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Reproduction of Inequalities in the Implementation of Social Policies in Latin America

*Roberto Rocha Coelho Pires
Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA)
Brazil*

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UNRISD ▪ Palais des Nations ▪ 1211 Geneva 10 ▪ Switzerland
info.unrisd@un.org ▪ www.unrisd.org

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Abstract

This paper aims to bring together discussions about policy implementation and reproduction of social inequalities. Our main goal is to identify and take inventory of the different mechanisms through which the day-to-day operations of government and the encounters between service workers and users may engender risks of inequality reproduction. Implementation processes take place in the hidden recesses of routine or in the obscure actions and inactions of public agents. Beyond contributing to the execution of the desired effects of social policies, we argue that policy implementation processes also produce other non-intended effects on service users and targeted populations. These effects may contribute to the persistence of social inequalities by producing the accumulation of material and symbolic disadvantages on social groups who traditionally experience forms of vulnerability. The empirical analysis draws from the systematic comparison of 23 concrete cases of social policy implementation in Brazil and Mexico. By looking across the cases, we identified an array of mechanisms linking implementation dynamics to the material and symbolic effects reinforcing already existing inequalities. Recognizing these mechanisms is an important step towards making social policies and services more effective in the pursuit of sustainable development goals.

Keywords

Public policy; implementation; inequality reproduction; Brazil; Mexico

Bio

Researcher at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) – Brasilia, Brazil. Main research interests include policy implementation, bureaucracy, and state-society relations.

Introduction

Brazil and other Latin American countries are among the most unequal societies in the world. Despite important advances in poverty reduction in the first decade of the 21st century, extreme poverty and inequality rates have been on the rise again during the last four years (Neri 2018), in tandem with austerity measures. However, fluctuations in inequality rates seem less salient if we look back the last hundred years, when a great deal of stability in income and wealth inequalities can be noticed (Souza 2016). Social inequality persistency indicates that powerful reproduction processes are underway, and that we should pay more attention to their dynamics and effects.

Dynamics of inequality reproduction operate in multiple spheres of social life, and we already know that government decisions and public policies play an important role in this matter. Nevertheless, relationships between policies and social inequalities reproduction are rather ambiguous. On the one hand, many government initiatives are formally and explicitly designed to combat or mitigate social, economic, or regional disparities. On the other hand, there are also public policies that strongly contribute to the reinforcement of existing inequalities (for example, a regressive tax system; monetary or immigration policies). Even knowing these government decisions and actions play a great role in inequalities reproduction, and that their analysis is an important and promising task, this paper seeks a different angle, searching for a complementary explanation that may contribute to ongoing debates. Our interest here is to discuss the risks of social inequality reproduction engendered by the provision of public services and goods aimed at expanding socioeconomic inclusion, or mitigating the effects of exclusion. Naming these initiatives generally as “social policies”, we will question whether and how they might reinforce existing social inequalities.

This counterintuitive perspective finds support in classic and contemporary discussions on policy implementation. Since the 1970s, implementation scholars challenged the idea that laws and political decisions are seamlessly executed by government bureaucracies as planned, arguing that implementation processes are necessarily creative and transformative. Implementation processes involve a multiplicity of (organizational and individual) actors whose behaviors and (inter)actions influence not only policy form, but also its contents and results.¹ Consequently, policy effects are not reducible to a mechanical unfolding of formal decisions and rules. Implementation processes create effects other than the formally desired. They are rather hotbeds of unintended effects – including both side effects and perverse effects (Vedung 2013).

Therefore, we envision implementation of social policies as processes that can engender non-intended effects on targeted (or adjacent) populations, in addition to contributing to desired effects. Non-intended effects can be both material and symbolic, and reinforce existing social inequalities by different means. Material effects relate to access and distribution of public services/benefits to different social groups. As we shall see, implementation dynamics may introduce informal barriers and selectivity, disproportionately harming a segment of the population in comparison to others, and negatively interfering with the production of distributive justice. In extremely unequal societies, these effects tend to be even more acute, as they contribute to the accumulation of disadvantages by social groups who already experience

¹ Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 1990; Hill and Hupe 2014.

some form of material vulnerability (Cardenas et al. 2010). Symbolic effects, in turn, draw from contemporary debates on social inequality, which have been emphasizing either its multidimensionality – moving beyond individual differences in income (Sen 1999; CEPAL 2016) – or an intersectional perspective – calling attention to the perverse combination of multiple markers of vulnerability in concrete experiences of exclusion (Crenshaw 1995; Hankivsky and Cormier 2011). As it will be illustrated, symbolic effects call attention to how day-to-day interactions with State agents interfere in the way citizens define and evaluate their social positions, as well as contribute to stabilizing their identities and sense of value in society. While material and symbolic effects can be analytically separated, they often appear strongly linked in living experiences. Together, these non-intended effects of implementation processes contribute to the persistence of social inequalities by producing the accumulation of material and symbolic disadvantages on social groups who traditionally experience some forms of vulnerability.

