

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Protecting the Child in Chile

The lives of poor Chileans, especially children, improved dramatically after 1990 as poverty, maternal and child mortality rates fell, and school enrolment and child nutrition levels increased. These gains were all the more impressive given the legacy of extreme poverty, inequality and social dislocation inherited from Pinochet's 15-year military dictatorship. The restoration of political and civil rights also allowed civil society to flourish, and this burgeoning sector played an important role in helping implement the government's social agenda. This Research Summary examines how three centre-left democratic governments, supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), made such enormous strides, from 1990 to 2005.

Chilean government's social and rights agenda

After Pinochet, the newly elected centre-left governments in Chile became a key driving force behind the substantive improvements in children's lives. Many of the new government officials and politicians came from NGOs, and formed a critical mass of reformers able to drive change. The new governments were characterised, to a greater or lesser extent, by their commitment to poverty reduction and human and child rights, and their recognition of the important role of civil society in helping address social problems.

The dramatic improvements in income and living conditions for the poor, particularly children were achieved through a combination of rapid economic growth, increased social spending including specific policies targeted at children, and the promotion of human and child rights. Children also benefited indirectly from wider government policies tackling domestic violence, access to education, and public safety issues. Because the social

programmes were financed mainly by economic growth, rather than redistribution, they were not opposed by vested interests. A strong and efficient state apparatus also meant that, in general, policy implementation was highly effective. Between 1990 and 2003 poverty plummeted from around 39 per cent to 19 per cent of the population, and extreme poverty from 17.4 per cent to 4.7 per cent.

The first coalition government in 1990 ratified a number of international human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and launched a number of initiatives including the first National Programme for Children. It also established a collaborative effort between government and civil society to address child rights, which reflected the shared commitments to human and child rights.

From 1994 to 2000 the second centre-left coalition government adopted a more technocratic approach towards social policy, focusing more on good

management than a close relationship with civil society. It introduced fewer specific initiatives on children, but did launch an important government initiative on poverty and crime which benefited children.

From 2000 to 2006 the third government launched a series of initiatives on children involving the active participation of social organisations. These included a new ten-year National Policy in favour of Children and Young People, and a Council of Ministers for Children and Young People. In 2005, politicians from a broad range of political parties recognised 'child care' as an essential part of the government agenda.

The civil society landscape

The government's social agenda was broadly supported by civil society including NGOs. By 2005, despite a reduction in international funding,

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“ A critical mass of reformers within government, when supported by civil society, can achieve dramatic improvements in people’s lives ”

more than 200 child-related NGOs were registered with the government. In general, NGOs focused on service delivery, and influencing and monitoring the implementation of government policy, rather than agenda setting. This was for a number of reasons. Many NGOs had been closely linked to the political parties that later formed the coalition government and shared a similar ideological approach. Others were closely related to the Catholic Church and had a charitable approach to development. In addition, after the transition to civilian rule many NGOs were sub-contracted by the government to deliver services, and were therefore financially dependent on the government. A survey in 2002 showed that 39 per cent of funding for NGOs came from government, 45 per cent from international sources, and just 2 per cent from donations. Many of the NGO activists were professionals with very specific and technical skills, such as legal reform, psychiatry, service delivery and social work, and saw their main contribution as delivering services.

Civil society strategy

The NGOs’ main influencing strategy was to develop permanent relationships and dialogue with officials in the powerful executive branch of government. They also monitored the government’s actions on child rights, through, for example, reports submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Because of the government’s receptiveness and because of financial and political constraints, NGOs put little emphasis on grassroots mobilisation, or on the media. Despite this, they were able to effectively influence policy implementation by providing technical expertise based on their professional qualifications and their direct experience of service delivery. Concrete examples of NGOs’

policy successes include the creation of offices for the protection of children rights and the promotion of initiatives regarding the prevention of sexual exploitation of minors, and the establishment of a protocol protecting minor’s rights to privacy in government data bases.

A minority of NGOs became more autonomous after 1990 and the most successful NGOs were also able to propose policy alternatives. OPCION (from the English word Option) was one of the few that played a proactive role in agenda setting, and along with ACHNU (Chilean Pro-United Association) and PIDEE (Programme for Children Injured during the State of Siege) helped establish a number of influential NGO networks as an attempt to increase NGOs’ political autonomy by working collectively. The establishment of the NGO National Network for Children in Chile in 2001 marked a turning point with NGOs becoming more independent and critical of government.

Insights

This research illustrates how a critical mass of reformers within government, backed by civil society, was able to achieve dramatic improvements in people’s lives. It also shows that, when the government is receptive, NGOs can influence policy implementation through the provision of technical expertise, direct experience and offering policy alternatives. It also shows how domestic coalitions can use international human rights frameworks to promote poverty reduction, and hold governments to account.

Credits

This Research Summary was written by Ruth Mayne, Independent Consultant, and is based on a study by Claudio A. Fuentes, the Director of FLACSO-Chile.

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