CCTs in Latin America:
Two Decades of Evidence-Based Policymaking

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CCTs	Conditional cash transfer programs
FeA	Familias en Acción
RC	Renta Ciudadana
JeA	Jóvenes en Acción

Abstract

This research explores the politics around conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) in Latin America. The main research question is: why have CCTs survived for over two decades in most Latin American countries? To solve this puzzle, this study focuses on the Colombian CCT program. It unveils the motives behind several modifications, adjustments, and evaluations made between 2000 and 2024 to the CCT scheme by resorting to policy documents and semi-structured interviews with former policymakers. In doing so, I argue that the adoption of evidence-based policymaking as the gold standard contributed to the survival of CCTs because it gave policymakers the chance to depoliticize social policy and justify the continuation of the program on its success as determined by the evidence. To produce such evidence, policymakers created a CCT program with very narrow objectives and interpreted the results of different program evaluations in a very specific way.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research is relevant to Development Studies insofar as it explores why conditional cash transfers, one of the most prominent poverty reduction policies in developing countries, have persisted for over two decades. The literature has identified some elements that shed light on this issue. Some authors claim that CCTs are popular among policymakers because they create electoral dynamics that benefit policymakers who adopt or continue such programs. No further explanations for the survival of CCTs have been made. This study adds another element: the evidence produced around CCTs is used to depoliticize the intervention, which allows for its continuation.

Keywords

Conditional cash transfers, evidence-based policymaking, Latin America, social policy, poverty reduction.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Since their adoption in the late 1990s in Mexico and Brazil, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) have become one of the most prominent policy interventions to tackle poverty in developing countries (Hanlon et al., 2010). In Latin America alone, 17 out of 20 countries in the region adopted this type of policy to curb poverty in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Osorio Gonnet, 2020). Two decades later, as of 2024, CCTs were still running in 14 different Latin American countries,[1] according to ECLAC's Non-contributory Social Protection Programmes Database. Not only were these programs popular back then; they have endured despite political and economic transformations.

The rapid diffusion and persistence of CCTs for over two decades could signal that there is a unanimous appraisal of their effectiveness in reducing poverty. However, the literature is divided. Proponents of conditional cash transfer programs argue that these policies help to reduce current and inter-generational poverty by providing poor households a direct cash transfer if they comply with certain conditions, usually school enrollment and attendance and/or regular visits to a health center. This claim is contested by other authors who argue that there is no evidence of their impact on inter-generational poverty. They claim that CCTs are effective in improving current income but not in improving future income or helping beneficiaries secure better jobs.

The doubts that have arisen around the effectiveness of CCTs in reducing poverty in the long run have had an impact on social policy in Latin America, with very different outcomes. Mexico, one of the first to adopt CCTs, dismantled the program in 2019 and created policies aimed at promoting quality education. Meanwhile, most Latin American countries have continued these programs. For instance, Colombian policymakers opted for continuing and reinforcing the CCT scheme in 2023-2024.

Why have conditional cash transfer programs run for over two decades in Latin America? Why haven't other Latin American countries followed the Mexican path and dismantled the program? Despite the vast literature exploring how CCTs were diffused in Latin America in the early 2000s or the impact of a specific program, there is a considerable gap in the literature concerning why these policies are still popular with policymakers 20 years after their adoption. If their long-term effects on

[1] Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, and Uruguay.

poverty are contested by some, why do these policies continue? The answers given by the literature that explores diffusion (electoral motives, the existence of an epistemic community that promotes a linear model based on human capital accumulation, the influence of development banks, and the ideology of the ruling party) only solve part of the puzzle. These reasons fail to address why CCTs are still running after two decades in many Latin American countries.

To solve this conundrum, I did an extensive analysis of the policy documents that sustain the Colombian CCT program. I tracked its changes and nuances through different pieces of legislation and internal briefs. By analyzing the documents produced by the government between 2000 and 2024, I was able to grasp the 'way of thinking' of the bureaucrats when modifying or continuing the CCT program. In addition, I interviewed Colombian scholars, policymakers, consultants, and civil society experts. These experiences allowed me to have a clearer understanding of the ideas that support the survival of CCTs at the national level. The Colombian case is particularly well-suited to explore why CCTs survived for so long in Latin America because the original program, *Familias en Acción* (FeA), had several modifications and evaluations, which provide an overview of the rationale behind their continuation. In 2023-2024, FeA was eliminated and replaced with a new policy, *Renta Ciudadana,* that is also structured around CCTs. Contrary to what happened in Mexico, Colombian policymakers decided to continue delivering social assistance via conditional cash transfers. From 2000 to 2024, there were several policy windows where policymakers decided to continue CCTs and had to justify their decision. Their motivations shed light onto why CCTs have survived for over two decades in Latin America.

Questioning why certain poverty reduction policies have run for so long in the region is key due to the challenges faced by Latin American countries, despite their overall positive economic development. Latin America is the world's most unequal region (Sánchez-Ancochea, 2021), and has been so for as long as there is data. From the beginning of European colonization, the region has been characterized by high levels of inequality that have been reinforced by the institutions created during the colonial rule and later adopted by the newly independent nation-states (De Ferranti et al., 2003). The extensive use of slave work in large-scale plantations and mines allowed the European elite to accumulate political influence and shape institutions aimed at the protection of the privileges of the white elites while restricting the participation of the underclasses (Sokoloff and Egerman, 2000). Instead of investing and promoting their own labor, Spaniards forced indigenous and enslaved populations to work the land, thus creating hierarchies that have permeated societal and institutional arrangements until today (Kalmanovitz, 2010).

Inequality has had a major impact on how Latin American states deliver social policy, particularly affecting those with no or very low income. The poor were left out of social protection systems until very recently. Throughout most of the twentieth century, social policy failed to benefit the poor in the region because social insurance programs were aimed at workers in specific sectors and later at workers in formal employment (Díaz-Cayeros and Magaloni, 2009). In a context where informal employment is far more common than formal employment, such a bias in social policy created a 'truncated welfare state' (Brearley, 2016). Latin American welfare states offered a two-tier social protection system: the rich and formally employed had access to high-quality services (predominantly private and delivered through social insurance), while the poor and informally employed had access to low-quality services (predominantly public) or no access at all. This two-tier system was the result of importing the European welfare model, where formal employment is high, to a different context with high inequality and widespread poverty (Barrientos, 2013).

In the 1990s, the consolidation of democracy in Latin America, some argue, created adequate incentives to 'expand public welfare commitments to vulnerable sectors of the population' (Haggard and Kaufman, 2008, p. 10). In such a context, Latin American technocrats reimagined social assistance policies and created conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) to reduce poverty. Since their adoption in Brazil and Mexico around 1997, CCTs have been adopted in more than 40 developing countries. In Latin America alone, 17 countries implemented targeted conditional cash transfers as a policy to reduce poverty, reaching over 160 million people (Stampini and Tornarolli, 2012; Stampini et al., 2023). Given their preponderance in poverty reduction, CCTs have been hailed as 'a magic bullet in development' (Birdsall, cited in International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, 2010).

Colombian policymakers, like most of their Latin American peers, opted to continue and expand conditional cash transfer programs. For two decades now, CCTs have been at the forefront of poverty reduction initiatives in Colombia. Some scholars argue that the 'new' Latin American social policy regime where social assistance via CCTs is central to poverty reduction has very low redistributive impacts (Martínez et al., 2009). Hence, it is puzzling why this policy option has become so predominant and survived for so long, curtailing policy innovation in poverty issues and inhibiting the government from implementing other, more transformative policies to reduce poverty.

After exploring the Colombian experience with CCTs in depth, I argue that the push for evidence-based policymaking helps to explain the survival of these programs in Latin America. By resorting to 'objective' evidence, policymakers transformed CCTs into a technical matter, where politics seem not to be important. This transformation was instrumental for the continuation of CCTs. The evidence

produced by the government and by independent consultants does suggest that the programs have some positive results. Interestingly, the Colombian program has narrower objectives than the ones hailed by their proponents and championed by scholars. Instead of aiming to reduce inter-generational poverty, the policy is aimed at increasing school attendance and improving nutrition. In addition, evaluations tend to address the direct impact of CCTs on these very narrow and explicit objectives without analyzing their impact on broader social indicators.

In a context where the effectiveness of the government is determined by its ability to produce measurable results, the narrowness and specificity of the CCT program were instrumental to legitimizing social assistance policies. By creating a policy with very limited objectives that produce measurable results, policymakers can claim that the government is reducing poverty and making decisions grounded on the best available evidence. Narrow objectives and evaluations help to support the good deeds of targeted social policy. This creates no incentives to implement different, more transformative policies—also grounded on reliable evidence.

In short, I claim that the growing importance of evidence-based policymaking among Colombian policymakers helps to support the survival of CCTs two decades after their adoption. The adoption of the evidence-based approach was instrumental in transforming a program heavily influenced by politics into a program that is regarded as purely technical. Evaluations overall show that CCTs do increase school attendance and improve nutrition but rarely assess if beneficiaries move out of poverty in the long run. The missing link between school attendance and future employment is mostly ignored. Hence, these interventions are regarded by policymakers as effective in achieving their goals and reducing poverty. Given that there is evidence that supports their benefits, CCTs are continued.

