Social policy reform and market governance in Latin America, Eds. Louise Haagh and Camila Helgo, 2002, Palgrave, (QUOTING REFERENCE 8360) (pat@pion.co.uk)
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The book "Social policy reform and market governance in Latin America" is an edited volume that presents diverse research under the common umbrella of policy evaluation. Ten chapters dealing with specific policy programmes in some Latin American countries provide empirical evidence supporting the general theoretical approach outlined in the Introduction (L. Haagh). The book is easy to read and the four sections ensemble very coherently.

The volume is an excellent piece of research that represents one of the most robust and serious criticisms of the neo-liberal perspective on public policy. Without losing theoretical depth and inspiration, the bulk of empirical country-specific analysis of key selected policy areas (especially for Chile, Mexico and a chapter for Bolivia), illustrates the complexity of policy-making in nowadays highly interrelated economic and social systems. The book addresses the connection between policy reform and welfare outputs in an explicit attempt to underscore that the wave of State reform has not been accompanied by a broader assessment of the general institutional coordination problems that may appear as a consequence.

The individual chapters generally criticise two types of general practice in policy-making in Latin America: group targeting and the predominance of an economic approach over an all-encompassing one that allows assessing the multiplying effects of policies in diverse (but connected) social systems. For this latter criticism, the authors propose a creative and very well-informed analysis of spill-over effects of the specific policy programs under scrutiny in each chapter. This effort contributes to widen the scope of the potential readers of the book, since both academics and policy advisors will find aspects of interest in it.

The country-specific contributions also bring to the forefront of the analysis the normative implications of policy-making for the coordination between political actors, social groups and institutional networks. In order to do this, the selected policy areas facilitate the task, since all of them are central (and involve hot political debate) in modern State reform in Latin America. Specifically, health care, education, gender programmes, labour policies and decentralization. These policy areas have received priority attention in the political agendas of all Latin American countries, if greater in the bigger (and also richer) countries, as the ones analysed.

A third common characteristic of the chapters is the inclusion of a gender perspective, highlighting the importance of analysing potentially multi-layered recipients of poverty alleviation policies or equity promotion ones (like the sector of women with children, living in an underdeveloped rural area and with low educational formation). Such a concern, the book comes to argue, would increase the success of policy-making. Again, this evaluative perspective (success or not; most of the times, mixed scenarios), brings about a stimulating view on the connections between a specific policy and its objectives, the outcomes in welfare and efficiency and the overall political sustainability of the policy-making style. The weak point here, perhaps, is the rather limited account for the debate on governance, despite its inclusion in the title of the book. Although

the general frame of analysis presented in the Introduction presents a good elaboration on how the debate on governance may enter the picture of policy evaluation, the other chapters follow more a logic of in-depth analysis (using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, for the rest) and focus on the normative derivations of the observed aspects. In that sense, including some comparative analysis would have allowed the authors to make more, and possibly better, claims regarding the consequences of various policy programmes and the consequences for governance.

Finally, I would recommend the book to non-Latin Americanist scholars. Although researchers (mainly sociologists, political scientists but also economic historians) dealing with current topics of Latin American politics will surely find the book rewarding and referential, other scholars, policy evaluators and advisors focusing on other market reforms in other parts of the world will most possibly also benefit from the amount of insights, material and adequate analytical style of this volume.

In addition, given that the volume undertakes clear normative standpoints, it is therefore highly suitable for triggering academic and practitioner's debate. Particularly, issues of institutional instability and lack of institutional coordination are common for all countries undergoing State reform, both underdeveloped and developed. International debate on these issues - the sources, solutions and the political tools to address policy - may well emerge from further research, following the line of the volume, but with greater focus on the comparative terrain.