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Policies to promote social mobility: life-cycle assessment

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Institutional measures to promote social mobility: Compilation of Public Policies

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1. Context: The crisis of the social elevator and the insufficiency of educational expansion.

One of the most important challenges facing contemporary societies derives from their promise of social mobility. Currently, a large proportion of children from the working and middle classes consider that they live worse than their parents. They believe that the social elevator has broken down. Despite enjoying greater credentials than their fathers and mothers, they consider that their opportunities have been reduced: they do not have access to decent housing or to prolonged and consistent salary improvements as their parents did.

For a time, it was thought that educational expansion and free, public and universal education were the necessary policies to promote social justice and increase social mobility given the strong propensity of advanced societies to replace affiliation criteria with meritocratic ones. At present, it is considered that these policies are not sufficient given the net influence that origin has on social destiny beyond the educational level. Currently, different institutions and organizations are developing public policies aimed at promoting social mobility. In this Policy Paper we are going to give details of some of them.

2. Analysis: Evidence and evaluation of policies throughout the life cycle.

The design of policies aimed at promoting social mobility encompasses a complex spectrum of interventions that can occur throughout the different stages of an individual's life. The basic substrate of mobility is resolved in the first years of life, which justifies the centrality of policies to help child poverty. The noble cousin of economics James J. Heckman (2006) showed that the socioeconomic return on educational investments follows a decreasing trajectory throughout the life cycle, showing that interventions in early childhood are drastically more efficient and cost-effective in mitigating inequality of origin than those applied in

later stages. This is one of the reasons why social scientists such as Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2008) defend the early schooling (nurseries and early childhood education) of children in high-quality public schools, in which both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are promoted and stimulated to the maximum, whose development is exponentially greater during early childhood. It is at these ages that investment in education is most profitable in social terms. It is children from less advantaged backgrounds who can benefit most from the stimulation of their potentialities.

It has been shown that the deprivations suffered during this period have long-term effects that are very difficult to reverse. The Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland) have the most intensive system for combating child poverty in Europe, with universal family benefits introduced as early as 1946 and 1952 (*Barnbidrag*, *Barnetrygd*, *Børne- og ungeydelse* and *Lapsilisä*), supported by strong institutional development and progressively reformed towards models of work activation and work-family conciliation. In Spain, the Child Support Supplement (CAPI), integrated into the Minimum Vital Income since 2022, has the same objective of strengthening the protection of households with minors and reducing child poverty. Unlike the IMV, its income thresholds are wider, so it can also reach low- or moderate-income families who do not meet the requirements to receive the IMV. However, the aid, which is granted monthly for each child and whose amount depends on age, is very low: in 2026 it is 115 euros for children under 3 years of age, 80.50 euros between 3 and 5 years of age and 57.50 euros between 6 and 17 years of age.

Once this initial material safety net in the home is guaranteed, the focus of equity shifts to the incorporation of the child into the compulsory school system. At this stage, the organization of educational pathways becomes a major conditioning factor. Comparative evidence shows that the early differentiation of students into educational pathways (*tracking*) can reinforce inequalities of social origin,

especially when there are few possibilities of transition between the different trajectories (Hanushek & Woessman 2006; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2010).

Comprehensive reforms, by prolonging common education and coexistence between students until older ages, have been one of the main alternatives to limit these effects. However, in Spain, comprehensive reforms do not seem to have substantially weakened the influence of class origin on educational achievement. The extension of compulsory schooling from fourteen to sixteen years of age could also have made it difficult to achieve certain educational objectives if it was not accompanied by the necessary resources and support mechanisms (Carabaña, 1999). On the other hand, rewarding schools based on the results obtained by their students, as established by the US *No Child Left Behind law*, can generate perverse incentives and does not seem to be an appropriate policy to promote equal opportunities (Hanushek and Ryamond, 2005).

At the same time as these training trajectories are structured, it is essential to neutralize the invisible advantages that operate in daily assessment in the classroom. At this level of the school experience, greater standardization of content and evaluation criteria contributes decisively to reducing the weight of family cultural capital in learning and educational results (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The existence of common and transparent educational criteria limits, at least partially, the advantages that students from families with greater cultural capital can obtain outside school, by forcing the institution to evaluate only what is explicitly taught.