To support these claims, this document is structured as follows. In the following section, the methodology is presented. The Colombian CCTs scheme was analyzed in depth by resorting to policy documents and semi-structured interviews with former policymakers. In section 3, the debates about conditional cash transfers are introduced. This section highlights how social assistance and poverty reduction became entangled, analyzes the mainstream theory of change behind CCTs, presents several critiques of such theory of change, and outlines how CCT programs were diffused in Latin America in the early 2000s. Section 4 presents a brief theoretical framework on how and why policies are adopted and continued by policymakers. The notions of *policy paradigm*, *welfare retrenchment*, and *welfare regime* are explained. Also, the idea of evidence-based policymaking is explored. In section 5, the Colombian CCT scheme is analyzed by tracing how it has changed since its adoption in 2000. Policy documents and different pieces of legislation were analyzed to produce a comprehensive narrative

that explains how *Familias en Acción*, the main conditional cash transfer program until very recently, was transformed into *Renta Ciudadana*. Section 6 analyzes how policymakers used the evidence-based approach to policymaking to continue CCTs. Finally, concluding remarks are presented in section 7.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The Colombian conditional cash transfer program was studied in depth. To do so, a dual research methodology was employed. First, documentary analysis was conducted following brief archival research aimed at identifying the main documents produced by the Colombian government regarding the CCTs program. Policy documents, program evaluations, executive orders, pieces of legislation, and internal memorandums were examined to understand the Colombian CCT scheme and how policymakers justify its adoption and continuation in official documents. Second, the research benefited from semi-structured interviews with experts on social policy in Colombia. Most of the interviewees formerly had decision-making roles related to social assistance and poverty reduction programs.

The institutions that have (or have had) responsibilities related to the Colombian CCT program were identified and their archives were reviewed. This allowed the identification of the main official documents regarding CCTs created by the Department of National Planning, the Department of Social Prosperity or the Colombian Congress from 1999 to 2024. These policy documents and reports created by the government were analyzed as primary sources to unveil the objectives, motivations, and paradigms behind the changes made to the Colombian CCT program over two decades. Evaluations of the Colombian CCT program produced by the government and by independent firms were also regarded as primary sources and duly analyzed. In addition, the legislative and executive decisions governing *Familias en Acción* and *Renta Ciudadana* (the CCT programs) were studied with the aim of exploring the 'way of thinking' of policymakers in charge of social assistance in Colombia.

Documentary analysis was key to uncovering the reasons behind the program's continuation. When analyzing these primary sources, a critical distance was adopted given that the documents produced by the government are a form of discourse whose objectives usually remain hidden (Foucault, 1971). Policy documents help to construct legitimation, among others, through rationalization (Van Leeuwen, 2009), which is particularly true for the primary sources analyzed because they explain how a social policy operates. These documents are only technical to some extent; they are also political documents that are aimed at legitimizing the government.

As a result, the selected documents were analyzed in the following way. They were read and a summary was created. A web-like structure was created to determine how policy documents relate to each other. Particular attention was given to the context in which these documents were produced to

identify how they transmit certain ideologies. Summarizing them and tracing how they are interconnected allowed me to adopt a panoramic view of the policy documents and create a critical distance from them. This was instrumental for organizing multiple sources that initially had no order and then constructing a reasonable claim taking them into account.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers, former policymakers, civil society experts, and scholars to get a grasp of their opinions about CCTs. It was difficult to reach policymakers who are currently working at the Department of Social Prosperity (*Departamento de Prosperidad Social*). Despite numerous attempts, it was impossible to chat with them. Given that the Department of Social Prosperity is currently in charge of the CCT program, their insights would have been valuable.

The interviews conducted provided varied information that was analyzed by taking into account the role of each interviewee. For instance, former policymakers whose job was related to the CCT program were proud of their service and tended to provide reasons to support the program. Scholars, on the contrary, had a more critical appraisal of the successes and limitations of social assistance policies in Colombia. A current policymaker working at the municipal level asked me to differentiate his viewpoint from the one he has to have as Director of Transfers. In total, I contacted 15 experts but was only able to conduct 6 interviews. Although it is not a representative sample, the profile of the interviewees is varied and all of them have (or had) decision-making roles.

After the documentary analysis and the interviews were finalized, the data collected was analyzed. The Colombian experience is paradigmatic because in 2023-2024 the CCT program was drastically transformed. Despite the numerous differences between the old and the new schemes, both depend on conditional cash transfers with enforcement mechanisms to guarantee school enrollment and attendance to regular health check-ups. Why did Colombian policymakers opt for continuing such a policy? Why has it survived for over 20 years? The rest of the document provides answers to these questions.

Chapter 3: Conditional Cash Transfers

Before suggesting why CCTs in many Latin American countries have survived for so long, a very brief introduction to conditional cash transfers is needed. This section provides some answers to the following questions: (i) how did CCTs become poverty reduction policies?; (ii) what is the mainstream theory of change supporting CCTs?; (iii) what are some of the main critiques of this mainstream theory?; (iv) how were CCTs diffused in the early 2000s in Latin America?

3.1. CCTs, Social Assistance, and Poverty Reduction

CCTs are social assistance policies that aim to reduce present and future poverty. As such, the concepts of 'social assistance' and 'poverty reduction' must be unpacked. It is also important to outline what is the relationship between the two and how it came to be.

Following Hulme (2015), when speaking about what to do with poverty three related, yet different, terms are sometimes (mis)used interchangeably: poverty alleviation, poverty reduction, and poverty eradication. Poverty eradication represents the grandest of the three: it refers to the goal of ending poverty for all, both in its symptoms and causes. Poverty alleviation aims at lessening the intensity of poverty (dealing with the symptoms only), while poverty reduction seeks to attack the causes of poverty and reduce the number of people suffering from it as fast as possible. The latter term is preferred given its realistic approach (unlike poverty eradication) and its focus on dealing with the causes of poverty rather than the symptoms (unlike poverty alleviation).

On the other hand, social assistance is part of social policy—a broad collection of programs, policies, and interventions aimed at promoting the welfare of citizens. Social policy can be divided into the provision of social goods and services, and social protection (Figure 1). The former includes basic services like health, education, and housing; the latter, social insurance and social assistance programs, as well as labor market interventions. According to Mkandawire (2004), one of the major purposes of social policy is the redistribution of income. Sumner (2016) argues that middle-income countries (like Colombia and most of Latin America) have the capacity and resources to redistribute as a poverty reduction policy, and hence this becomes a matter of political choice. Thus, poverty has been at the center of social policy debates for quite some time, while the state has been posited as the 'prime agent of welfare' (Midgley, 2019a).

Figure 1. Components of social policy

Social Policy	
Social goods and services	Social protection
- Health - Education - Housing	- Social insurance - Social assistance - Labor market regulation

Source: Barrientos (2013)

There is a major difference between social insurance and social assistance: the former protects against risks based on beneficiaries' contributions (an insurance scheme), while the latter provides noncontributory protection to the destitute (an entitlement scheme) (OECD, 2013). Within this framework, social assistance can take the form of cash or in-kind benefits financed by the government or non-state actors (Howell, 2001; Gassmann, 2018). Most commonly, as explained by Midgley (2019b), social assistance benefits are only available to people whose income, assets, or well-being indicators are below certain thresholds—identified through means testing. The two most common social assistance policies in developing countries are cash transfers (conditional or not) and school feeding programs (World Bank, 2013; World Bank, 2024; World Food Programme, 2023).

In Colombia, social assistance was associated with Christian notions of charity that promoted 'aiding' or 'helping' the poor in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Castro, 2008). Where available, social assistance policies or programs were limited in scope and primarily aimed at alleviating the negative effects of destitution. During most of the 20th century, Latin American policymakers envisioned reducing poverty without resorting to social assistance (Barrientos, 2013). Instead, economic policy (import-substitution industrialization and later liberalization) and social insurance were seen as the prime anti-poverty interventions. As noted above, the region saw the consolidation of truncated welfare states where employment-based social insurance covered less than half of the population. Only recently, social assistance became the center of poverty reduction policies in Latin America—and later in other developing countries. For some, the rise of cash transfers 'represents a paradigmatic shift in poverty reduction' (Hanlon et al., 2010). It also signals the 'individualization of poverty policies,' where

macroeconomic and structural issues are put behind and the lead is taken by poor persons who can use the transfer received to escape from poverty by their own means (Leisering, 2020).

Different conceptions of poverty are related to or impact how social protection interventions are devised. Mosse (2010), for instance, advocates for a relational approach to poverty by arguing that it is caused by long-term processes of exclusion, as opposed to a residual approach that understands poverty as being marginal to economic development. The (re)discovery of the role of social assistance in tackling poverty is underpinned by the latter understanding of poverty. Barrientos (2013) suggests that there are three types of social assistance policies depending on their underlying understanding of poverty (Figure 2). *Pure income transfers* see poverty primarily as deficits in income or consumption, thus poverty is reduced if poor people receive an economic transfer. *Income transfers combined with asset accumulation* understand that poverty is caused by deficits in income or consumption and, most importantly, by deficits in productive assets. These include human capital, physical goods, or financial assets. CCTs are the most prominent example of this type of social assistance policies, aiming to reduce the inter-generational persistence of poverty by promoting human capital accumulation. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme are examples of income transfers combined with asset accumulation where human capital accumulation is not the main element. Finally, *integrated poverty reduction programmes* combine a range of interventions over multiple dimensions under the impression that poverty is a result of social exclusion.

