assumption considering the speed of technological transformation and the fact that society has become more urbanized, implying far greater prerequisites for individuals to be able to escape from ultra-extreme poverty. Therefore, there is a need to increase the threshold used to estimate worldwide ultra-extreme poverty.

Furthermore, those who find themselves living with US $1.25–$1.90 are forced to endure excessively long workdays, mistreatment, abuse, forced labor, prostitution, and organized crime. Hence, SDG1.1 does not contribute to society moving toward the right to a life of dignity by avoiding such serious abuses to human dignity.

On the other hand, SDG1.2, which aims to halve poverty in all its forms in accordance with national parameters, does constitute progress in the determination of the goals, as it opens the door to recognizing that poverty is a worldwide phenomenon, and not one exclusive to developing countries. However, there is a risk that the search for universal parameters of human dignity will be abandoned. This is because this goal allows the World Bank's parameters to continue to be used for the poorest countries, while middle- and high-income countries set their own thresholds according to their level of development and priorities. There is no doubt that in rich countries, the requirements for not living in ultra-extreme poverty are greater, but this goal does not contribute to the reduction of inequality in standards of living between countries. On the other hand, SDG1.2 is framed along the lines of what Sen called the political definition of poverty, which depends "on a feasibility assessment ('ought implies can')," but which, the author explains, "accepts that although certain deprivations cannot immediately be eliminated, this is not the same as saying that they should not be considered deprivations" (Sen 1992, 315). This line of thinking is equivalent to the World Bank and the governments of poor countries telling their population: "Listen, old man, even though you are suffering from hunger you are not poor, since the way things are, it is impossible to maintain everyone's income above the level required to end hunger" (ibid).

The final topic to be addressed in this section is that of inequality, which is intimately related to the two already mentioned. Inequality manifests the imbalances of power in society, not only within nations but also between them. This imbalance became exacerbated over the course of the last century. According to Pogge (2009), in 1820 there was a ratio of 3 to 1 between the incomes of the richest 20% and the poorest 20%; in 1913 the difference rose to 11 to 1 and, at the end of the last century (1997), it was 74 to 1. The lingering effects of the economic and financial crisis of 2008 have also contributed to the increase in inequality. For example, in 2010, the 11 million most prosperous of the world's rich (equivalent to around 0.15% of the world's population) had recovered the losses caused by the crisis of 2008 and their fortunes had overtaken what they had been in 2007 (Capgemini and Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Management 2011, 4). The degree of income concentration is so brutal that people living in the world's poorest households share 1.1% of global income, but represent 43% of the world's population; in contrast, those who live in the richest countries hold 80.5% of the world's income and make up only 16% of the total population (Pogge 2009).

The worsening of inequality under capitalism is confirmed in Thomas Piketty's study (2014). He makes it clear that when the returns to capital are higher than the growth rate of the economy, capitalism generates unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based. The two most important ideas of Piketty are that the dominant tendency of capitalism is generation of income inequality and wealth concentration in 1% of the population. Piketty brings down both the myth created by Simon Kuznets that mature capitalism's tendency is toward lower inequality, and the other, which maintains that the latter is the fruit of merit (education, cleverness, and so forth), since being wealthy depends, predominantly, on inheritances. The solution to inequality goes beyond the goal of the new global development agenda to raise the incomes of the poorest 40% of the population above the average rate of increase. Importantly, the proposed mechanisms to achieve this goal (empowerment, equality of opportunities—and not of results—fiscal, wage and social protection policies, improved regulation of financial markets, and so forth) make no changes to the principles that govern economic function under a neoliberal approach; for example, equality of opportunities is sought, rather than equality of results. As such, no acknowledgment is given to the fact that a major difference exists between formal liberty and the application of the law, which is not equal between rich and poor, as the rich will always be better positioned. Also, while the 2030 Agenda strives to continue with the mechanisms of the free market, it proposes to control the movement of people by way of ordered, planned migration (SDG Goal 10.7), a factor which inhibits the leveling of wages between countries, as was recognized by Adam Smith (Himmelfarb 1988).

Both Paul Krugman (2009) and Thomas Piketty (2014) have shown that under the current system, the owners of capital are those who have increasingly appropriated the fruits of human labor, to the degree that wages as a proportion of total product earnings have declined dramatically over the last few decades. In Mexico, this phenomenon can also be observed: while work remunerations represented 43.5% of national income in 1976, in 2011 their percentage dropped to 30.3%, according to data provided by INEGI's National Accounts System (Márquez Ayala 2013).

