Research Idea

Implementing the COVID-19 Vaccine in Mexico: A Call for Methodological Localism

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Abstract: This study summarizes a brief literature of global public policy, through a critique of methodological nationalism, transnationalism and orientalism and presents an alternative approach to study of known as methodological localism. Evidence using a case study of vaccine implementation in Mexico City shows this completely new approach to address wicked problems. This is done in the midst of a discussion about the distribution of wealth in Mexico and describes not only vertical fiscal imbalances that have brought more inequities in the Mexican Federation but also its importance for local policy implementation. Evidence has shown that even at the very local level, various policy imbalances affected the strategy to address COVID-19 pandemic. Results demonstrate that the States with the highest vaccination rates are Mexico City, Quintana Roo and Querétaro, which are considered some of the more developed states, while their poorest counterparts are the ones that have the lowest vaccination rates Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas. Within Mexico vaccines from all over the world have been applied, yet due to its existing administrative structure, these inequalities also exacerbate the implementation of the health policies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Vaccines Applied as of Dec 9, 2021 20</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AstraZeneca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pfizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinovac</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sputnik V</td>
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<td>Cansino</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderna</td>
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<td>Johnson &amp; Johnson</td>
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<td>TOTAL:</td>
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Context of Policy Problem

The emergence and rapid spread of the virus identified as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), named COVID-19, has highlighted the vulnerabilities of the health systems in many national economies. This study seeks to analyze what type of subnational government, which may include a combination of either states, local or municipal governments, were more prepared to combat the crisis in Mexico. Using a new perspective, we consider many public policies were necessary to be implemented at the local level to be effective during the crisis. These policies include facemask mandates and enforcement, school business and community closures, and local programs to help the infected, their families and communities. Therefore, in a crisis of this magnitude, public administration analysist and

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managers must also be acutely aware of the institutional capacity and authority that local administration have when applying various public policy solutions. By applying a local-global approach to political economy, this analysis reviews what type of states and subnational governments may be better prepared to meet these challenges, and which are not, and may need external or global interventions.

**Academic Literature**

In comparative studies, “typical public policy and public administration studies focus on the [national] State, its Agencies, its subnational interactions, and the actors and processes influencing national policy creation and its administration.” (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p.3). In this regard, methodological nationalism is the intellectual orientation that conceives the nation state as the only unit of analysis or as a container for all social processes of the state. However, “the State has been unable to claim exclusive domains to create policy and administer programs, […] one result of this is a rise in global policy and its transnational administration.” (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p. 4). That is why public administration scholars need to use alternative approaches to study global public policy in its different manifestations applied by the state: methodological nationalism, transnationalism orientalism, or localism. “Not only because the state is no longer the only progenitor of policy and its administration, but also because policy and its administration are no longer products of exclusively public action.” (Stone & Moloney 2019, p. 4).

“Methodological nationalism is a research practice that institutionalizes a particular narrative bias in recollections of the past. It perpetuates the nation as immanent in history..."  

*through an initial proposition that nations are an obvious level of description and explanation. By embodying this choice of abstraction, methodological nationalism does not innocently reflect on the world out there.”  

(Vasilev 2008, p. 44).

The main reason is that methodological nationalism reflects and reinforces all the researcher's prior identification and biases with what a nation can do as well as its subnational actors and government units. “The methodological nationalist researcher “can submit himself [or hersel] entirely to the force of facts and logic and yet still arrive at a one-sided conclusion that nations hold the key to understanding what took place in the past, what is happening in the present, and how we ought to act in the future.” (Vasilev 2008, p. 7).

Methodological nationalism has several drawbacks that force many researchers to make one-sided conclusions by extrapolating public policy actions taken by a particular situation in the past and globalize them into the future only by which to capture the national government’s priority of the time of that social phenomenon. The most common methodological downsides are: conceptual overstretch, selection bias, the misrepresentation of governing bodies, which can conflate culture and national identity.

When focusing on methodological nationalism, policy analysts and academics tend to ignore the plurality of states, considering that minorities, such as indigenous people and multinational communities often remain highly ignored or underrepresented, as it tends to overstate national bias and de-emphasizes asymmetries between countries and their subnational governments. “Needed is a multisided research design, which are informed by the insight that locales are
connected by social practices and resource flows within and also across borders, are the most valid for investigating transnational social spaces.” (Bariglowski 2015, p. 216).