We believe that understanding these non-intended effects of implementation is relevant because it illuminates consequential dynamics that are often neglected, or rarely approached in political debates. The fact that implementation takes place in the hidden recesses of routine, or in the obscure actions and inactions of public agents, does not mean it should remain immune to public scrutiny. The less it is exposed and discussed, the more likely it will remain as a viable option for governments (and societies) to play the double-game of maintaining inclusive legal norms or political discourses, while letting implementation “trick” the actual delivery of social policies (Dubois 2010), or allowing a form of disentanglement-through-practice to take place (Lipsky 1984).

In sum, this paper is an attempt to evaluate the role of policy implementation processes in the perpetuation of social inequalities. Our main goal is to recognize and take inventory of the different mechanisms through which the day-to-day operations of government and the encounters between service workers and users may engender risks of inequality reproduction. We will do so by examining concrete cases of implementation of social policies in Brazil and Mexico. The methodological strategy is presented in the following section. After that, we discuss the main findings and conclusions.

Methods

Advancing our empirical understanding of the mechanisms linking policy implementation processes to the material and symbolic effects leading to the perpetuation of social inequalities requires the analysis of multiple cases and the concrete experiences of policy makers, workers, and users. In order to do so, we have been mobilizing an informal network of researchers in Latin America. The network began as a small group of Brazilian researchers that met monthly (from October 2016 to December 2017) at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) to discuss their ongoing empirical work on the topic. These discussions led to a first publication of intermediary findings (IPEA 2017) and a call for papers in the beginning of 2018. The call reached a larger group of scholars working on the topic (including Mexican collaborators) and resulted in 31 paper proposals, out of which we selected 23 case studies (presented in Table A.1, appendix). The cases contain empirical analyses of the implementation dynamics of public

programs/services and their potential effects on their users/beneficiaries, in terms of reinforcement (or not) of preexisting social inequalities.²

The resulting set of case studies provided a database for the identification and analysis of the mechanisms linking policy implementation to the perpetuation of inequalities. It is worth noting that the data produced was not designed to be representative of a larger population of public programs or services (it is rather a convenience sample³). Given that we do not aim at estimating generalizable effects, but rather at exploring, identifying, and illustrating the different mechanisms associated to the effects, the current database offers a unique opportunity. The 23 cases have one characteristic in common: they are public programs or services that interfered directly or indirectly with the poor and other vulnerable groups or segments of the population. Therefore, they allow us to explore the effects of their implementation dynamics (and their related mechanisms) on these social groups. Despite such similarity, there are important variations within the set of cases (see Table 1), in terms of (a) policy domains, (b) coordination by different levels of government, (c) analyses focused on different contexts or levels of implementation, and (d) whether the initiatives were focalized on specific target groups or universally accessible.

Table 1: Variations in the set of cases (n=23)

Policy Domain	Social Assistance (5)
	Health Care (4)
	Education (3)
	Rural Development (3)
	Justice and Public Order (3)
	Housing (2)
	Infrastructure (2)
	Work and Income (1)
Level of government (coordination)	National government (18)
	State governments (3)
	Local governments (2)
Context of implementation (level of analysis)	National level (10)
	State/Regional level (3)
	Local level (10)
Program/service focused on specific targeted or vulnerable group?	Yes (14)
	No (9)

Source: Policy implementation and (re)production of inequalities Project (IPEA 2018)

We then subjected the cases studies to systematic comparative analysis. First, for each of the programs/services, we identified their stated objectives, the non-intended effects observed by the researchers, and the mechanisms that engendered such effects. Second, we looked deeper into the mechanisms and their relation to the effects, comparing across the cases, in order to identify the main patterns running across the diverse set of cases (Table 1). By doing so, we

² These case studies are currently under review to become chapters of a forthcoming book dedicated to the subject, to be published by IPEA in 2019.