Figure 2. Relationship between social assistance and poverty

Understandings of poverty	Type of social assistance
Poverty as consumption deficit	Pure income transfers
Poverty as productivity deficit	Income transfers with asset accumulation
Poverty as inclusion deficit	Integrated anti-poverty transfer programmes

Source: Barrientos (2013, 2018)

In such a paradigm, market mechanisms and access to formal employment are key elements to improve welfare, rather than the direct provision of services by the state (Lavinas, 2013)—as it was thought when European welfare states developed. A huge difference between social assistance in developed countries and Latin America is that in the former transfers usually cover the difference between household income and the poverty line, while in the latter transfers are in most cases 'insufficient to take beneficiaries above the poverty line' (Barrientos, 2009).

Notwithstanding the 'paradigmatic shift' that cash transfers represent in poverty reduction, some scholars and policymakers argue that in the Latin American context, they are not (no longer) an adequate policy option to substantially reduce poverty. For instance, Arza and Maurizio (2020) contend that 'a more profound and stable reduction of poverty requires a better distribution of income, jobs and social security rights and benefits.' To effectively achieve poverty reduction, Britto (2008) argues that a broader development strategy is needed where macroeconomic policy, labor market interventions, redistribution, and education are integrated with social assistance.

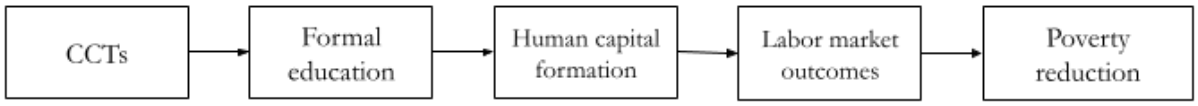
Analyzing the welfare state in the United States, Desmond (2023) contends that social assistance policies have been 'designed to make poverty less lethal, not to make it disappear'. His critique is equally applicable to CCTs in Latin America: 'they rescue millions of families from a social ill, but they do nothing to address its root causes' (p. 138).

3.2. The Mainstream Theory Behind CCTs

Almost every report, article, or book about CCTs in Latin America repeats their basic feature: they aim to reduce current and inter-generational poverty by providing poor households a direct cash transfer if they comply with certain conditions, usually school enrollment and attendance and/or regular visits to a health center (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009). The cash transfer provides an incentive for households to send their children to school, rather than sending them to work (Ravallion, 2016). It also increases their disposable income and allows them to spend it on whatever they see best—usually better nutrition—reducing present poverty. In turn, conditionalities are meant to increase the household's human capital as better-educated and better-fed children are more likely to obtain better jobs and secure better income in the future. In the Latin American context, Osorio Gonnet (2020) advances that CCTs respond to a policy paradigm according to which poverty is caused by the lack of productive capacity; hence, human capital accumulation via conditionalities related to health and education will help to reduce poverty in the future.

The model for long-term poverty reduction adopted by the proponents of CCTs is quite simple. These programs seek to address a particular development bottleneck: poor children remain poor because they are not educated or have adequate health (Handa and Davis, 2006). The persistence of poverty across generations, the theory goes, is caused by an under-investment in human capital, especially in education (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009). If children attend school and are healthier, they will increase their knowledge and skills, which will improve their labor market outcomes, which will eventually allow them to transition out of poverty in the long run. To promote school attendance and nutrition, households are given an incentive (cash transfer) for each child that attends school and/or assists to regular health check-ups. This transfer should be high enough to induce attendance, but low compared to other sources of income, otherwise it would discourage participation in the labor market (Pérez and Brown, 2017). Long-term poverty reduction is therefore seen as a linear process where access to education and better health determine future employment (Figure 3), ignoring other variables such as the quality of education, labor market conditions, or youth unemployment (Jones, 2016).

Figure 3. CCTs' basic theory



Source: Adapted from Jones (2016).

This basic, linear policy paradigm is at the core of CCTs but is not the only criteria to assess such programs. Following Velázquez (2020), CCTs are a distinct type of program because they encompass five characteristics: (i) aim to reduce poverty by investing in human capital; (ii) deliver cash instead of services or other in-kind benefits; (iii) depend on conditionalities; (iv) are targeted to the poor; and (v) promote high levels of institutionalization. Similarly, Osorio Gonnet (2020) argues that CCTs have four essential characteristics: (i) include health conditionalities; (ii) include education conditionalities; (iii) consist of a monetary transfer provided to the person in charge of the household; (iv) include mean testing mechanisms to identify and target potential beneficiaries.

Although there is some consensus around the basic theory and characteristics of CCTs, very different models have been implemented in Latin America. CCTs in the region can be grouped

depending on the strictness of conditionalities: hard, moderate, and soft (Cecchini and Madariaga, 2011). Programs with hard conditionalities tend to enforce them and condition the transfer to their verification, while programs with soft conditionalities do not impose sanctions when conditionalities are unmet. FeA is an example of the former; *Chile Solidario* (Chile) and *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (Ecuador) are examples of the latter.

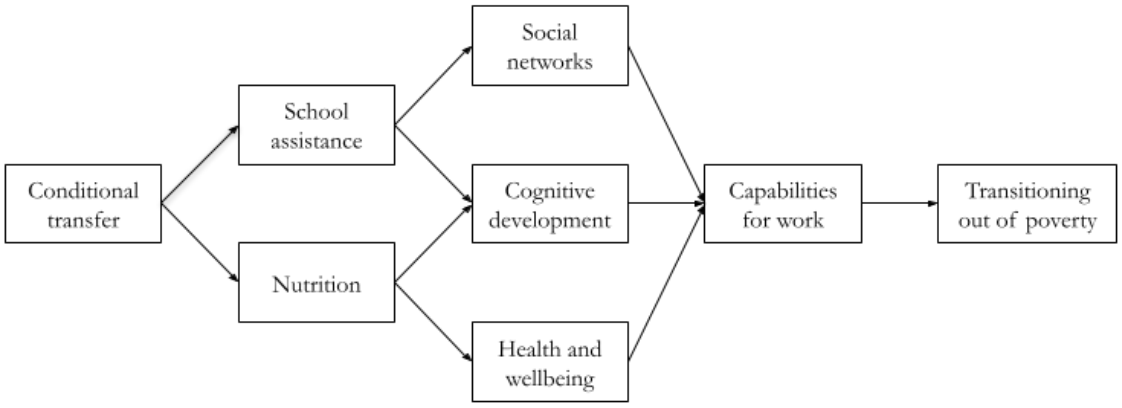
Building on that logic, Borges (2022) argues that there are only two different models of CCTs in Latin America. The 'human capital model' emphasizes conditionalities to promote school attendance among narrowly targeted segments of the population—the poorest of the poor. The 'basic income model' provides a minimum transfer to a broad segment of the population without strictly enforcing conditionalities. Borges contends that while the human capital model was promoted by the right (in Mexico) and its main aim was reducing poverty in the future, the basic income model was promoted by the left (in Brazil) and its main aim was reducing current poverty.

In addition, impact evaluations are a common feature among CCTs. These programs were created during a 'paradigm shift towards evidence-based policymaking' (Sandberg, 2016). Multiple evaluations have been conducted to determine under which conditions CCTs produce better outcomes (Bucheli, 2015). As a result, De Janvry and Sadoulet (2006) argue that evaluations have helped to improve the efficiency and targeting of CCT programs. From the beginning, the Mexican CCT model included analyzing what was the impact of the program on education, health, and nutrition (Skoufias and McClafferty, 2000). In Colombia, FeA was the first policy intervention to include an independent impact evaluation to improve its efficiency and impact (DNP, 2004). As I will argue later, this element is crucial for the survival of CCTs.

Despite the centrality of evaluations in CCT programs, some critical scholars recognize that there is a huge knowledge gap on their long-term impacts. There is a 'myopia bias' that affects most evaluations of development interventions that intend to yield positive impacts in the long run (Ravallion, 2008). In CCTs, it is challenging to assess (i) the possible gains in productivity of children in recipient families, and (ii) if the gains in productivity are caused by their better nutrition and education. Doing so is costly and unfeasible as it requires following a cohort of beneficiaries in their transition from school into the labor market (Handa and Davis, 2006). As of 2024 and to the best of my knowledge, there are no long-term longitudinal evaluations of the Colombian CCT program assessing if the intervention improves the income of beneficiary children, years after receiving the transfer.

The ideas of what a CCT program outlined above influenced Colombian policymakers and experts on poverty. A consultancy firm that evaluated FeA summarized this program's theory as follows:

Figure 4. CCT theory in Colombia



Source: Adapted from Econometría-SEI (2012).

