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Reorienting public policies to expand equal opportunities

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1. Context: opportunities, well-being and social mobility

Reducing inequality of opportunity requires putting public policies back at the centre of development strategy. Prior to the Second World War, States had limited information on the living conditions of their populations and people's life trajectory was strongly conditioned by social class of origin, unequal access to education, health conditions, housing and employment opportunities. The post-war period transformed this scenario: the expansion of national accounts, labour statistics, social information systems and welfare indicators made it possible to make inequality visible and, at the same time, opened the possibility of intervening on it.

In this context, a new idea of well-being was consolidated: life opportunities should not depend exclusively on the market or on the social position of origin. Health, sanitation, education, housing, employment and progressive taxation became central instruments for expanding social mobility. Historical experience shows that occupational and educational mobility does not arise automatically from economic growth: it requires States capable of directing resources, sustaining rights and correcting accumulated inequalities.

At the same time, equality of opportunity came to be understood as one of the main criteria for assessing the quality of democracies. Although differences in outcomes can exist in any economy, they are only socially legitimate when people have real possibilities to develop their capacities regardless of their family origin. When advantages and disadvantages are systematically transmitted between generations, social mobility decreases, perceptions of injustice increase, and social cohesion is weakened.

2. Analysis: from industrialization to well-being as a public strategy

For decades, industrialization was considered the main engine of social progress. However, the experience of Latin America, Africa, and Asia showed that industrial growth alone does not guarantee more integrated societies or necessarily reduce inequality of opportunity. In many countries, industrialization processes coexisted with unemployment, informality, labor segmentation, and dual societies. Therefore, development must be evaluated not only by productive expansion, but also by its capacity to generate collective well-being, social protection and mobility.

Comparative evidence shows that the countries that have achieved higher levels of equality of opportunity are not only those that achieved higher rates of economic growth, but also those that consolidated solid public institutions and universal welfare policies. Likewise, numerous studies show that inequalities begin to accumulate from early childhood, so early investments generate high social and economic returns.

European reconstruction policies and post-war development strategies offered a relevant lesson: when states invest in a sustained manner in education, health, housing, sheltered employment and social infrastructure, subsequent generations achieve better than previous ones. This was one of the foundations of the so-called "golden age" of social mobility.

Since the 1980s, the reduction in fiscal progressivity, the concentration of wealth and the weakening of some social protection mechanisms have put these advances under stress. Today's inequality is not only explained by individual differences in merit or effort, but by the unequal capacity of households to transmit educational, property, territorial and relational advantages.

3. Public Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen public social information systems. States need comparable, regular and quality statistics on education, employment, income, wealth, housing, health, social origin and occupational trajectories.

In addition to producing periodic information, it is essential to develop longitudinal and comparable systems that allow the impact of public policies to be evaluated and facilitate evidence-based decision-making.

2. Prioritize universal policies with redistributive capacity. Health, education, sanitation, housing and care must be treated as basic infrastructure for social mobility. Targeted policies may be necessary, but they do not replace universal systems capable of social integration.

3. Recover progressive taxation. Equality of opportunity requires financing public goods and limiting the intergenerational reproduction of extreme advantages.

4. Link productive development and job quality. Industrial or innovation policy only contributes to mobility if it generates stable, protected jobs with real possibilities for training and promotion.

5. Place social peace and well-being above drag models based on armaments. Public investment in education, health, housing, science and social inclusion produces broader and more sustainable collective returns.

6. Systematically evaluate the impact of public policies through comparable indicators on inequality of opportunities and social mobility, favoring learning between countries and the continuous improvement of interventions.

4. Conclusion: making social mobility a public goal again

Equality of opportunity is not a spontaneous result of the market or an automatic consequence of economic growth. It is an institutional construction. Reorienting public policies towards social mobility, collective protection and intergenerational equity is a condition for sustaining more peaceful, democratic and cohesive societies.

In a context characterised by demographic ageing, technological transformations and increasing inequalities, expanding equality of opportunity is a strategic investment in sustainable development. Societies that reduce the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages make better use of available talent, strengthen productivity, and consolidate more legitimate democratic institutions.

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