The most specific goal (SDG10.4) aimed at reducing inequality refers to the adoption of fiscal, wage and social protection policies, but its formulation lacks content, in the sense that recent years have seen governments and international bodies establish mechanisms to protect large capital, especially financial capital, including bailing out companies using public funds, while scarce resources are allocated for the population facing hunger, and austerity programs are put in place, which risk the lives and wellbeing of significant numbers of people. This happened following the crisis of 2008, when the US government acted on behalf of banks and corporations. A bail-out package was implemented (Troubled Asset Relief Program-TARP) at a cost of US $700 billion (Reuters y AFP 2009), compared to the emerging aid program, announced by the World Bank, which provided only US $1.2 billion in aid to poor countries most affected by the crisis of 2008.

Similarly, in Mexico the laws on social security systems to the public and private sector were reformed both in 1997 and 2007, undermining workers' rights. These reforms changed the pension system from one based on a distributive system relying on solidarity between generations (the young pay fees to social security, which keeps the pensions of older) and with defined benefits, to another pension system based on individual capitalization accounts, in which the pension depends on the ability of workers to save for their pension. This arrangement has reduced benefits, increased contribution rates and risen the retirement age. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO 2014, ix): "These adjustments are reducing state responsibility for guaranteeing income security in old age and shifting large parts of the economic risks associated with pension provision on to individuals, thereby undermining the adequacy of pension systems and reducing their ability to prevent poverty in old age."

Changes to economic and social policies proposed to solve the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis show a trend that highlights the intensification of inequality. In an analysis of adjustment proposals found in 180 documents created in response to the crisis, Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins (2013) demonstrate that economy-stabilizing programs imply an increase in fiscal contraction (lower social spending). Further, in order to "achieve healthy growth," they note, proposals result in the elimination of subsidies on the consumption of basic products (fuel, agricultural products and food); wage cuts in education, health and other public sectors; an increased rationalization and narrowed focus in social programs; reforms to pension and health systems (reductions in benefits and extensions to contribution periods); along with greater workforce flexibility and the broadening of consumption taxes by way of value-added taxes (VAT) on basic products disproportionately consumed in the poorest households. In Mexico, the federal government has made several attempts to impose VAT on food and medicines, and it is in a process of a redefinition of pension systems, looking to cut benefits for workers.

International Agendas and Social Policy in Mexico

The first global agenda for development of the millennium responded to the process of reconfiguration of economic and social policies, which started in the 1970s and later intensified following the debt crisis of the 1980s. As can be recalled, deeply indebted countries, including Mexico, had to accept changes in their economic and social policies in exchange for receiving new loans or renegotiating their debt with international bodies. These "recommendations" sought to ensure the functioning of the "free" markets for goods and financial services, reduce the state's role and limit as much as possible its participation in economic activity, "invest in human capital" and offer minimal social security safety nets for the poor. The new SDGs continue with similar proposals, while also expressing concern for the fragile state of the environment.

Thus, a transition can be observed from a social policy that sought to reduce social deficit through the promotion of employment and its associated benefits, toward the implantation of programs targeting the extremely poor, under a discourse of efficiency in the assignment of public resources. This action de-linked social development from economic development in favor of imposing a territorial/targeted approach, using a conditional aid scheme, providing education and health services, which are both precarious and incomplete.

Targeted programs that are promoted by international organizations are governed by the following principles:

(a) Subsidiarity; that is, the State will only intervene when markets fail.
(b) Targeting; under this principle, extreme poverty, but not poverty in general, is considered the only failure of the market that merits attention by the State, since the extremely poor cannot compete with equality of "opportunities" in the labor market (Boltvinik 2004).

It is for these reasons that the identification of the poor, especially the ultra-extreme poor, has become essential over recent years. For Evelyne Huber (2004), among the real reasons behind changes to social policy proposed by international organizations during the 1980s are the need to protect the process of economic adjustment from setbacks caused by social protests, as well as to ensure that developing countries did not present problems with budgetary stability and fiscal discipline, which could limit their ability to pay their debts and to mitigate problems of poverty and inequality which, evidently, were not mitigated by economic recovery (when this occurred). According to Huber (2004, 207), "in the name of efficiency and social justice ... (targeted) nutrition and preventive health campaigns were launched, aimed at the poorest of the poor." In this way, Mexico added itself to the list of countries entered into the "race downwards" on issues of social policy.