This model is very similar to the one created by Jones (2016) (Figure 3). Its main difference is that Colombian policymakers included more variables. Following this rationale, a person receives a conditional cash transfer and improves their school attendance and nutrition. By doing so, they create social networks and enhance their cognitive development at school, while being healthier due to their improved nutrition, which in turn improves their cognitive development. These factors help them acquire sound capabilities that are rewarded in the job market. Eventually, they will transition out of poverty thanks to their improved human capital.

3.3. CCTs' Transformative Role: Do They Reduce Inter-Generational Poverty?

As outlined above, CCT programs can help to reduce poverty in at least two ways (Araújo et al., 2017). First, they seek to reduce present poverty by increasing household income; second, they aim to reduce the inter-generational transmission of poverty by increasing human capital accumulation (e.g. promoting education and nutrition). The former objective seems straightforward. Although this might not follow in all cases (Amarante and Brun, 2018), giving money to households in poverty will indeed improve their living conditions (Fischer, 2018).

The latter objective is more contested. It is grounded on the idea that improving the health and education of children will make them earn more in the future. By developing human capital—understood as 'the productive capacity of individuals', their knowledge and abilities that allow them to receive income or secure employment (Menezes, 2013)—CCTs prepare poor children to perform better in the job market. Proponents of conditionalities argue that they fuel human capital accumulation and formal employment (Stampini et al., 2023). Conditionalities are a common feature of cash transfer programs because they are perceived as having an effect in disrupting the inter-generational persistence of poverty (Amarante and Brun, 2018). Latin American programs heavily emphasize conditionalities and human capital investment because the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have financed interventions with that aim in mind (Hanlon et al., 2010, p. 129; Scarlato and D'Agostino, 2019).

Despite what some have called the centrality of the 'productivist' dimension of CCT programs (Barrientos, 2013), critical scholars have argued that there is no clear evidence supporting their long-term effects on poverty reduction. Some authors claim that the chain that links CCTs, human capital, and increased income is broken. The logic is flawed, they contend, because it ignores the quality of education and the particular dynamics of the job market in societies with high informality: 'pushing more poor children into overcrowded schools does not produce better-educated adults with jobs' (Hanlon et al., 2010, p. 134).

Analyzing the Brazilian experience, Lavinas (2015) argues that conditional cash transfers in Latin America do not promote a process of redistribution nor curb poverty because they are based on faulty paradigms about how to achieve sustained, long-term poverty reduction. She contends that the residual nature, low cost, and emphasis on market inclusion of CCT programs 'make them ineffective in reducing poverty in the long term' (Lavinas, 2013, p. 39). Similarly, a study commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank found that one of the largest CCT programs in Latin America had 'at most a modest effect' on the chance that beneficiary children will escape poverty in the future (Araújo et al., 2017). Children in treated households had no higher probability of continuing to university or securing employment than children in non-treated households. While CCTs allow people experiencing poverty to increase consumption and better cover some basic needs, it is argued that they fail to create opportunities for upward mobility and conditions to disrupt inter-generational poverty (Pérez and Brown, 2017).

After evaluating the Uruguayan CCT program's theory and underlying assumptions from a qualitative perspective, Sandberg (2016) questions whether social assistance policies are adequate

instruments to reduce long-term policy by enhancing human capital accumulation. Despite their important role in alleviating short-term poverty, he contends that CCTs' hybrid design—cash for current needs and conditionalities for the future—is flawed and to some extent incompatible. The capacity of these policies to impact social mobility is based on 'dubious assumptions' (Sandberg, 2016, p. 330) that are not supported by existing evidence. A similar appraisal of CCTs' impact on inter-generational poverty comes from Chile's *Chile Solidario* program. After its implementation, school enrollment, and medical attention among poor children improved and household consumption increased. However, overall poverty increased in certain periods. Borzoutsky (2012) argues that there is no evidence that the Chilean program effectively increases human capital accumulation and helps to break the inter-generational perpetuation of poverty.

To effectively reduce poverty and be transformative, Papadopoulos and Velázquez (2016) suggest that CCTs must be accompanied by measures that enhance the employment opportunities of beneficiaries because they are not enough to reduce future poverty on their own. Critics of CCTs claim that without better labor market conditions CCTs will not be effective in the future (Barrientos and Villa, 2016). Despite the positive results of most CCT programs on consumption and school enrollment, Molyneux et al. (2016) claim that they have had modest achievements in more ambitious transformations. Jones (2016) argues that the human capital-based linear model of CCTs ignores that young people's trajectories living in poverty are much more complex. Young people may not move from school to the labor market for a variety of reasons even when receiving a cash transfer for attending school, which hinders their transition out of poverty. For similar reasons, Molyneux (2009) argues that most CCT programs fail to create a sustainable link between beneficiaries and the labor market.

In short, recent evaluations have shown that CCTs have positive short-term effects in alleviating the living conditions of beneficiaries, but still present challenges in ensuring long-term poverty reduction (Osorio Gonnet, 2020). These contrasting results are inherent to CCTs' dual objectives, creating tensions and internal contradictions that undermine their transformative capacity (Soares and Britto, 2007; Handa and Davis, 2006). Considering the quantitative evidence available today and the underlying assumptions of these programs, critical scholars argue that when implemented in contexts marked by financial constraints, poor quality education services, high informality, and high inequality, conditional cash transfers fail to reduce inter-generational poverty.

3.4. Other Critiques of CCTs

It has also been argued that cash transfers are functional to the ideological shift that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s when neoliberal thought helped in reconfiguring 'development' from the transformation of the productive structure to poverty reduction and provision of social assistance for the poor (Chang, 2010; Hulme, 2015). In such a view, CCTs are functional to a social protection system that promotes self-sufficiency and individualism, where the role of the state is limited to promoting that individuals are well prepared to insert themselves in the labor market and thus escape poverty on their own merits (Pérez and Brown, 2017).

Following this line of thought, critical scholars have contested that neoliberalism and the rise of CCTs come hand in hand. They argue that CCTs are designed to address the symptoms of deprivation and not the structures that produce and reproduce poverty (Saad-Filho, 2015). By sidestepping the root causes of the problem, cash transfers help to maintain the dominant economic model, which also explains why international financial institutions like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have been so eager to promote them (Adesina, 2020). While recognizing that cash transfers ameliorate poverty somehow, critics contend that these programs cause the state to roll back and leave the provision of public goods to the market, 'leading to the transfer of responsibility for welfare from the state to the individual' (Saad-Filho, 2016, p. 76). The new social policy model created by the massive adoption of CCTs in Latin America 'places more emphasis on individual responsibility' while modifying—but not eliminating—the role of the state in welfare provision (Molyneux, 2008).

In direct opposition to those who see a 'southern revolution' in the rise of cash transfers, some even argue that these policies are not transformative at all and are underpinned by a neoliberal rationale because they shift the responsibility of eradicating poverty from the state to the individuals (Wolkenhauer, 2023). This literature suggests that CCTs are an expression of the 'mature phase' of neoliberalism due to their market-oriented and human capital-enhancing nature (Putzel, 2020). As Fischer (2020) notes, these critics emphasize that the ideologies behind CCT programs limit their ability to challenge the inequalities exacerbated by other policies adopted following a neoliberal policy framework. Such an argument echoes Harriss-White's (2005) theory according to which capitalism creates poverty, while also creating immense material wealth.

The discussions presented above show that the underlying logic of conditional cash transfers is heavily contested. While there is abundant evidence of their impact on school attendance and nutrition, there is less evidence of their impact on inter-generational poverty.

3.5. Diffusion of CCTs in Latin America

CCTs are extremely popular among policymakers in the developing world. Since their early adoption in Mexico and Brazil around 1997, these programs have been adopted in almost all Latin American countries. Although CCTs have been implemented in Asia and Africa too, the Latin American experience is noteworthy because 17 countries in the region adopted this type of policy to curb poverty in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Osorio Gonnet, 2020). Today, most of the CCT programs put into effect in the region in the early 2000s are still running. A notable exception is the Mexican case. Despite the national and international appraisal of *Progresa-Oportunidades-Prospera*, the CCT program was eliminated in 2019 by the left-wing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Ramírez and Velázquez (2023) argue that *Prospera* was easily eliminated because beneficiaries became apathetic towards its continuation or termination due to its hard design and strictness in enforcing conditionalities.

As shown in Figure 5, in a decade, Latin American policymakers adopted very similar interventions to reduce present and future poverty via social assistance with an emphasis on human capital accumulation:

Figure 5. Conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America

Year	Country	Program Name[2]	Conditionalities
1997	Mexico	Progresa/Oportunidades	Education and health
1998	Honduras	Programa de Asignación Familiar	Education and health
2000	Costa Rica	Avancemos	Education and health
	Nicaragua	Red de Protección Social	Education and health
2001	Colombia	Familias en Acción[3]	Education and health

[2] In most countries, the program's name changes over time, usually when a new administration comes to power. The name included in this chart is the original or the one the program is most known for.

[3] For more than 20 years, the Colombian program was called *Familias en Acción*. In 2023, it was renamed *Renta Ciudadana*.