Other approaches to be considered such as transnationalism, which uses a multi-design method that allows analysts to study countries with different contexts and conditions, concentrating on factors such as ethnicity, gender and social classes. Another methodological approach, which reduce this bias, gives equal attention to minorities and lower-level governments when they try to play a central role in politics and social rights.

Another drawback is that methodological nationalism ignores the importance of foreign actors, which ironically in most of the cases influence local people in several ways to national as well as subnational politics and policies. “In classical political science, public policy occurs inside nation-states. In the field of international relations, a “realist” perspective would also hold that states are the dominant actor in the international system and that international policies are made between states.” (Stone 2008, p. 23). Another way to study these views is through “Transnational Administration (TA) which refers to the regulation, management and implementation of global policies of a public nature by both private and public actors operating beyond the boundaries and jurisdictions of the state, but often in areas beneath the global level.” (Stone & Ladi 2015, p. 107).

Therefore, if comparative public administration researchers do not consider the qualities of administrative capacity and interventions by globalization and global forces into subnational governments, we are missing a great deal of analysis of why a phenomenon happens and how it interacts with national political and administrative processes.

“The social sciences have become obsessed with describing processes within nation-state boundaries as contrasted with those outside and have correspondingly lost sight of the connections between such nationally defined territories. It also downplays nationalism’s role in modern state building by analytically separating the rise of nationalism from that of the modern state and of democracy. In this way, the national framing of the modern state building experience and of democratization become almost invisible. State and nation become two separate objects of enquiry.” (Wimmer & Glick 2002, pp. 1-5).

According to Stone and Ladi, global public policy analysis is challenging because:

- Public policies are executed inside a nation state at varying levels of government.
- Different scales and meanings attached to each state should be considered.
- Each state is different, so the implementation within each state is unique.
- Varying degrees of complexity should be applied to global public policy within different states.
- Global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc. are no longer the main external decision makers or factors for internal needs.

All these factors can cause a lineal model of policy cycle process that is not grounded in reality and is not as accurate as real politics and tensions within the policy cycle and between actors within and across the bureaucracy. Indeed, policymaking is messy. Conceptualizing policy as a chaos of purposes and accidents is not enough. This means that the following four stages do not happen in a
linear way: problem definition and agenda setting, formal decision making, policy implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

In order to avoid analysts to get drawn into indecision on how to study a problem, especially when facing wicked problems, they should take a different approach by considering multiple viewpoints to address outcomes rather than choosing between them. This can help to confront numerous ambiguities between policy options. For example, that subnational authorities can have access to global markets and might have different capacities to reach out to policy makers in international institutions. “In this regard, it should be followed those steps to address wicked problems correctly: research context, data collection and analytical approach.” (Burke, et al. 2020, pp. 364-368).

Let us think about the public policies that are needed to combat COVID-19: isolation, face masks, boosting the economy of local businesses. Those are policies made by mayors, local representatives and neighborhood leaders who are in charge of public health policies among their communities where they live. Indeed, public policies needed to address effectively COVID-19 pandemic which are also related to national priorities such as distribution of hospital equipment, oxygen tanks, management of cases and deaths, but there is also space for additional public policies such as ensuring that SMEs and medium-sized companies have liquidity among other fiscal policies. Those public policies, as mentioned before, need to be addressed at the local level.

**Theoretical Framework**

Therefore, studying methodological localism is not just a regular study of local governments, but how these local governments also have to content to inter-governmental relations, competing political agendas of the presidency and other actors at the top of the administrative structure and politicians buying for power when they are encouraged to implement a global public goods (like the vaccine) suggested from outside the state’s domain. The policy complexity comes when international public goods are encouraged to be implemented at the local level, while additional actors are also be included in the process. An example of this are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nation have the mandate to be implemented at the local level.