When students complete the compulsory stages and decide to continue their education, the viability of their trajectories becomes directly dependent on the policy of scholarships and direct financial aid. Scholarships are one of the main instruments for reducing educational inequality, by compensating for the differences in economic resources between families. Engel's law allows us to understand this relationship: the lower the family income, the greater the proportion of income that must be allocated to cover basic needs, which drastically reduces the resources available to meet the costs associated with

schooling (Chai and Moneta 2014). Scholarships partially compensate for this economic disadvantage and promote greater equality of educational opportunities. Therefore, expanding their coverage – especially for master's degree studies, where new inequalities in the labour market are being generated – is essential to prevent socioeconomic origin from acting as a filter of exclusion in higher education.

This logic of financial sufficiency becomes critical when consolidating university policies on access to bachelor's degrees and qualified employment. In the field of higher education, it is advisable to establish a scholarship system that does not depend excessively on academic performance – beyond a minimum threshold, such as the one approved – but fundamentally on the socioeconomic situation of families (Hernández and Pérez 2013). Likewise, a policy of progressivity of university fees according to income allows the effective cost of studies to be adapted to the economic capacity of each household. This alternative reduces dependence on systems based on scholarships-loans and prevents students from families with fewer economic resources from taking on greater debt to access university. Finally, it is advisable to strengthen collaboration between universities and companies through a broader system of paid internships, which allows specific skills to be acquired in the workplace without excluding those who cannot afford to work for free. Unpaid internships generate, in this sense, additional inequality by entailing an opportunity cost that not all students can assume at the beginning of their working life.

The cycle of interventions closes in adulthood through the creation of institutional frameworks and state agencies dedicated exclusively to the monitoring, evaluation and design of policies for social mobility. The greatest interest in its public promotion at a global level is in the United Kingdom. With the intention of breaking with socially endogamous practices in the labour market and institutions, the British parliament created in 2010, through the *Life Chances Act*, the body now known as the *Social Mobility Commission*. Originally called *the Child Poverty Commission*, it was renamed definitively after the *Welfare Reform and Work Act* of 2016, removing the reference to child poverty from its name to focus its legal mandate on adult mobility.

It is an independent *advisory non-departmental public body*, sponsored by the *Prime Minister's Cabinet Office*.

The Commission's functions include annually assessing the UK's progress on social mobility through the *State of the Nation* report, the latest volume of which was published in December 2025, coinciding with its 15th anniversary; advising ministers on how to measure inequality, mobility and poverty; and working with employers, universities and local authorities to boost their participation in improving social mobility under the chairmanship of Alun Francis OBE. In line with this effort, in 2025 the House of Lords set up the *Social Mobility Policy Committee*, a dedicated parliamentary committee that investigated how to better integrate educational and employment opportunities. Its November 2025 report, *Social Mobility: Local Roots, Lasting Change*, calls on the government to expand local pilot projects (*Youth Trailblazers*) and update the income threshold for university scholarships. This research, along with that of the historic *All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility*, has had a wide public impact by systematically making visible the barriers that restrict access to elite positions in contemporary society.

3. Recommendations:

From the above, the following five proposals can be extracted.

1. Strengthen investment in early childhood and the fight against child poverty.
2. Delay the differentiation of educational itineraries.
3. Standardize the contents and evaluation criteria
4. Make the system of scholarships and grants for higher education more universal and progressive
5. Create an independent state institution to promote and evaluate social mobility.

4. Conclusion: The need for a vital strategy and an institutional framework.

The evidence collected suggests that social mobility cannot be promoted through a single intervention, but through a cumulative strategy throughout the life cycle. The priority should be placed on early childhood and on the reduction of economic and educational inequalities of origin, and then prevent these inequalities from being reproduced through the selection of pathways, evaluation, access to

higher education and the transition to employment. Finally, it would be necessary to create an independent public institution in charge of regularly monitoring and evaluating the evolution of social mobility and the impact of policies aimed at promoting it. In this sense, the most promising policies are those that combine early investment, equal educational opportunities, progressive economic support, better conditions for transition to employment and a permanent institutional monitoring and evaluation system.

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