2001	Brazil[4]	Bolsa Familia	Education and health
2002	Chile	Chile Solidario	Education, employment, housing, health
2003	Ecuador	Bono de Desarrollo Humano	Education and health
2004	Argentina	Programa Familias	Education and health
2005	Dominican Republic	Programa Solidaridad	Education and health
	El Salvador	Comunidades Solidarias Rurales	Education and health
	Paraguay	Tekoporâ	Education and health
	Peru	Juntos	Education and health
2006	Bolivia	Bono Juancito Pinto	Education
	Panama	Red Oportunidades	Education and health
2008	Guatemala	Mi Familia Progresa	Education and health
	Uruguay	Plan Equidad	Education and health

Source: Adapted from Cecchini and Madariaga (2011), Sugiyama (2018) and Osorio Gonnet (2020).

The literature on this issue has noted that the rapid spread of CCTs through Latin America was the result of a process of diffusion that can be explained by internal and external factors. Learning and emulation—from the Mexican and Brazilian experiences mostly—and the active support of the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank were crucial, given that they 'defined CCTs as the new norm' (Sugiyama, 2011, p. 264). As Osorio Gonnet (2020) argues, the main mechanisms present in the diffusion of cash transfers in the region were learning, emulation, and moderate coercion by International Financial Institutions.

[4] Brazilian municipalities were among the first to implement CCTs programs, yet the national government only did so in 2001. In 1995, Caminas and Brasilia adopted the *Bolsa Escola* program, which later expanded to hundreds of municipalities and eventually shaped the nation-wide federal program (Coêlho, 2012).

Moreover, the existence of some sort of consensus among Latin American policymakers around the effectiveness of these programs was decisive for their diffusion. Osorio Gonnet (2020) argues that an 'epistemic community' of experts on poverty reduction was formed with the aid of development banks during the early 2000s, which helped to promote the adoption of CCT programs and advance cross-national learning. She stresses that this 'epistemic community' was formed by government officials such as national Directors of CCTs or Ministers of Development, and staff of multilateral organizations like ECLAC, IDB, OAS, or UNDP. Workshops, official visits, informal communications, reports, and research papers produced by international development organizations allowed policymakers to obtain crucial information about the design and impact of CCTs and a platform to discuss their effectiveness, aiding their adoption in local contexts.

The existence of an epistemic community and the suggestions (some would say moderate coercion) made by international actors are not the sole reason for the prominence of these policies in the region. There are internal factors that help to explain why Latin American policymakers resorted to social assistance to curb poverty. The diffusion of CCTs in Latin America in the early 2000s coincided with the rise of left-wing governments in the region—known as the Pink Tide—which led many to believe that there was a relationship between the adoption of these pro-poor policies and government ideology. Following Barrientos (2012), there is a 'natural affinity' between center-left governments and the protection of the poor. However, Pena (2014) contends that CCTs have been adopted regardless of the ideological leaning of the ruling parties. She identified three waves of CCT adoption. In the first wave (1995-2000), cash transfers were adopted by center or center-right presidents; in the second wave (2001-2004), by center-left or left governments; in the third wave (2005-2008), CCTs were adopted by presidents from both sides of the ideological spectrum.

Following a similar argument, Brooks (2015) contends that CCT adoption is not dependent on ideology. She points at the degree of democratization and ideological divisions among the government as elements that help to explain why some countries and not others adopted these programs. Other authors argue that the adoption and diffusion of CCTs depend on electoral motives rather than ideology. Analyzing the Mexican and Brazilian experiences, Britto (2008) suggests that electoral concerns played a key role in the creation of CCTs in addition to the pressure exercised by international organizations. She argues that to better withstand the economic crisis that affected the region in the late 1990s, Latin American policymakers created an intervention that directly linked the national government (politicians) and beneficiaries (constituency) to win votes.

Díaz-Cayeros et al. (2016) analyze the role of electoral politics in the design of poverty reduction policies by studying the Mexican CCT program, *Progresa*. Unlike investments in public goods that are aimed at communities and benefit broad sectors of the population, particularistic transfers such as CCTs yield more electoral results for politicians because they create a sense of entitlement and dependence. However, the authors argue that with the establishment of the CCT program, social policies in Mexico shifted from discretionary and clientelistic to formula-based and technocratic. Notwithstanding this major change, Díaz-Cayeros et al. (2016) show that poor voters reward politicians who adopted or expanded cash transfer programs, which supports the existence of a relationship between elections and CCTs. Indeed, Latin American presidents implemented cash transfer programs to boost their popularity, given that they give immediate benefits to millions of 'deserving poor,' which is more attractive than other pro-poor policies (Vega, 2023). In Colombia, there is evidence supporting that Álvaro Uribe, the then-president who expanded the CCTs program, increased his popularity and was rewarded by constituents in targeted municipalities in the following elections (Nupia, 2011).

Contrary to the view that asserts that political ideology and CCTs are unrelated, Borges (2018) advances that the design of the programs is indeed dependent on ideology. Left-leaning presidents were influenced by the Brazilian experience—targeting was looser and conditionalities less strict—, while right-leaning governments chose to prioritize human capital accumulation, following the stricter Mexican model.

Despite its major contributions, the literature that analyzes the diffusion of CCTs in Latin America fails to explain why these policies have survived for over two decades. Most countries that adopted CCTs during the diffusion period in the early 2000s continue their implementation. The reasons that explain their diffusion—political incentives, an epistemic community following a policy paradigm, and the influence of development banks—do not completely account for their continuation, although they shed some light on it.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

There are few studies analyzing why CCT programs survive for long periods after being adopted in Latin America. Most of the literature on conditional cash transfers in the region explores either their impact or how/why they were diffused in the early 2000s. As shown in Chapter 3, it has been argued that CCTs were adopted *en masse* due to electoral motives, the existence of an epistemic community that promotes a linear model based on human capital accumulation, the influence of development banks, and the ideology of the ruling party. These reasons, particularly the role of politics in the delivery of social assistance, solve part of the puzzle. Indeed, politicians are keen to continue a social assistance policy that benefits millions with direct cash transfers. However, elected officials have dismantled CCT programs (López Obrador in Mexico) or drastically transformed them (Petro in Colombia). If electoral motives were the only driver of CCTs, they would have continued without major changes. Hence, a more nuanced explanation of why CCTs are still running after two decades in many Latin American countries can be developed.

From an institutional perspective, De la O (2015) argues that survival depends on how the government is formed. She suggests that programs implemented in countries with divided governments are 40% more likely to survive after 10 years of operation than CCT schemes implemented in countries with unified governments. This proposal is too mechanistic and excludes that policies are not neutral—their continuation is not natural; it depends on the active decision taken by someone.

When exploring why CCTs have survived for so long in Latin America despite being contested on different grounds, my research relates to a broader question that has been addressed by institutionalist literature: why are policies adopted, eliminated, or continued? Beyond electoral motives, what drives social policy? In this regard, four theoretical frameworks are useful to understand why certain policies persist over time. First, the notion of *policy paradigm* popularized by Hall informs how certain sets of ideas determine policy outcomes and narrow the alternatives considered by policymakers. Second, the welfare regimes approach popularized by Esping-Andersen offers possible explanations as to why social policies are established. Third, the lock-in effects created by social policies shed light on the difficulties associated with *welfare retrenchment* as conceptualized by Pierson. Fourth, the strong support that *evidence-based policymaking* has received in the last decades could help to explain the adoption and continuation of policies that have been proven to be successful.

It should be noted, however, that most of these theories were not created to explain the survival of conditional cash transfers nor take into account the Latin American experience. The scholarly debates about the emergence of welfare regimes, paradigms, and retrenchment emerged in the 1990s, after neoliberal policies swept across the Global North. These conceptualizations should be taken with care when analyzing the Latin American experience because retrenchment and paradigm shifts are far more common in this region than in northern contexts.

4.1. Institutional Change, Policy Paradigms, and Welfare Regimes

In his 1993 seminal article, Hall delineated a theory of the role of ideas (policy paradigms) in public policy. His contribution is especially important to understanding policy changes and, most notably, incremental shifts in policy without major transformations. In its original formulation, Hall's theory suggests that policymakers create policies according to a framework of ideas that delineate the problem that they are addressing, the goals of the policy, and the instruments used to achieve these goals. These sets of ideas are defined as policy paradigms.

Building upon Kuhn's work on scientific paradigms, Hall (1993) contends that three types of change can be identified when analyzing policy paradigms. First-order change refers to bureaucratic, minor adjustments following the logic of incrementalism; second-order change refers to less usual modifications, including the 'development of new policy instruments', while maintaining policy goals. First and second-order change resemble normal policymaking because they do not question the rationale behind the policy paradigm (Carnie and Weible, 2015) nor challenge 'the overall terms of a given policy paradigm' (Hall, 1993). On the contrary, third-order change refers to a radical modification in the policy discourse and represents a paradigm shift. Third-order change has three main elements: (i) a change in the power dynamics that allowed one actor to impose the paradigm; (ii) significant shifts in authority within the political realm—conflicting expert opinions force the policymaker to choose one over the other—; (iii) anomalies or failure of the existing paradigm to explain or solve the policy problem (Hall, 1993; Carnie and Weible, 2015).