In terms of vaccination implementation, the value added is that Mexico was a net importer of vaccines, buying and also receiving donations, and also donated to the international vaccination campaign COVAX<sup>21</sup>. For example, 18 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine were used for booster shots announced by the Ministry of Foreign Relations Marcelo Ebrad in February 2022. <sup>22</sup> But earlier in 2021, Ebrad announced donations of 250,000 USD to help other countries. Furthermore, data from December 2021, shows this dynamic of a net importer and also a donor country. <sup>23</sup> While this might sound odd, this middle-income country is also performing its role in the

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<sup>21</sup> In June 2021, during the Gavi COVAX AMC Summit “One World Protected”, Mexico announced a donation of 250,000 USD for the Gavi COVAX AMC as a first contribution to Gavi. https://www.gavi.org/investing-gavi/funding/donor-profiles/mexico


<sup>23</sup>https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/infographic-mexicos-vaccine-supply-and-distribution-efforts
national stage while also receiving and distrusting its own vaccination program internally, with relative success. While methodological nationalism rightfully criticizes that too much of the public administration literature is focused on the state without considering (a) how transnational actions influence the state (local or national level), (b) how the state is not the only global actor with policy power at the supranational level, and (c), often omits other actors like global NGOs, MNCs, transnational public private partnerships, foundations, which also influence the creation of global policy and its administration. The role of middle-income like Mexico struggle with global policy integration and performing as leader on the world stage, they also internally have to apply local strategies within their nation state often with a dysfunctional administrative structure (such as implementation of the vaccine across its 32 state governments and over 2,500 municipalities).

Studies of federalism as a legal system in which a national government and a subnational exist together in which they make agreements related to their public finances, is further too short sided to explain how these subnational local government also work on the international stage. For example, the 1st Article of the Mexican Fiscal Coordination Law establishes that the Mexican will enter into an agreement with each Federative Entities (States) adhered to the National Fiscal Coordination System through Federation Mexican Ministry of Finance (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público), in order to make sure that they receive the public funds that are established in the rules of the Mexican Federal Fiscal System. As it can be seen, the nature of fiscal federalism implies a definition of competencies between the competing levels of the Federation to carry out tax collection and public spending but also implementing public policies.

In theory, this system will allow to increase citizens welfare, as the Federation collect the public resources and distributes to each State that will allocate it more efficiently, as long as at the local level, governments have more contact with people and data to better understand their needs. Doing this, “will also be cheaper, as local governments will offer goods and services the population at the lowest cost, while performing this task, it will also allow them to strengthen their fiscal responsibility as members of a Federation.” (Oates 2005, pp. 349-373).

On the other hand, if the central government had those functions, it would be unknown the specific needs of the entire population, so it will probably be provided the same amount and type of goods to the entire population, without considering their particular needs and peculiar characteristics. When international relationships are involved into the policy making process, they circumvent the nation state all together and therefore they may provide vaccines not accounted for by the national government, may buy vaccines from different entities not federally approved, or they may receive donations not registered at the federal level. Furthermore, it is up to the federal government to ensure that equal treatment of each subnational entity but often is not able to do so because of capacity issues and competing agendas at the national level.

Data and Analytic Methods

In this section we develop a brief case study of Mexican distribution of the vaccine. This will help to show how a new approach, the methodological localism, is needed to address
effectively wicked problems caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

First of all, the main public policies implemented in Mexico during the pandemic are analyzed, considering the States with more and less cases using the data from the National Public Policy Laboratory, known in Spanish as Laboratorio Nacional de Políticas Públicas, from the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, known as CIDE or Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas.

This will allow us to understand the economic decisions that state governments used when faced by the economic shock represented by the current COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is to know the efforts of the State to face this difficult situation, providing elements for public discussion and decision-making, especially in the social policy implementation moving forward after the pandemic and into new fiscal reforms for the country.

Table 2: Public Policy Implementation in the States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Policy Type</th>
<th>More cases</th>
<th>Less cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student scholarships</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment insurance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for COVID-19 infected</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for labor reintegration</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for indigenous people</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for older adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pantry delivery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutritional support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for vulnerable people</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports for public transport drivers</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: September 2020 data.
Source: Own elaboration based on CIDE data

To show the imbalances that have brought Mexican Federalism, we study the distribution of the vaccine considering the States with higher and lower vaccination rates considering the official data reported by Federal Health Ministry (Secretaría de Salud Federal) from México last November 22nd.

