

The Life Development of Young People Engaged in the Oportunidades Programme

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The Oportunidades Programme has a significant impact on the life trajectories of rural indigenous and mestizo youth in Mexico. Cash transfers are provided to those taking part in the Programme under the agreement that recipients comply with a number of conditions aimed at developing their human capital through investments in education, health and nutrition; the ultimate goal being to contribute to the central objective of breaking the intergenerational vicious circle of poverty.

In order to assess the impact of Oportunidades, Sánchez and Jiménez (2012), twelve years after Oportunidades' implementation, juxtaposed Programme participants against non-participants, utilizing a sample of forty-one youths born between 1987 and 1989, the first generation cohort to be placed under the Programme's auspices. In addition to being generally balanced in terms of exposure (23 youths are former grant holders and the remaining 18 were either never beneficiaries or at least had very short-lived Programme exposure), the sample analyzed was also balanced with regard to ethnicity and gender.

Life histories of the individuals in the sample provide insight as to how young people develop survival strategies even in contexts of high marginalization that undermine or impede the investments in their skills. One of the key findings made by Sánchez and Jiménez was that the Programme created high expectations among young people and their families with respect to school achievement as a social mobility mechanism. Grant holding households implement complex strategies in order to support the continuation of their teen/preteen child's schooling. However, according to Sánchez and Jiménez, high expectations of a successful career for the youth after finishing school are more often than not at odds with the stark reality that work opportunities, in local communities or even in the national or international contexts in those cases where youth, upon graduation, might have migrated, are genuinely meagre.

Social inequalities, particularly as manifest in these limited opportunities, are a source of considerable despair for Mexico's rural indigenous and mestizo youth; a situation compounded by their greater day-to-day exposure to violence as compared to non-minority Mexican youth. Further still, the jobs to which these young people do have access, whether those jobs are in Mexico or the United States, are for the most part temporary in nature. Despite their efforts to achieve higher levels of education, success in these efforts does not seem to translate into an asset guaranteeing a 'good' (stable, safe, decently paid) job; the only exception apparently being those cases wherein high school is fully completed. Youth often get involved in informal and illegal activities as the State fails to implement policies that would promote formal jobs and economic activities. Young indigenous women are especially vulnerable given their reduced ability to make their own decisions with respect to staying in school longer or to potential employment opportunities.

The patterns found in the life trajectories of the young people Sánchez and Jiménez studied are influenced by their decision to either migrate or indeed settle in the very communities they were born and raised in. Youth perceive migration as the ideal means for obtaining employment and thus economic independence. Moving away may also be considered part of a strategy to get to a university or other alternatives involving educational and/or labour continuity (mostly linked to teacher training). But migration, argue Sánchez and Jiménez, is also a common response to crises.

In cases in which young people "stay on" in their communities of origin, the only 'strategy' is to survive. In most cases, say Sánchez and Jiménez, these youth continue to live in the household of origin even after having started a new family. Rural indigenous and mestizo young people, compared to their parents, are more successful in delaying the beginning of their reproductive lives, increasing the average number of years of education. Nevertheless, they are not successful in finding better occupations. They still work in traditional economic activities that are poorly paid.

For Sánchez and Jiménez, the life history of the young people in the sample shows that the most complex strategy, requiring intensive investment on the part of their families, occurs when a given youth manages to have access to a university. In the sample analysed, this strategy is mostly adopted by long-term beneficiaries of the Programme who have benefited from the capital accumulated by their families (González de la Rocha, 2010b). These households are domestic units in the "consolidation phase"—households with older children—or in the "dispersion phase"—when offspring start leaving.

Moreover, these households, though featuring strong family bonds, often have diversified economies as well as 'untraditional' domestic compositions, such as homes made up of grandparents and grandchildren (without the generation in between), female 'heads', and/or homes fragmented on account of migration.

The educational grants of Oportunidades, Sánchez and Jiménez conclude, have had a significant impact by acting as a guarantee, securing the permission of the parents to allow their children to stay longer in school—at least to the extent that the schools are available in their communities. Oportunidades promotes the accumulation of human capital by the younger generations in marginalized areas. However, to achieve its long-term goals, the State should also assume its responsibility in developing opportunities and in supporting productive diversification that demand and include a more educated generation.

Reference:

Sánchez y Jiménez (2012) Trayectorias juveniles: escolaridad, empleo y formación de nuevos hogares In González de la Rocha, Mercedes y Agustín Escobar Latapí (Coords.), 2012, Pobreza, transferencias condicionadas y Sociedad, México, D.F.: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, CIESAS.