Despite its tremendous influence, Hall's theory has been the subject of multiple critiques. Some scholars have questioned that his model is too strict and fails to capture more subtle ideational changes that may occur without necessarily replacing old ideas with new ideas (Carstensen, 2011). According to Howlett (1994), instances of paradigmatic change are rare by definition, while most policy changes occur at the level of instruments. Following this rationale, Carstensen and Matthijs (2018) argue that

a 'full-blown paradigm shift' is an outlier even when there is an ideational shift in government, so they propose that ideas can change *within* a given paradigm. From a similar perspective, Wilder (2015) argues that even in policy areas with strong paradigmatic ideas, policymakers 'engage in bricolage', which is another way of saying that they 'muddle through' (Lindblom, 1959).

From a broader institutional analysis perspective, Hall's theory contrasts with Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) conceptualization of gradual institutional change. In direct opposition to the notion of policy paradigm and punctuated equilibrium models of institutional change, they argue that institutions go through gradual processes of endogenous change. In their view, change can come from within given the 'power-distributional implications of institutions' (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p. 14). Thus, they propose four modes of endogenous or gradual institutional change: (i) displacement, removing existing rules and creating new ones; (ii) layering, introducing new rules over existing ones; (iii) drift, changing the impact of existing rules; (iv) conversion, reinterpreting existing rules. There are, however, some elements of Mahoney and Thelen's approach that are worth taking into account. For instance, they understand institutions as creating inherent tensions because they allocate resources to some actors and not others (p. 8). It is particularly important to bear this in mind when analyzing CCT programs. As argued above, high levels of inequality in Latin America produced 'truncated welfare states' that failed to reach the poor. CCTs, maybe for the first time, redress this injustice and could create two actors interested in continuing such policies: beneficiaries who see their livelihoods improved and technocrats/politicians who can claim that they are aiding the poor.

When adapting the notion of policy paradigms to CCTs in Latin America it is worth questioning if they survive due to path dependence. Following Mahoney's (2000) conceptualization, path-dependence analyses share three defining features: (i) a casual process highly sensitive to events that took place long ago; (ii) the fact that those early historical events cannot be explained based on other prior events; (iii) a deterministic causal pattern or inertia.

Although Hall's theory has limitations, it is relevant for my analysis because it helps to explain why certain policy interventions are continued over time with only minor changes. Exploring the 'ways of thinking' of Colombian policymakers allows me to identify why and how CCTs have become associated with the status quo (Baumgartner, 2012)—or why they have survived for so long. Hall's characterization of paradigms as 'taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole' (Hall, 1993, p. 279) resembles what we see today with cash transfers. When a new paradigm is institutionalized, just as what happened with CCTs in the early 2000s, 'members of the relevant policy community come to accept its hegemony' (Howlett, 1994, p. 634).

Another classical theorization regarding what might drive social policy was created by Esping-Andersen (1990). He argues that welfare states develop and are shaped by three factors: (i) the nature of class mobilization; (ii) class-political coalition structures; and (iii) the historical legacies of regime institutionalization (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 29). The combination of these factors leads to the creation of three different welfare models: the liberal welfare state, the corporatist welfare state, and the social democratic welfare state. Esping-Andersen argues that past welfare reforms and social class dynamics are key to understanding today's social policy arrangements.

Fine (2014) has criticized Esping-Andersen's three-fold model because 'it is incapable of explaining change.' He contends that the welfare regimes approach lacks analytical value given that it fails to integrate how a certain country changes its social policies and becomes a different welfare model. Despite the shortcomings of Esping-Andersen's theorization to account for policy or regime changes, the three factors that shape welfare states could be useful to explain why CCTs have survived for so long in Latin America.

4.2. Welfare Retrenchment

The politics around welfare expansion are fundamentally different from the politics of welfare retrenchment (Pierson, 1996). While expanding social policies is relatively easy provided that there are sufficient funds, dismantling social policies and reducing the welfare system is terribly difficult. In his groundbreaking contribution on this topic, Pierson (1994) attempted to explain why during Reagan's and Thatcher's tenures in the U.S. and the U.K. government social spending remained high, while other neoliberal reforms were more successful. Pierson develops several arguments to explain such a conundrum. Most notably, he argues that two policy feedbacks have a substantial impact on retrenchment. In some cases, past commitments and the institutional structure around welfare create 'lock-in effects.' Previous policy choices 'narrow present options,' bounding governments to the promises/actions of their predecessors (Levy, 2021, p. 170). In addition, given that social policies tend to allocate resources, past programs foster the appearance of interest groups that aim to maintain their benefits. Policymakers are constrained by the need to honor what previous governments pledged and by the new interest groups that emerged from existing programs (Levy, 2020). As Pierson (1994) argues, 'previous policies matter because they help shape the distribution of political resources' (p. 50).

Partly following Pierson's argument, Green-Pedersen (2003) argues that interest groups have varying degrees of strength, which determines how easy or hard the retrenchment of specific social

security schemes is. Regarding social assistance, for instance, there are no strong interest groups when compared with old-age pensions. Although this might be true for CCTs in Latin America given that 'the poor' are not politically organized, my hypothesis was that these programs create long-term commitments (supporting children during their whole childhood) and have sound institutional lock-ins that prevent policy change. These factors would explain why CCT programs have survived for so long.

Pierson's framework is relevant to my analysis because it allows me to theorize why CCT programs have been in place for more than two decades in Latin America, especially Colombia. As noted by Niedzwiecki and Pribble (2023), policy legacies are a crucial determinant of social policy expansion and retrenchment in Latin America—and social assistance is not an exception. Considering that not all poverty alleviation programs in Latin America have been locked in (Fenwick, 2013), the Colombian experience is relevant to understanding why CCTs have survived for so long.

4.3. Evidence-Based Policymaking

Another element that influences or shapes public policy is the available evidence concerning its effectiveness or impact. From the beginning of this century, there has been a push for more 'rational' or 'evidence-based' policy in several developed countries—the UK and Australia are good examples (Cairney, 2016). *Evidence-based policymaking* highlights that policy decisions should be rigorous, systematic, informed by evidence, and include rational analysis (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005). Experimentation and evaluation are essential to learn what works (Rodrik, 2008). The chosen policies should be, in general, the ones that will work because they have been regarded as effective in the past (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012).

However, Cairney (2016) suggests that some of the scholars and institutions that appraise evidence-based policymaking disregard its limitations and have accepted it uncritically. He contends that there are problems with the supply of evidence (e.g. objectivity is elusive) and with the demand for evidence (e.g. some forms of evidence are privileged over others). Moreover, 'the use of evidence is a political process, an exercise of power' (Cairney, 2016, p. 42). When creating evidence-based policy, researchers and policymakers face several dilemmas that require value-driven and political choices, not only analyzing 'objective' data (Cairney and Oliver, 2017). In line with these critiques, Greenhalgh and Russell (2009) argue that the practice of evidence-based policymaking ignores the complex, contend-dependent nature of policymaking. Some of these limitations arise because, in the end, such an

understanding of what drives (or should drive) policy is 'situated within a positivist paradigm' (Strydom et al., 2010) or is 'ideologically driven' (Deeming, 2013).

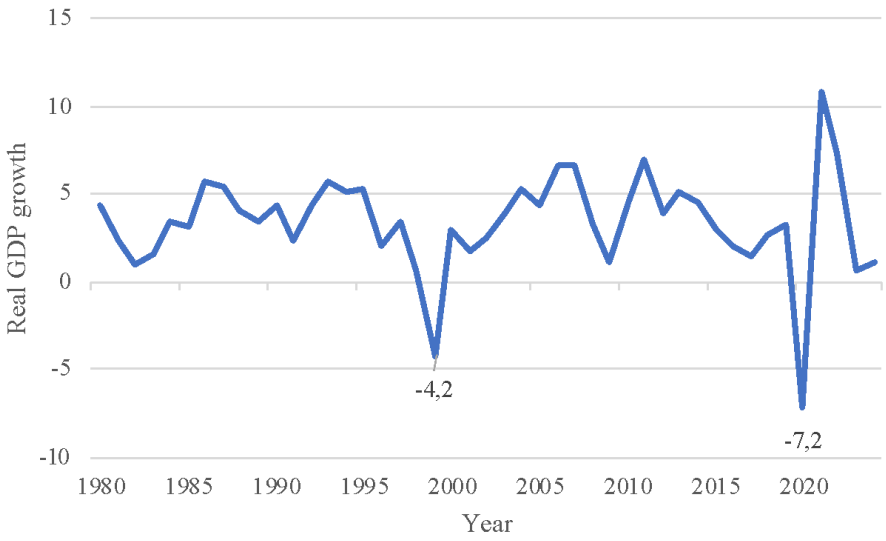
Despite its limitations, policymakers are encouraged to create evidence-based policies on several issues—CCTs not being the exception. Proponents of this approach claim that 'randomized evaluations have the potential to revolutionize social policy' (Duflo and Kremer, 2003). Not surprisingly, the adoption of CCTs coincided with the push for evidence-based policymaking (Sandberg, 2016). Hence, one possible explanation for the survival of CCTs in Latin America is the symbiotic relationship between evidence-based policymaking and social policy: policies supported by strong evidence are more likely to be adopted or continued.