The implantation of neoliberal policies was first seen in the economic sphere, and later in the social one, with the launch of the *Progresa* program, which occurred one year after the World Food Summit of 1996. It was during this summit that the Rome Declaration on World Food Security was established, which includes the following affirmation by signatory governments:

> We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015. (FAO 1996)

During the reconfiguration of social policy, "technocrats" acquired greater power within the public administration. As Huber (2004) explains, these new protagonists, educated at foreign universities, were closely linked to financial organizations and rose to important posts involving decision-making on economic and social issues. The author indicates that many of these actors absorbed a neoliberal view of the world and were promoted on a fast-track, quickly moving from international bodies to national governments. For Huber, this process forms an essential part of the way in which globalization came to Latin America.

On the issue of social policy in Mexico, perhaps the most emblematic figure in this process was the Mexican economist and politician Santiago Levy, who produced a study for the World Bank on poverty in Mexico (Levy 1994), which served as the basis for the design of the *Progresa* program that was one of the first conditional cash transfer programs. While his work is not directly linked to the Millennium Development Goals, it was created using very similar premises to the World Bank's 1990 study on global ultra-extreme poverty—that is, Levy's study sought to minimize poverty. Once the program was launched the WB promoted this same scheme to other countries in Latin America.

In his work, Levy affirmed that extreme poverty in Mexico was a problem found mainly in rural areas, which affected only small proportion of the national population (19% in 1984) (1994, 47). However, Julio Boltvinik and Araceli Damián indicate that Levy made the mistake of defining an extreme poverty line which was too low, assuming that Mexico's poorest households spent 80% of their income on food, a percentage which is far too high for Mexican parameters. In fact, as Julio Boltvinik and Araceli Damián showed, in 1996 (one year prior to the launch of the *Progresa* program) the country's poorest decile spent 57% of their income on food. According to Julio Boltvinik and Araceli Damián (2001, 23), because they were based on an error, Levy's two basic conclusions were erroneous: (1) that extreme poverty was predominantly rural and (2) that it affected only a small proportion of the population. His errors had profound implications for issues of social policy, through the creation of the *Progresa* and later on *Oportunidades* program, which for many years was targeted at rural areas and, in spite of being expanded to urban areas in 2004, was inadequate in its coverage. The authors show that using parameters more appropriate to Mexico, extreme poverty affected around 50% of the population in 2000, and that nearly 60% of the poor lived in urban settings (those with more than 15 thousand inhabitants) (Boltvinik and Damián 2001, 24).

One of the aspects which made the launch of the *Progresa* program so attractive is that its defenders maintained that by targeting the poorest of

the poor, it was more efficient than other kinds of policies, by preventing the receipt of benefits by those who were undeserving. Also, these kinds of programs, with their immersion in Anglo-Saxon ideology, prevent support being given to the poor unless they do something in exchange, with shared responsibility being required in order to receive benefits, in other words, the poor have to meet certain obligations in order to remain in the program (attend school and talks about health issues at health clinics, and so forth.).

Several authors (Boltvinik 2004; Cornia and Stewart 2003; Sen 2003) have pointed out the pernicious effects of targeted benefits; they highlight, for example, that they create a stigma around beneficiaries, who automatically acquire the label of "poor" as a result of receiving resources; they lead potential "beneficiaries" to resort to manipulation of information as a means to show that they need support. But their greatest defect lies in the argument that targeted programs are more effective in cost-benefit terms when compared with programs with a universal approach. In a study of 17 countries (including Mexico), Andrea Cornia and Frances Stewart (2003) indicated that the living conditions of the poor and of the general population deteriorated when general food subsidies were substituted by targeted programs. They also warned that cost-benefit analyses cannot capture the future costs of flaws in targeted programs. They argued that while programs seek to increase efficiency through greater targeting, the objective population is increasingly excluded, leading to losses in wellbeing and productive efficiency, both present and future, caused by malnutrition in adults and minors excluded from the program, which are not accounted for in this type of study. In Mexico, exclusion errors have been high; for example, Damián (2007) showed that the percentage of families who were poor in "capacity" (according to suppositions under which the *Oportunidades* program operated) and did not receive income from the program was 63.7% in 2004. The author also points out that the country's poorest households did not receive the benefit due to lack of access to health services (clinics) and/or education (primary and secondary schools), as they were not to be found in their local areas and, therefore, they were unable to meet their shared responsibility. Exclusion in urban settings was also high; according to data from the National Survey on Income and Expenditure in Households (*Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares* or "ENIGH"), in 2008, 86.3% of the "capacity" poor in urban areas (those with more than 15,000) did not receive the *Oportunidades* program. A report from the Inter-American

Development Bank on the *Oportunidades* program shows that, according to the ENIGH 2010, 62% of the population below the minimum wellbeing line received no opportunities, considering that this is a mistake of excluding a significant number (around 2.6 million households). The error of exclusion in urban areas was 77% and 34% in rural areas (Araujo and Suárez Buitrón 2013).