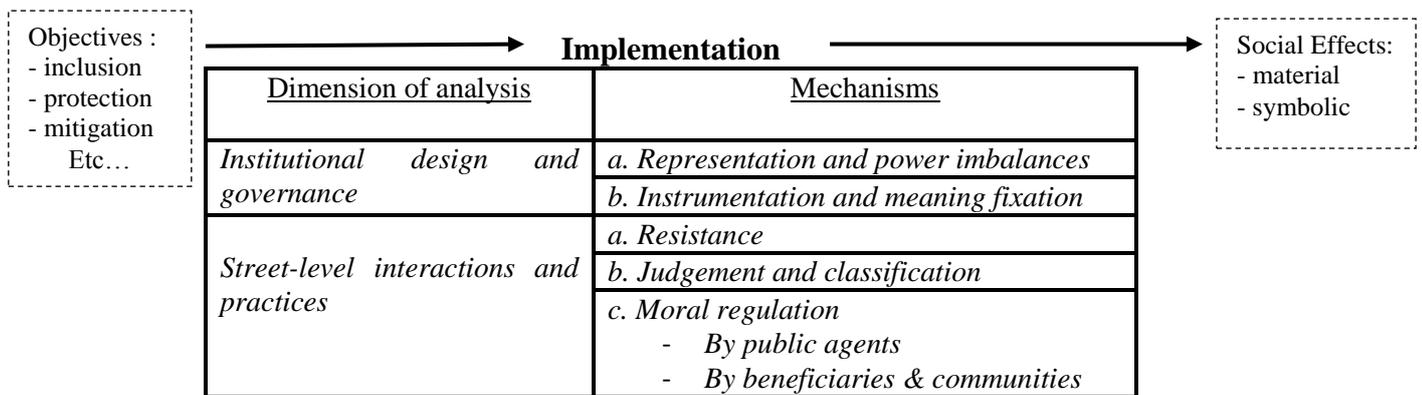
³ Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that involves the sample being drawn from that part of the population that is close to hand (i.e. at the reach of the network of researchers involved). This type of sampling is most useful for exploratory studies and pilot testing.

were able to depict in more abstract terms the mechanisms that appeared to be playing similar roles in different cases. We conceive this procedure as a type of qualitative meta-analysis, in which we drew elements from single case studies with the goal of putting together a broader analytical cartography of the different mechanisms leading to risks of inequality reproduction in policy implementation.

Findings: a mosaic of mechanisms and their related risks

The findings from the analysis of the empirical cases indicated a mosaic of mechanisms that take place during actual implementation dynamics and lead to the material and symbolic effects contributing to the perpetuation of social inequalities. At the center of Figure 1, we recognize two broader dimensions of analysis of implementation processes – in line with the extant literature on the topic – and their related mechanisms. The list of mechanisms is indicative of the different forms through which implementation processes incorporate risks of reproducing inequalities. In that sense, it can be a useful tool for preventative assessments (*ex ante*) or evaluations (*ex post*) of actual public programs and services. In what follows below, we will define and illustrate each of these analytical dimensions and their associated mechanisms, drawing from empirical cases.

Figure 1 – Mechanisms leading to risks of inequality reproduction in policy implementation processes



Source: Policy implementation and (re)production of inequalities Project (IPEA 2018)

Institutional Design and governance

Top-down approaches to policy implementation have underscored institutional design as a key dimension in understanding how policy goals, contents, and formats get transformed through the course of implementation (Hill and Hupe 2014). Putting in practice legal norms and political decisions frequently requires the involvement of multiple actors (both government and non-government) and objects (resources, technologies, etc.) in institutional arrangements that provide the organizational support for the unfolding of public actions. These institutional arrangements account for the governance of the implementation process (Capano et al. 2015; Marques 2013). Therefore, attention to the institutional arrangements for implementation brings about two key sets of questions: (a) who is entitled (or not) to participate and have their interests and points of view institutionally represented? And, given that the distribution of power, resources, and roles among the different actors involved is often unequal, what are the

implications for the capacity of the different actors to intervene in critical decisions regarding implementation strategies and courses of action? (b) In the process of stabilizing the relationships among the multiple actors involved in the arrangement through the development of instruments (formal procedures, protocols, information systems, forms, etc.), what visions, values, and preconceptions about the users of service/program get fixed? What are the implications of these instruments for the users? As we shall argue below, these two aspects of the institutional design and governance of the implementation process introduce potential risks leading to material and symbolic effects that may contribute to the perpetuation of disadvantages and vulnerabilities by certain groups of the population.

a) Representation and power imbalances:

A first mechanism engendering risks of exclusion, lack of attention, and harm to disadvantaged groups in implementation processes relates to who are the actors taking part in implementation arrangements and which interests and points of view are institutionally represented. The implementation phase of the policy process is also an important political arena (Grindle 1980). Considering this phase as an opportunity to introduce transformations, interested actors seek to participate, influence, and control decisions related to operational strategies and actions. Therefore, looking at the interested actors who succeed in taking part and those who are left out of (or aside) the institutional arrangement, as well as at the articulations among actors and their levels connectivity, can be first steps in understanding the risks of inequality reproduction in implementation processes.