Chapter 5: Conditional Cash Transfers in Colombia

5.1. Poverty in Colombia

Colombia is an upper-middle-income country with solid macroeconomic stability (World Bank, 2024). In the last 30 years, it has had an overall positive GDP growth despite two massive economic crises in 1999 and 2020 (Figure 6). The 1999 economic crisis heavily influenced the creation of Colombia's CCT program, while the 2020 economic crisis served the creation of an unconditional cash transfer scheme (Gallego et al., 2021).

Figure 6. GDP growth expressed as annual percent change



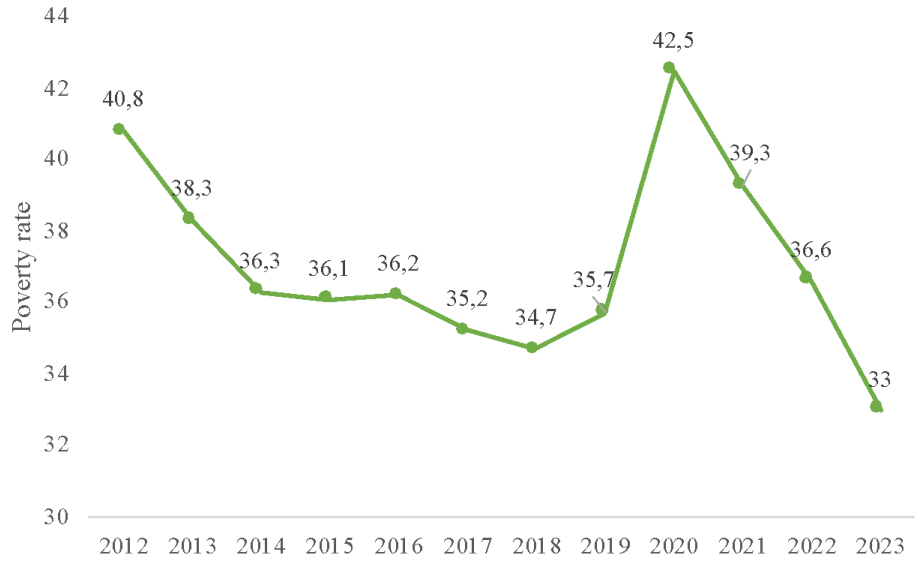
Source: Made by the author with data from IMF (2024).

Despite Colombia's positive economic growth in the last decades, poverty and inequality remain high. Like other Latin American countries, Colombia is caught in a high-inequality, low-growth trap that affects economic progress and educational outcomes (UNDP, 2021). Income inequality in Colombia is dramatic: while the region's average Gini index in 2018 was 0,46, the Colombian Gini index in 2023 was 0,54 (DANE, 2024). In 2019, the income of the richest 10% was 33,3 times higher

than the income of the poorest 10% (Cárdenas, 2020). Such high inequality is caused and reinforced by the unequal access to quality education, a two-tier labor market with very high informality, and the low redistributive capacity of the fiscal policy (Mejía and Nuñez, 2022).

While inequality is a major policy problem for Colombian policymakers, poverty also affects a considerable share of the population. In 2023, more than 16 million people were living under the national poverty line, and almost 6 million were living in extreme poverty (DANE, 2024a). Notwithstanding the remarkable reduction in the share of the population living in monetary poverty since 2012[5] (Figure 7), one third still live under the poverty line. In the early 2000s, during the first years of operation of the CCT program, monetary poverty reached 53,7% of the population (DNP, 2010). The situation is very different now, but it is hard to determine if the CCT program is the cause for such reduction in monetary poverty. On the contrary, multidimensional poverty is relatively low and has been so for several years: in 2023 it only affected 12,1% of the population (DANE, 2024b). The sharp contrast between monetary poverty and multidimensional poverty (33% and 12,1%) suggests that increasing household income should be a policy priority for any poverty reduction program.

Figure 7. Share of the population living in monetary poverty in Colombia (2012-2023)



[5] Between 2009 and 2011, the Department of Statistics (DANE) changed how poverty is measured in Colombia. Most analysts consider that the data prior and post 2012 lack comparability.

Source: Made by the author with data from DANE (2024a).

Due to the high levels of monetary poverty and the structural inequalities created since colonial times, social mobility across generations is the lowest among OECD countries (OECD, 2022). The OECD (2018) estimates that it would take at least 11 generations or 300 years to rise from the bottom 10% to the mean income in Colombia. The Colombian armed conflict and the country's unique, yet difficult geography have hindered economic growth and prevented social policies from reaching those living in rural areas (Kalmanovitz, 2019).

Taking into account the challenges faced by Colombia, social policies are aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. One of the most important social assistance programs targeted at the poor was *Familias en Acción* (FeA), a CCT scheme recently replaced by *Renta Ciudadana* (RC). As of 2021, FeA covered 2,4 million households (DNP, 2021), benefitting over 8 million people. Despite its massive reach, FeA covered less than half of the population living in monetary poverty. FeA was conceived as (and now RC is believed to be) the main poverty reduction policy in Colombia.

5.2. From *Familias en Acción* to *Renta Ciudadana*

Before the adoption of CCTs in the late 1990s, policies to curb poverty in Colombia were based on industrialization and the transformation of the structural characteristics of the economy. Alviar (2013) suggests that import-substitution industrialization, rural migration to the cities, promotion of microfinance, and redistribution of unused land were the preferred policy options to reduce poverty towards the end of the twentieth century at the national level. In the 1990s, the Colombian development strategy shifted from industrialization to strengthening the role of markets to achieve economic growth following the structural reform agenda (Ocampo and Porcile, 2020; Ocampo, 2022). In such a context, new social policies were designed to match the new development model that promoted free trade and the active role of markets in poverty reduction.

In the late 1990s, Colombia experienced a harsh economic downturn following the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Cárdenas, 2020). To help the poor resist the difficult times, Andrés Pastrana's administration adopted the CCT model after the Director of the National Planning Department visited Mexico for an ECLAC meeting and discussed CCTs with Santiago Levy—then Director of the program in Mexico (Urrutia and Robles, 2018). Following the human capital-based model that

emphasized the need to promote income among families with children, the program was named *Familias en Acción* (Families in Action). After more than 20 years of operation, this policy has been hailed as a success by many, including the country's former president (Santos, 2024). FeA was complemented with *Jóvenes en Acción* (JeA) in 2012, a CCT program that sought to promote the enrolment of recent graduates in tertiary education. Local governments such as the Municipality of Bogotá (a nine-million city) introduced conditional cash transfers following the successful experience of FeA.

Familias en Acción experienced four phases from its adoption in 2000 until its elimination in 2024. Despite some changes in the number of beneficiaries and the program's targeting (Figure 8), its main objective remained unchanged: promoting education and health among children from low-income households to increase human capital accumulation. To receive the transfer, beneficiaries were obliged to attend school and regular health checkups. In Phase 1 (2000-2006), the program was piloted with the aid of the Inter-American Development Bank and The World Bank. In Phase 2 (2007-2012), it was expanded to include more beneficiaries, and a new international loan was requested by Colombian policymakers. In phase 3 (2012-2021), FeA became a 'state policy' when Congress enacted a law regulating it and created a budget item for it. In Phase 4 (2022-2023), the program's transfers were increased and its targeting improved. In 2024, FeA was replaced by *Renta Ciudadana* (RC). When FeA was transformed into RC, the number of beneficiary households was considerably reduced: from 2,4 million to around 500.000.

Figure 8. Targeting and funding of FeA and RC

	Funding	**Beneficiary households**	**Authority in charge**
FeA Phase 1 (2000-2006)	74,9% IFIs 25,1% National budget	300.000, later expanded to 400.000	Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation
FeA Phase 2 (2007-2012)	82% IFIs 18% National budget	1.500.000	Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation
FeA Phase 3 (2013-2021)	100% National budget	2.818.000	Department of Social Prosperity (DPS)

FeA Phase 4 (2022-2023)	100% National budget	2.400.000	Department of Social Prosperity (DPS)
Renta Ciudadana (2024)	100% National budget	544.108	Department of Social Prosperity (DPS)

Source: Made by the author.

Phase 1 of FeA (2000-2006)

The Colombian CCT program was officially created through CONPES 3081—CONPES are policy documents produced by the highest government authority on public policy matters. At first, the program was part of a broader policy (*Red de Apoyo Social*) that was aimed at 'mitigating the impact of the economic recession [of 1998 and 1999] on the most vulnerable.' Its specific objective was to support the poorest households[6] with a transfer if they kept their children at school, provided them with adequate nutrition, and took them to health checkups (CONPES 3081). The nutritional subsidy consisted of a USD$20 monthly transfer per beneficiary household, while the subsidy regarding education consisted of a USD$6 monthly transfer for children enrolled in elementary school and USD$12 for children enrolled in high school.