Even though the *Oportunidades* program has been highly praised on an international level, it has not achieved its main objective: avoiding the intergenerational transfer of poverty, as demonstrated in evaluations carried out in 2007, ten years following the launch of the *Progresa* program (Boltvinik 2012). According to these evaluations, *Progresa/Oportunidades* graduates are no less poor than their parents, and neither do they show higher performance than non-beneficiaries of the program—indeed, a significant proportion of these have emigrated due to the lack of job opportunities in their communities (Boltvinik 2012 and Tetreault 2012). In the interview by Boltvinik (2012, 20) of Ilyana Yaschine, Director of Evaluation for the *Oportunidades* program from 2002–2006, the latter suggested that it was limited in its impact due to the fact that good quality education and health services were outside its reach. She also expressed the view that the program went into decline due to being used as an instrument for solving a diverse range of political problems, through the inclusion of new components that broke down the coherence in its original design. It is worth here to remember that the original intention of the *Oportunidades* program was to improve food habits, health and education, but only for children 7–17 years of age enrolled in school programs.

Final Reflections

The question put forward in the beginning about the degree to which the first Millennium Development Goal has been met, and how much further we have to go to end poverty in all its forms, is of acute relevance in Mexico. Sadly, it is highly improbable that the new indicators pertaining to the first objective of the SDGs will produce changes in the current social policies, since they are likely to be aligned to the same neoliberal principles on economic and social issues that govern all public policies. This is in spite of a lack of progress on the issue of overcoming the poverty seen in Mexico. In fact, the creation of the People's Health Plan (*Seguro Popular* or "SP") in 2004, anticipated the SDG1.3, which proposes providing systems of social protection and minimum coverage for the poor and vulnerable by 2030. The SP offers very limited health services to the population with the least resources. Although the government has affirmed that it provides universal coverage, this has been brought into question, and the program has even been criticized by Santiago Levy himself, who has noticed that it encourages increased informality in the economy by encouraging employers to shirk their obligation to register their workers in the formal social security system.

After all that has been discussed above, it becomes desirable and necessary to address the problems of the current economic model in a different way. For this to be achieved, social policy must once again be linked to economic development. With regard to economic policy, the internal market must be strengthened by using progressive wage increases above rates of inflation, and by taking certain other containment measures against economic and financial crises, such as unemployment insurance.

Furthermore, taking into account the economic and social costs of failing to improve the living conditions of the poorest members of the population and the problems arising from the exclusion errors of targeting, it is essential that we return to the promotion of universal human rights, which guarantee a life of dignity, with or without employment. But the design of a new social policy must start with different principles from those that guided the construction of the welfare state in Europe, which presupposed the existence of full employment and, as a result, made social benefits conditional on obtaining employment. There is no longer any reason to continue assuming that work is the basic dimension of citizenship, that wages are the basis for workers' vital and moral autonomy and that the latter can give them access to a system of protections for themselves and their families throughout their whole lives (Bustelo 2004). Capitalism has the tendency to reduce the global demand for employment and, as a result, a reduction in our countries' social deficit cannot be achieved using employment as its sole basis. One of the proposals gaining strength in international debate on this topic is the establishment of basic universalism, a concept which, in addition to unemployment insurance, would provide a guaranteed income to citizens and universal social services (Molina 2006), the cost of which has been calculated at 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) by Boltvinik (2009), who suggests that it could be financed by austerity programs (a reduction in the highest incomes among the bureaucracy), a reduction in tax evasion and progressive tax reform.

It should also be highlighted that a modification to the parameters used to measure poverty is essential to improving the living conditions of individuals, basing them instead on prescriptions of what constitutes an optimal satisfaction of human need, which goes beyond the World Bank's idea of minimal satisfaction, the absence of which people find themselves unable to live and act like humans. This is in view of the fact that people's ability to give their best efforts and develop to the fullest will only be possible to the degree that they are given a fair portion of available resources. Therefore, it is necessary not only to overcome extreme poverty, but also to make substantial changes to the social foundations that sustain the existence of extreme socioeconomic inequalities.

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