One example comes from the implementation of employment and professional training policies. Mendes (2018) examined the operation of Codefat (the Council of the Fund for Workers' Support), a decision-making body composed by representatives of government, workers' unions, and firms' associations, responsible for creating and funding professional and technological training programs, as well as managing the unemployment insurance program, in order to correct distortions and support the development of the Brazilian labor market. Mendes analyzed the proceedings of the meetings and the councils' decisions between 1990 and 2016 and found out that, despite statistically visible and persistent gender inequalities operating in the Brazilian labor market over the period (wage gaps, informality, etc.), the topic was only rarely approached by Codefat (only 12 out of 780 council's resolutions). The investigation of the underlying mechanisms revealed, first, that female presence in the council was very low (only 5.9 percent, on average, of the councilors). Second, during the course of the meetings, whenever issues associated to gender inequality or the situation of women in the labor market came up, male councilors employed four kinds of discursive tactics to avoid them (i.e. not speaking about it; postponing; not searching for additional information; or leaving it in abstract form - not specifying). Finally, the Council did not seek out nor welcomed institutional partnerships with other government bodies responsible for promoting gender equality or programs and services targeting women. As a result, Codefat has remained blind to gender issues and the challenges faced by female workers in the labor market. The combination of insufficient female representation in the implementation arena, unequal distribution of resources and power among the different actors (male and female councilors), and incipient articulation with gender-sensitive organizations in the external environment reinforced barriers to the inclusion of gender issues in Codefat's agenda.

In other cases, we observed that the representational aspect was apparently fulfilled. The so-called intersectoral or transversal implementation arrangements are characterized precisely by bringing together different types of government and non-government actors in order to face complex problems through an integrated approach. The *Fica Vivo!* Program, implemented in the state of Minas Gerais (Brazil), since 2006, with the goal of preventing criminality rates among youth in violent territories, offers such an example. According to Jesus (2018), the Program's institutional arrangement was based on partnerships between the police, the social service department, and civil society organizations (such as neighborhood associations and NGOs) aiming at combining social support actions (i.e. professional training, cultural activities, and social services and benefits) with strategic policing and criminal justice interventions. The discourse of the integrated approach was key in increasing the budget allocated to criminality prevention, as compared to previous attempts in the area. However, as implementation actions unfolded, power imbalances and institutional disarticulations led to a greater appropriation of the funds for police interventions and, consequently, to the underdevelopment of the social component. At the end, such disarticulation produced a public intervention that disproportionately emphasized policing activities in the territories inhabited by poor – and mostly black – families. Their overexposure to state surveillance contributed not only to increasing tensions and levels of incarceration of this public, but also to the symbolic reinforcement of stereotypical associations between poverty, race, and violence.

Yet another example of the risks associated to the lack of connectivity within institutional arrangements is provided by Sandim and Assis (2018), in their analysis of the Program for Integral Assistance to Families, a component of the National Social Assistance System. Here again the Program's institutional arrangement was based on the articulation of a network of services (i.e. health care units, justice department, energy and water provision companies, kindergarten facilities, among others). However, the investigation of the actual implementation of the program in two municipalities (Belo Horizonte and São Paulo, Brazil), indicated that the connectivity of the institutional network failed rather frequently. Moreover, these failures tended to affect the poorest families more intensively, because the costs of “repairing” the institutional disconnections were completely transferred to them – i.e. transportation costs, delays and longer waiting times to access benefits, as well as the burden of repeatedly providing documentation and proving their precarious life conditions. In situations like this, the very search for needed public support can become part of a process in which conditions of vulnerability may even be (materially and symbolically) deteriorated.

b) Instrumentation and meaning fixation

In addition to interest representation and power imbalances, another important aspect in the analysis of institutional arrangements for policy implementation is the routinization of relationships among the multiple actors involved through the adoption or development of instruments. By instruments, we designate the non-human entities or objects that stabilize and provide specific form to relationships in the course of the collective effort of implementation. Examples of these instruments include information systems, protocols, standard operating procedures, indicators, registration sheets, etc. that routinize the exchanges among government organizations, as well as between them and the users of public services. According to Lascoumes e Le Galès (2007), instruments are not only technical, but also social devices, because they carry with them social representations about the actors and they fix the meanings of the interactions they regulate. Consequently, instruments materialize preconceptions and

values and, therefore, they are not neutral. They may empower or disempower, they unevenly distribute onuses and bonuses, they might make things easier and accessible for some, while more difficult or out of reach for others. In sum, by looking at the instruments that routinize relationships among the multiple actors involved in the implementation effort, we gain insight into how specific visions, values, and preconceptions get materialized (Le Galès 2010) and the selectivity they operate between different groups of public service users and beneficiaries.

