

# From Universalism to Targeting and Back Again: Conditional Cash Transfers and the Development of Social Citizenship

by Bryan Roberts, University of Texas at Austin

**Moving forward** from the premise that poverty is not simply a lack of resources, but in fact at the same time a relation through which the poor come directly under the control of the State, Roberts (2012) explores the place of Cash Transfer Programs (CCTs) such as Mexico's *Oportunidades* Programme in the evolution of social policy and citizenship in Latin America, assessing the impact of these programmes in terms of poor peoples' perceptions of their rights and the quality of their civic participation. In the industrialized world, poverty reduction policy was initially strongly influenced by concern that schemes intended to help poor people might in fact have the ultimate effect of generating disincentives among the poor to engage in paid work. It was only later, and in developing countries particularly, that policy discourse began to focus on building poor peoples' capabilities, in broad terms, as a means toward breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

As targeted policies, poverty reduction programmes inaugurate special relations between the state and a particular segment of its citizenry, which, intentionally and unintentionally, affect perceptions of rights, responsibilities and citizenship. Consequently, the evaluation of the impact of CCTs on citizenship needs to focus not only on results, including increases in levels of educational achievement or the reduction of infant mortality, but also on the manner in which CCTs are implemented. Implementation means identifying who is poor, providing these people with resources, and monitoring their compliance with the conditions of the program. In turn, this involves demonstrating to the public and relevant funding agencies alike that the programme is working effectively. Tendler (1997) shows that the way social policy is implemented influences not only the success of the programme in achieving its goals, but also the value that beneficiaries put on the programme and their trust in government. Evaluating the effect of implementation for the quality of citizenship is more difficult than statistically measuring the extent to which stated programme targets are met, but it is equally important.

CCTs use cash incentives directed at the education of children and at maternal and preventative health programmes to enable the poor to rise permanently out of poverty. Mexico's *Oportunidades* Programme is attaining near universal coverage of the country's rural and urban poor through direct cash transfer relations between the central government and *Oportunidades* grant-holders. There is relatively little mediation in the relations between these two sides; nor is community involvement a central part of *Oportunidades*. The lack of opportunities for beneficiaries to contact officials and to negotiate with them is a clear *Oportunidades* shortcoming, argues Roberts; as is the inherent danger that the Programme can ultimately be hostage to an 'audit culture'.

The emphasis on minimizing administrative costs implies that central Programme officials are not numerous enough to ensure that *Oportunidades* is administered effectively locally. However, the overall transparency of *Oportunidades*, as well as its relative lack of clientelism, says Roberts, stand as especially positive aspects of its design.

Different socio-economic contexts, including migration, ethnicity, and the urban/rural contrast, affect the implementation of the Programme. These three particular contexts create both possibilities and difficulties. Migration, for Roberts, can disrupt family relations and weaken the local basis for social and economic development, particularly since government programmes designed to make use of migrant remittances are not well coordinated with *Oportunidades*. It is easier for *Oportunidades* to work in rural as opposed to urban areas, since in the latter beneficiaries may be harder to identify and information about the Programme is less accessible, especially in densely populated areas characterized by high anonymity versus smaller rural places where people know each other. The disadvantage of rural areas is that they are unlikely to have the jobs that will persuade the youth educated by *Oportunidades* to stay; a circumstance which speaks to the importance of fifth-generation poverty reduction policies that combine cash transfers and conditionalities with programmes geared toward local development and job creation. The cohesive, long-standing relationships among members of rural indigenous communities can make *Oportunidades* more effective, but equally the social heterogeneity and impersonality of urban areas can be a barrier to participation in *Oportunidades* for indigenous migrants.

Ultimately, *Oportunidades* can create a more equal and participative citizenship, but the social and economic heterogeneity of communities means that the Programme needs to institute procedures for adapting to local circumstances and catering to special needs. One institutional solution is to create intermediaries between communities and Programme officers who reside in the community and are employed by both State and community. *Oportunidades* must also seek to co-ordinate institutionally with other local development policies, particularly those aimed at creating local jobs and housing. The challenge is to combine local involvement in the design and implementation of policies while retaining an effective central co-ordination of the health, educational and social development agencies responsible for providing services and benefits.

## References:

- Roberts, B. (2012) Del universalismo a la focalización, y de regreso: los programas de transferencia condicionada de efectivo y el desarrollo de la ciudadanía social. In González de la Rocha, Mercedes y Agustín Escobar Latapi (Coords.), 2012, Pobreza, transferencias condicionadas y Sociedad, México, D.F.: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, CIESAS.
- Tendler, Judith. (1997). *Good Government in the Tropics*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.