

International Observatory of Human Capabilities,
Development and Public Policy

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATORY OF
HUMAN CAPABILITIES, DEVELOPMENT
AND PUBLIC POLICY

International Observatory of Human Capabilities, Development and Public Policy
Linked to the Nucleus of Public Health Studies of the Center for Advanced Multidisciplinary
Studies of the University of Brasilia

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This collection can also be accessed on the website <http://www.capacidadeshumanas.org>, in Portuguese, Spanish and English. Contributions and suggestions may also be sent to:

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PRESENTATION

The International Observatory of Human Capabilities (OICH) emerged in 2012 as an extension of the activities of the Observatory of Human Resources in Health of the University of Brasilia. Since the observation of human capabilities, as proposed by Amartya Sen's interpretation, involves the monitoring of numerous economic and social variables, it should be clarified how this initiative relates to the purpose and trajectory of an observatory dedicated to the study of human resources in health.

The Observatory of Human Resources in Health of the University of Brasília incorporates a Latin American network of research that has been operating uninterruptedly since 1999, through technical cooperation and financial assistance of the Pan American Health Organization and the Brazilian Ministry of Health. Despite the term "human resources" has a managerial connotation, the analytical perspective adopted by the network in Brazil has always remained focused on the broader aspects of the study, i.e., the economical and social aspects of the workforce employed in the health sector.

In this sense, the study of human resources has been directed to numerous relevant questions that arise from the perspective of human rights and citizenship. Among such issues, the following should be highlighted:

- The demographic and regional differences in the distribution of the workforce, including internal migration, seeking to assess the degree of **equity of access to health services**;
- The types of employment status, from a perspective of legality and justice of labor relations in both the private and the public sector in order to identify and characterize precarious working conditions, which take place in the **absence of guaranteed labor and social security rights**; and

- The status and trends in the levels of education of the various categories of health professionals, in order to identify the fulfillment of the **expectation of further improvement of the educational qualification of assistants**, especially the members of nursing.

This line of research highlights not only the economic and social aspects of the health workforce, but also aspects of labor justice. This specific approach stimulated its researchers to critically discuss the various theories and interpretations of the **human dimension** of development. Among these, it is worth mentioning three aspects that are present in the international debate on development:

- 1) The theory of human capital as a source of competitive advantage for companies and countries (Schultz);
- 2) The interpretation of the role of technological innovation and highly qualified human resources required for high technology companies, members of the modern knowledge-based economy (based on Schumpeter); and
- 3) The interpretation about the human capabilities, which make health, education and social security indispensable conditions to ensure people's freedom to choose what they want to do and be (this being the ultimate goal of development, according to Amartya Sen).

Of these three theories, which have in common the main feature of the "human element" in development, only Amartya Sen's theory has a clearly defined origin in a concern to prevent serious personal deprivations and promote social justice. Sen never theorized about health and education as if they were mere tools of survival and employment, since, as a philosopher and not just an economist, he is not only concerned on how to guarantee the supply of a healthy and well qualified workforce to capitalist firms. Indeed, Sen has in mind, above all, the need to promote human capabilities as foundations that enable the achievement of development goals, such as freedom, that need to express themselves in the daily life of people through a variety of lifestyles.

Sen's perspective on the issue of people in development is geared towards the promotion of justice, in a sense that is attuned with the history of the research in human resources in health, since researchers in this area are also keen to overcome the utilitarian and managerialist view of the concept of resource. Therefore, it is understandable that an observatory of human resources in health decides to walk towards studying human capabilities internationally and beyond the area of health.

The first edition of reports of the International Observatory of Human Capabilities, Development and Public Policy (OICH) is largely interested in highlighting trends observable in each thematic area (health, education, labor, social security, etc.) for selected countries. Since this is a first approach to the systematic study of public policies related to the promotion of human capabilities, descriptive orientation was inevitable and even desirable. Only in reports on environment, certain issues could be addressed, especially contentious or controversial, about the negative or harmful effects of development on an international scale.

Since the concept of human capabilities refers to all the people of a country and not only the workers in the formal economy or the high-technology industries, the discussion of the study results cannot be limited to show that the citizens' material conditions of live have improved and that the economy has become, for example, more productive, diverse and rich. The prospect of justice implicated in the theory of human capabilities is answered correctly only when there are signs that the economic and social development is occurring with the creation of a plurality of lifestyles freely chosen by the people.

In this context, one must ask, in a very relevant way, if the capitalist development, such that has occurred in Latin America and other continents, does not inevitably impose certain standardized and controlled lifestyles in society, within which there is no unveil of the freedom horizon promised by Sen's theory. Often it seems that this freedom horizon is definitely made unviable due to the development style imposed unilaterally by the State, a phenomenon that can occur in both contexts of authoritarian as democratic regimes.

Perhaps this is the most prominent issue in the theoretical discussion by an international observatory of human capabilities. We must rec-

ognize that this issue has not been properly asked or answered in the first round of observations, but so insightful stands as a challenge for future developments of this initiative.

In producing its thematic reports, the observatory had over a dozen external collaborators who acted independently of each other. The series of annual data for each subject, compiled by international organizations, with a focus on the 2000s, served as a suggestive basis for the analysis. Thus, there wasn't a predefinition of issues or trends considered relevant to the analysis. The collaborators felt free to develop their reports based on that data or other they deemed most relevant. This method of working in network of collaborators was very productive and an innovation in relation to the operational scheme of observatories, based on small research teams, and with a more or less permanent status. Thus, in the first round of observation and reports that make up this collection, the method of the network allowed the following areas to be addressed: 1) economic and social context, 2) human development, 3) inequality and poverty; 4) work and welfare; and 5) health, education and environment.

However, even if maintaining this network conformation, a further round of the observatory should, preferably, start from an interpretive framework about the global macroeconomic context, without abandoning, however, the examination of the economic and social indicators. So, it would have as initial reference an explicit critical understanding of the current global crisis and its possible consequences for public policy and the guarantee of social rights.

Several scholars of the world economy, among them Immanuel Wallerstein, have stated that the crisis that began in 2007 is much more serious and profound than one may think. It is not a mere temporary and cyclical inflection of capitalism, but assumes the character of a fork on a planetary scale, with the potential to cause a world economic order that, for all the people, can be even more cruel or more just than the current, depending on the decisions that, until now, are imponderables.

For the entirety of Latin American economies, it is clear now that the process called development remains a very vulnerable and subordinate insertion of Latin American countries into the world economy, based on the export of commodities. But even such alternative of subordinate

insertion in relation to the central axis formed by the United States, China and the European Union can no longer work in the favorable forms of the 2000s. What is threatened currently is not GDP growth at high rates, but rather the optimistic outlook of integrated development, economic and social, which encouraged the analysts of this decade and is evident in reports gathered here. In many Latin American countries, despite the more or less marked decrease in the growth rate of the economy, domestic labor market and consumption remains warm and dynamic, and this condition may persist for some time, but not indefinitely, if there is no solution to the impasse of world capitalism.

We must, therefore, perform the demand in the short term, a careful evaluation of the consequences of the current crisis on public investment in social policies, especially in health, education, social security and income distribution.

ROBERTO PASSOS NOGUEIRA