One of the clearest examples of the operation of this type of mechanism is the *Bolsa Familia* Program (BFP). This conditional cash transfer initiative in Brazil aims at alleviating extreme poverty and interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty, by requiring the children of impoverished families to regularly attend to education and health care services. A standard operating procedure of the BFP is that the cash transfer must be made directly to the mother (rather than the father), because they are conceived as more prone to use the money in favor of the children's needs (i.e. food, hygiene, and school supplies). As a result, for many poor women, the BFP cash transfer turned out to be their first and only independent source of revenue, contributing to their empowerment in the management of the household. But, as Marins (2018) and Melo and Marques (2018) argue, the BFP's standard operating procedure ended up crystalizing an expectation upon the female beneficiaries as the sole responsible for caring for the children, reinforcing a traditional gender stereotype, with clear impacts on the quotidian life of women in the sense of amplifying their disadvantages and reducing their future opportunities.

Another example in a different policy domain regards the selection procedure for accessing public university-level education. Goellner (2018) compared three different selection procedures employed by the University of Brasília, between 2012 and 2016. The first and oldest method is a test of formal knowledge administered at the completion of high-school studies (*Vestibular*). The second, named *PAS*, is also based on high-school level formal knowledge, but it is administered in series, at the end of each of the three years of high-school. The third and more recent method, *Enem-SISU*, focuses on the articulation of contents, rather than their separation by disciplines, and takes place twice every year. While the first two used to be formulated by the University of Brasília, the third is a national-level standardized test, formulated by the Ministry of Education and valid for all federal universities in the country. In sum, the selection procedures differed in terms of the form, content, and regulation. Statistical analyses confirmed that the three methods selected significantly different groups of new entrants. While the first two tended to favor the selection of white newcomers from families with higher income and with previous experiences in private schools (on average, providers of better high-school level education and specific preparatory courses), the third selection procedure opened greater space for the selection of black students, from lower-income families and a full educational trajectory in public schools. Therefore, depending on the instrument employed to transform high-school graduates into new university students, the selectivity of the implementation arrangement may differ, favoring already established groups, creating additional hurdles for the disadvantaged, or mitigating already existing inequalities.

Street-level interactions and practices

Scholarly debates on policy implementation have long asserted the analytical gains derived from a bottom-up perspective, which brings emphasis to the role of implementation agents, their beliefs, behaviors, and day-to-day practices (Hill and Hupe 2014). According to this perspective, we cannot fully understand the risks engendered by implementation processes to

the reproduction of inequalities only by looking at institutional designs. The concept of “street-level bureaucracy” (Lipsky 1980; Hupe et al. 2015) sought precisely to call our attention to the implications of the work performed by implementation agents in the frontline of public services to the contents of public policies and to the users of these policies. Given the conditions under which these frontline agents often perform their jobs – complex rules, shortage of resources, excessive demands, away from superiors’ attention, and in face-to-face interactions with users – they inevitably enjoy some level of discretion in the execution of their ordinary tasks. The use of discretion by these agents, in turn, create opportunities for creative adjustments, through the introduction of elements and references alien to the program/service formal rules and prescriptions. These adjustments tend to be oriented by the impetus of implementation agents to gain control over their routines and workloads, as well as by moral judgements based on social values and preconceptions shared by them (and sometimes also by the users). These discretionary accommodations may lead to innovations or solutions to emerging problems, but also to undesired consequences to the users (Dubois 1999, 2010). In what follows below, we look into the potentially negative consequences of discretion and explore three different kinds of mechanisms (as previewed in Figure 1) linking the behaviors and ordinary practices of implementation agents to the material and symbolic effects associated to the perpetuation of social inequalities.

a) Resistance

The examination of the empirical cases revealed that one of the mechanisms associated to the uses of discretion by street-level workers is resistance to formal norms, policy prescriptions and guidelines, as well as superior decisions. In some circumstances, frontline workers may decide to simply ignore or diverge from these institutional orientations. As we shall see below, when the institutional orientations point towards procedures for inclusion, expansion of access, or focalization of vulnerable groups, the resistance of implementation agents to follow through may result in lack of attention/action, invisibility, or inadequate forms of approaching needy publics.