Figure 1: States with Highest and Lowest Vaccination Rates

Source: Secretaría de Salud Federal México
Findings

In practice, Federalism in Mexico has become increasingly unbalanced, as States are highly dependent on Federal resources. Indeed, “Mexican Federalism continue to be highly centralized in terms of income and increasingly decentralizing in spending. This imbalance must be corrected through mechanisms of joint responsibility between the Federation and States in issues related to public finances and the establishment of guidelines and regulations in the case of debt contracting." (Gandarilla, N., 2012).

This unbalanced Federalism has had an effect on States and municipal governments’ quality of public policy. The consequences of this imbalance have been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the largest number of patients and deaths are highly concentrated in Mexico City, Chihuahua, Baja California and Sonora, which present much more cases than in the rest of the States. Indeed, if they are omitted, the cases seem to be distributed in a more balanced way respect to the others.

Given the situation of the economic and health crisis facing the Mexican government, actions were announced to address the emergency in order to reactivate the economy. Therefore, each of the 32 states in the country designed contingency. The information on the situation found at the state level must be considered to have a general overview and make decisions to face the economic problems that the pandemic brought with it.

Mexico City (CDMX) is a state that, despite having a greater number of cases and deaths from COVID, is the one that has implemented a greatest variety of public policies, among which are: support for student scholarships, unemployment insurance, patients with COVID 19, labor reintegration, indigenous people, older adults, pantries, food support, among others. The foregoing contrasts with the State of Mexico, which has only implemented food aid and support for vulnerable people. Mexico City presents a clear example of the imbalance mentioned before. It is a State where power is highly centralized, it has been developed many different public policies to address COVID-19 Pandemic, but, at the same time, it can be seen a higher number of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

At the same time, it can be seen that the States with the highest vaccination rates (more than 95% of the population), are Mexico City, Quintana Roo and Querétaro, which are considered one of the most developed States, while the poorest Mexican States are the ones that have the lowest vaccination rates (less than 75%): Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas.

The COVID-19 crisis reinforces how public policy implementation is often asymmetrical at the local level, where fiscal imbalances exacerbate administrative capacities and income inequalities.

Implications and Conclusion

The objective is to capture information on the public policies that states are implementing to support their local economies during the health contingency due to COVID-19, as well as in the subsequent recovery period. The above, in order to be able to know what are the policies that work for the prevention of pandemics that could generate another health crisis such as COVID-19, as well as the economic
consequences that put at risk the progress made in social development, being able to affect vulnerable groups to a greater extent. It should be noted that all entities in the country have registered an increase in the number of infections due to the COVID-19 virus, although the number of deaths has been decreasing. In this sense, the entities that have registered an increase in the number of infections by COVID-19 seek to implement sanitary measures that are stricter, in order to prevent the pandemic from spreading further and contribute to the prevention of the closure of the activity economic in the country again. Also, more developed States have higher vaccination rates than their poorest counterparts. As a result, the measures are different in each State, not only in scope but also in impact. This is due both to the implementation capacity of each State, as well as to the composition of its economy. We know that all States are going to suffer the crisis, but some Entities will have a stronger impact than others, due to the dependence they may have on the different economic variables, among which are trade, tourism, exports. The states that will be least affected are those in which their economy depends on the production of basic necessities such as food.

We can also see how the Northern states implemented a greater number of measures than those in the south, since the latter represent the most backward economies in the country. The above indicates the inefficiency to be able to cope with the crisis in times of the pandemic, as well as the measures that must be taken to recover from it. It is particularly important to note that the analysis of the level of incidence that priority social programs may have to support the most affected sectors by the pandemic, as well as social ones as relevant to address poverty, in the short term, their operation may be useful to address the drop in the income of the population.

It is necessary to expand and strengthen responsive measures such as the programs presented above in order to design priority programs that have a positive impact on citizens. Likewise, it is important to improve the operational capacity of these programs, and ensure that they are adequately focused on meeting the needs of their target population, as well as considering additional measures to assist those who lose their source of income, as well as the urban sectors, as they are more exposed to those vulnerabilities.

References