The study of Milanezi and Silva (2018) provides an illustrative example. They examined the implementation of the National Program for Integral Health Care of the Black Population in local health care centers in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The Program aimed at improving black population’s health indicators and conditions, given ample statistical evidence about the disparities in health conditions between blacks and whites in Brazil. The program emphasized special attention to that segment of the population and oriented the articulation of the different health care equipment and services on the local health districts. Ethnographic research revealed a form of resistance that operated through silence. Local health care professionals rarely talked about the Program, it was never an issue at their regular team meetings, and measures to transform program proposals into formal or informal protocols for practice were not in place. In the search for understanding the motivations behind such silences, the authors found out that implementation agents did not agree with the provision of differential treatment toward blacks. They understood this as racism and believed they should deny racial differences in order to provide universal access to service users. They resisted the national program guidelines and formal rules because they did not share with policymakers the same vision of the problem. Meanwhile, a segment of the population needing special attention and treatment, as demonstrated by health conditions indicators, remained invisible and not adequately approached.

Another example in which the mechanism of resistance mediated the implementation processes and its unfavorable results to vulnerable segments of the population is the case of the National Program for Social Assistance in Brazil (Jaccoud and Abreu 2018). The Program was structured in the 2000s based on the recognition of social services and benefits as social rights and government responsibilities. Consequently, a national system for social services has been put in place, with clear division of roles between the federal, states, and municipal governments. In 2016, it added up to 10 thousand public facilities and 240 thousand social workers providing services at the local level. Jaccoud and Abreu ran a national survey with the goal of understanding the perceptions of implementation agents, in terms of how they conceive of the national policy, their work, and of the beneficiaries they are supposed to serve. The findings indicated significant divergence in these understandings. While some professionals adhered to the formal prescriptions of the program (i.e. a rights-based perspective), others systematically depicted users as “lazy”, “opportunistic”, and to be blamed for their unsuccessful destinies. For the latter, services and benefits were understood as a gift or favor, rather than a government responsibility to care for those in need. So, in this case, resistance to formal policy, guidelines and rules appeared in the form of divergent interpretations by the workers in charge of implementing policy goals and procedures.

b) Judgement and classification

A second type of mechanism that plays out during street-level encounters between service workers and users relates to classification operations. The use of discretion by implementation agents brings up uncertainties and dilemmas about how to proceed in each situation. In reaction, frontline workers develop practical strategies for reducing complexities and uncertainties over time. Chief among these strategies are informal classification systems that allow them to quickly differentiate users and assign them to the associated responses (i.e. service delivery, denial, demand more documentation, etc.). These classification systems often embody preconceptions about the users and mobilize collectively shared stereotypes, which allow implementation agents to judge, in each situation they face, who are the users who “truly” deserve the public benefit and their efforts (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 2012). If differentiating the public becomes indispensable to making street-level implementation work feasible (Lipsky 1980), it is not without consequences to service users. The practical solutions to the challenges faced by the agents – based on their perceptions, values, and representations of the users – amounts to the institutional production of discrimination, lack of attention and the selective mistreatment offered to vulnerable groups of the population.

One example of the operation of such mechanism is presented by Penna (2018), in her study of rural development and agrarian reform services in the North of Brazil. The ethnography focused on the ordinary interactions between implementation agents and settlers of new colonization projects. Special attention was given to the implementation agents’ efforts to adapt a complex and demanding national legislation to the local situations in the process of certifying the occupation of lots as entitled (or not) to the benefits of the agrarian reform program. When deciding which lots/families were to be considered part of the program, implementation agents mobilized multiple informal tactics and criteria to establish the “clients’ profile”, such as examining their hands and skin to determine whether the family was engaged in agricultural work, or the use of the stove and the type of food consumed (locally produced or not). The examination of these vestiges played a crucial role in the judgement of the agents about whether a family was to be classified as deserving to remain on the lot or not. In case these (and other)

informal criteria were not met, the agents would classify the family as an irregular occupant of the lot and demand its expropriation.

We observed the same type of mechanism operating in the case of a public high school in Rio de Janeiro that implemented a special class focused on students with educational delays and aimed at correcting age-grade deficits. Oliveira and Carvalho (2018) focused their analysis on the interpretations, meanings, and uses made by the school principal and teachers of their decisions to allocate students in these special classes. They found out that beyond the formal policy criterion (i.e. age-grade deficit of at least two years) other informal criteria took place in the judgement and classification of students by these implementation agents. The principal and the teachers cultivated a narrative about the “ideal profile” for students in these special classes, which differentiated those whose educational delay derived from their learning difficulties (cognitive aspect), from those whose delay was related to attitudinal aspects. Two main types of associated responses followed from this prior classification of the students: an extraordinary service for the deserving students allocated in the special classes, and an inferior offer and lack of adequate attention to the underserving ones, who remained facing educational delays in ordinary classes. Local implementation agents would frequently justify their practices in terms of “saving those who can be saved”. Consequently, students whose educational delay was identified as related to indiscipline, disinterest or lack of “good will” were readily stigmatized and dismissed from any special kind of support.

c) Moral regulation

The third type of mechanism to engender risks of inequality reproduction in the course of street-level implementation relates to the moral regulation of users/beneficiaries’ conducts. While the two previously described mechanisms – resistance and classification – tend to operate over decisions about access to public services or goods, moral regulation is more likely to operate during service interactions, once a person has already become a user/beneficiary. This mechanism calls attention to the fact that being a user/beneficiary of a public program brings consequences to the users, other than the service or benefit provided. The moral regulation of users’ conducts can be exercised by implementation agents or by other users and their local communities. Such mechanism presents greater affinity with symbolic effects, as service interactions may interfere with the users’ sense of social place and value, through the internalization of guilt and a subordinate image of oneself (Dubois 1999; Siblot 2006).

One illustrative example comes from Oliveira and Peixoto’s (2018) analysis of *Programa Oportunidades*, a conditional cash transfer initiative in Mexico. The authors focused on the implementation dynamics involved in the monitoring of the educational component – children’s school attendance – and in the interactions between service workers and beneficiaries. Many elementary schools in Mexico have long suffered from underfunding. As a response, school managers have relied on spontaneous monthly donations from parents. In this scenario, the mothers receiving grants from *Oportunidades* became a special target of the collection effort. Since they received a regular stipend from the government, school principals and teachers understood they had a moral obligation to contribute. In some cases, school managers even called upon *Oportunidades* staff to come to the school for lecturing and putting pressure on the beneficiary mothers. The fact that these mothers received a benefit from the government, “granted” school managers “the right” to request donations and other services to the school, such as cleaning up and facility maintenance. Otherwise, they would refer to these mothers as

opportunistic and uncommitted to the school and to caring for their children. None of these exigencies formally existed and their informal introduction by the implementation agents ended up increasing the burden on poor mothers, in addition to imposing on them a sense of moral debt to the government and their officials.

Eiró (2018) studied the local implementation of the same kind of program in Brazil – *Bolsa Família* (BFP) – and revealed the operation of the same type of mechanism. The social workers involved in monitoring granted benefits were going beyond their formally prescribed roles and performing domiciliary visits, in order to assess how the mothers were spending the money provided by the government. The ethnography revealed that a moral hierarchy of spending oriented these assessments. Implementation agents valued when the mother spent the money with their children (food, school supplies, clothing, etc.) but disapproved other expenses considered by them as “futile”, such as new appliances, cell phone or a motorcycle. Social workers perceived the latter as indicative of the family’s lack of need of the benefit, which, in turn, should be reallocated to other families. As developed by Eiró (2018), these quotidian interactions contributed to the internalization of social representations of poverty by the poor, reinforcing an interpretation of their subordinate social place.

Finally, in some cases, moral regulation played out among beneficiaries and between them and their local communities. Sticking to the *Bolsa Família* case, Marins (2018) explored the implications for the women of being a Program beneficiary. The ethnography revealed attempts by these mothers to hide their status at their children’s school, for example, because they felt ashamed of receiving a benefit or being considered by the government as “extremely poor” (i.e. a condition to access the benefit). In relation to their neighbors, these beneficiaries also felt constantly judged in their spending habits. Furthermore, being a beneficiary can be understood as “being in debt with government”, rather than exercising a right or citizenry, as well as opening space for moral regulation by others. By reflecting on a similar type of situation observed in France, Dubois (2015) asserted that “the precarisation of working-class individuals and the heightened competition for jobs, housing and welfare benefits among them have been conducive to renewed forms of social and symbolic separation (Lamon 2000) between those who work and those who do not work, and, among them, those who ‘deserve’ support and behave properly and those who do not” (ibid.:2).

Final considerations

We started out from the recognition of the historical persistence of social inequalities, in countries like Brazil, and the complex relationships between such persistence and public policies. We delimited our focus on those policies formally and explicitly aimed at fighting the effects of social exclusion and, drawing from the analytical perspective of policy implementation studies, we posed the question of whether and how the daily execution of social policies engendered risks of social inequality reproduction. Through the systematic examination of concrete cases of policy implementation in Brazil and Mexico, we identified an array of mechanisms linking implementation dynamics to the material and symbolic effects that reinforce existing inequalities. The set of mechanisms, grouped in Figure 1, can be seen as a potentially useful tool for guiding preventative assessments (*ex ante*) or evaluations (*ex post*) of actual public programs/services, and their implementation strategies. Such kind of reflection, based on grounded understanding of the reproduction processes, may contribute to reversing

observed trends, and making social policies and services more effective in the pursuit of sustainable development goals.

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Appendix - Table A.1 - Set of cases

#	Public Policy / Program	Policy Domain	Level of Gov. / Place	Time	Mechanisms observed	Dimension of analysis	Case Study Authors
1	National Program for Pharmaceutical Assistance	Health Care	National / Brazil	2004-	Representation and power imbalances + Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Moretti & Santos
2	Belo Monte Hydroelectric Plant	Infrastructure	National / Altamira (Br)	2005-2013	Representation and power imbalances	Institutional design and governance	Gomide, Machado & Pereira
3	Council of the Fund for Workers' Support Fund (Codefat)	Work and Income	National / Brazil	1990-2017	Representation and power imbalances	Institutional design and governance	Mendes
4	Fica Vivo!	Justice and Public Order	State / Minas Gerais (Br)	2006-2017	Representation and power imbalances	Institutional design and governance	Jesus
5	Transnordestina Railways	Infrastructure	National / NE (Br)	2006-2016	Representation and power imbalances	Institutional design and governance	Gomide, Machado & Pereira
6	National Program for Access to Technical Education (Pronatec)	Education	National / Brazil	2011	Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Melo & Marques
7	National Program for Documentation of Female Rural Workers (PNDTR)	Rural Development	National / Brazil	2007	Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Melo & Marques
8	Prisons and correctional facilities	Justice and Public Order	State / Brazil	2018	Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Teixeira
9	Support to productive rural activities	Rural Development	National / Brazil	2011	Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Melo & Marques
10	University selection policies (University of Brasília)	Education	Local / Brasília (Br)	2012-2016	Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Institutional design and governance	Goellner
11	Program for the Integral Attention to Families (PAIF)	Social Assistance	National / SP + BH (Br)	2017	Representation and power imbalances + Judgement and classification	Institutional design and governance + Street-level interactions and practices	Sandim & Assis

#	Public Policy / Program	Policy Domain	Level of Gov. / Place	Time	Mechanisms observed	Dimension of analysis	Case Study Authors
12	<i>Minha Casa Minha Vida - Entidades</i>	Housing	National / Brazil	2015-2016	Resistance	Street-level interactions and practices	Viana
13	National Policy for the Integral Health Care of the Black Population	Health Care	National / Rio de Janeiro (Br)	2016-2018	Resistance	Street-level interactions and practices	Milanezi & Silva
14	National Policy for Social Assistance (PNAS)	Social Assistance	National / Brazil	2016	Resistance	Street-level interactions and practices	Jaccoud & Abreu
15	Attention and treatment to drug abusers (CAPS-AD)	Health Care	National / Rio de Janeiro (Br)	2016	Moral regulation	Street-level interactions and practices	Worcman & Morganti
16	<i>Bolsa Família</i>	Social Assistance	National / "Angico" (Br)	2013-2015	Moral regulation	Street-level interactions and practices	Eiró
17	<i>Minha Casa Minha Vida</i>	Housing	National / Curitiba (Br)	2017-2018	Moral regulation	Street-level interactions and practices	Bega & Santos
18	<i>Oportunidades</i>	Social Assistance	National / Mexico	2001-2014	Moral regulation	Street-level interactions and practices	Oliveira & Peixoto
19	Criminal policy / Drug law enforcement	Justice and Public Order	State / Brazil	2006-	Judgement and classification	Street-level interactions and practices	Ferreira, Natalino & Santos
20	Educational delay (age-grade) correction	Education	Local / Rio de Janeiro (Br)	2016	Judgement and classification	Street-level interactions and practices	Oliveira & Carvalho
21	Family Health Strategy and Community Health Agents	Health Care	National / 3 municipalities (BR)	2006-10 2016-17	Judgement and classification	Street-level interactions and practices	Lotta
22	Rural Extension and colonization projects	Rural Development	National / Marabá (Br)	2011-2012	Judgement and classification	Street-level interactions and practices	Penna
23	<i>Bolsa Família</i>	Social Assistance	National / Itaboraí (Br)	2015	Moral regulation + Instrumentation and meaning fixation	Street-level interactions and practices + Institutional design and governance	Marins