This pilot program was intended to last three years and benefit around 300,000 households living in extreme poverty. Beneficiary households were selected from rural municipalities of less than 100,000 inhabitants (CONPES 3081). Policymakers included in the program's design an evaluation to determine if it should continue or be eliminated. During phase 1, FeA was designed, executed, and evaluated by the National Planning Department and a Presidential Agency (*Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional*), which gave the executive an important role in its implementation. The initial budget of the program was USD$336 million, out of which USD$230 million (68,4%) was covered by loans provided by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (CONPES 3081).

[6] SISBEN (*Sistema de Identificación de Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales*) is the most important targeting tool used by the Colombian government to determine who is eligible for social policy interventions. It is a survey that classifies households in different groups that range from 'extreme poverty' to 'not in need of assistance'. There have been considerable changes in the methodology used to group households and determine their vulnerability since FeA started, but overall the idea of sorting the potential beneficiaries in different groups according to their income and other variables have remained fixed.

In 2004, Phase 1 of FeA was evaluated. After comparing treated households with a control group, researchers found that the program had a positive impact on school enrolment of children ages 14 to 17. Also, the nutrition of children in treated households improved when compared to non-beneficiary children (DNP, 2004). This was the first public policy to be evaluated in those terms in Colombia. By resorting to these preliminary findings, the program was expanded and continued because it had 'proven' to be successful. Policymakers justified the expansion of FeA in 2004 on the increase in school enrolment and nutrition of children in treated households.

The Colombian government increased its funding and created a monitoring and evaluation system—making FeA the first public policy to include M&E in its budget. CONPES 3359 allowed the Colombian government to seek additional international loans for USD$86,4 million. These additional resources allowed FeA to reach 400.000 households in 2006 and helped with the creation of an M&E system based on quantitative and qualitative information. The consolidation of monitoring and evaluation had a double purpose. First, one of the requirements set by international donors to fund the program was conducting evaluations to determine if the objectives were being met (Urrutia and Robles, 2018; DNP, 2010). Second, it allowed policymakers to justify their decisions with context-specific evidence.

Phase 2 of FeA (2007-2012)

In 2007, the Colombian government decided to continue and expand its CCT program, although it recognized that FeA was created to promote human capital amid the late 1990s financial crisis (CONPES 3472). Given its positive results in enrollment and nutrition, the program was expanded through CONPES 3472. This policy document increased the number of beneficiaries to 1,5 million households (from 400.000 in 2006). Categorical targeting was formally introduced to cover two of the country's most vulnerable populations: indigenous and internally displaced people (IDP). IDPs had been beneficiaries of FeA since 2005 after a major ruling by the Constitutional Court,[7] yet only in 2007 were officially included in the policy's design (DPS, 2021). Indigenous people, although officially included from the beginning of Phase 2, were only formally incorporated into FeA after a pilot

[7] In 2004, the Colombian Constitutional Court (2004) ruled that there was an unconstitutional state of affairs regarding IDPs, who were not receiving government assistance despite their precarious situation. The government promised to include them in FeA to solve this situation.

conducted in 2009 and 2010. The program's geographical coverage was also expanded as some medium and major cities were included (DPS, 2021).

To fund this massive expansion of social assistance until 2010, the government resorted to the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Each financial institution provided a loan of USD$743 million, while the national government invested USD$326 million. CONPES 3472 provided adequate funding until 2010 when the presidential tenure of Álvaro Uribe came to an end. From then on, FeA's funding was uncertain given that the program depended on the President and the new administration could eliminate it (Urrutia and Robles, 2018). Juan Manuel Santos' administration (2010-2018) continued the program due to its positive results and aimed at reducing its dependence on the executive.

Phase 3 of FeA (2013-2021)

In 2012, Congress enacted Law 1532 of 2012, a bill drafted by Santos' administration. This law institutionalized the Colombian CCT program and transformed it into a state policy, independent of the Executive (Urrutia and Robles, 2018). FeA was transferred from the presidential agency *Acción Social* to a newly created one: it would be coordinated and implemented by the National Department of Social Prosperity—a government office of equal value to a Ministry (article 1, Law 1532 of 2012). After the enactment of Law 1532 of 2012, FeA had the following characteristics:

- Its main objective was 'contributing towards the superation and prevention of poverty and the formation of human capital through direct cash assistance' (article 3, Law 1532 of 2012).
- The program consisted of a bimonthly conditional cash transfer to improve the health and education of children whose families live in poverty or vulnerability[8] (article 2 and article 10, Law 1532 of 2012).
- Beneficiaries included families living in poverty, IDPs, and poor indigenous families (article 4, Law 1532 of 2012).
- It was nationwide, without any geographical targeting tools (article 5, Law 1532 of 2012).

[8] In Colombia, the National Department of Statistics (DANE) groups the population in five categories: extreme poor, poor, vulnerable, middle class and upper class. People living in vulnerability are just above the poverty line but have the risk of falling below it.

- It was government-funded. Each year the national government had to include FeA's operation in its budget (article 8, Law 1532 of 2012).
- It aimed at providing cash transfers through financial products to promote financial inclusion when possible and provide the transfer to women as an affirmative action towards them (article 10, Law 1532 of 2012).
- Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) was included as a core aspect of the program to determine the impact and effectiveness of the subsidies (article 11, Law 1532 of 2012).

Given that the main characteristics of FeA were included in Law 1532 of 2012, the government could not easily transform the program without congressional approval. This allowed FeA to be more consistent and be regarded as a 'state policy' by academics (cited above) and government agencies (DPS, 2019). For several years, FeA was run according to the prescriptions included in the 2012 legislation. By 2017, it covered 2,5 million households with an investment of 0,21% of the country's GDP (Cárdenas, 2020).

In 2019, Congress made minor changes or adjustments to Law 1532 of 2012 through Law 1948 of 2019. This new piece of legislation introduced the following modifications:

- The program's objective was modified. In addition to contributing towards the superation and prevention of poverty, Law 1948 of 2019 included specific objectives such as promoting school enrollment, increasing access to tertiary education, and preventing teenage pregnancy (article 3, Law 1948 of 2019). It is noteworthy that the program's objective was refined in 2019 after several evaluations had been conducted. I will return to this issue in section 6.
- Afro-descendent families living in poverty and extreme poverty were included as beneficiaries (article 4, Law 1948 of 2019).
- Although the program was nationwide, a preference for rural areas was introduced (article 5, Law 1948 of 2019).
- A new component was introduced. Some beneficiary households would now be given training in reproductive health, nutrition, financial services, and productive inclusion. This additional training is aimed at enhancing beneficiaries' capacities beyond formal education to increase their chances of securing a formal job (article 7, Law 1948 of 2019).

Massive institutional coordination was needed to run the program after 2012 when it was formalized as a policy that required the interaction of several institutions at the national, departmental,

and municipal levels.[9] A policy document produced by the Department of Social Prosperity outlines the responsible authorities for the implementation of FeA (DPS, 2019). At the national level, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Interior, the Department of National Planning, the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, the Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation of Victims, and the Department of Social Prosperity have specific functions. At the departmental level, the Office of the Governor, the Secretary of Health, and the Secretary of Education are involved in FeA. Finally, at the municipal level, the Office of the Mayor, a municipal delegate, an indigenous delegate, the Secretary of Health, the Secretary of Education, the schools and health providers, and the Municipal Certification Committee are involved in the implementation of the program (DPS, 2019).

Phase 4 of FeA (2022-2023)

Since 2018, Colombian policymakers have been aware that FeA's effectiveness in reducing present poverty has decreased when compared with other determinants of poverty reduction such as economic growth (DNP, 2019). To increase the program's impact, Iván Duque's administration decided to redesign it and change how beneficiaries were selected. This modification was needed because there was a new methodology to determine who was eligible for government assistance.[10] However, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the plan. In 2021, FeA started its transition into Phase 4, which would in theory solve some of the problems identified in Phase 3 and provide additional income to households who were affected by the pandemic (DPS, 2021a).

Phase 4 of FeA was expected to start in August 2022 (DPS, 2021b), but it did so in March 2023. One of the major changes made by the Department of Social Prosperity in Phase 4 was increasing the bimonthly transfers provided by FeA (Figure 9). In municipalities with very high malnutrition, households living in extreme poverty could receive up to COP$1.000.000 (USD$231,2) every two months. In 2023, the poverty line in Colombia was COP$435.375 per month per person (USD$100,7)

[9] According to the 1991 Colombian Constitution, the country is divided into Departments and Municipalities. As of 2024, there are 32 departments and 1.103 municipalities.

[10] In 2016, the Colombian government modified the methodology to determine eligibility for social assistance programs through CONPES 3877. This policy document determined the creation of SISBEN IV, a refined survey that is used for targeting purposes in different government policies.

(DANE, 2024a), which means that in certain municipalities and to certain households, FeA provided an additional income of a little more than a poverty line.

Figure 9. Amount of the bimonthly transfer in USD[11]

	Municipalities with very high malnutrition		**Municipalities with high malnutrition o PDET[12]**		**Other municipalities**	
	Extreme poverty	Poverty	Extreme poverty	Poverty	Extreme poverty	Poverty
Health	231,2	166,5	166,5	74	74	55,5
Education	74	55,5	55,5	27,7	27,7	18,5

Source: Adapted from article 21 of Resolution 542 of 2023 issued by the DPS.

Despite the changes made to FeA and the fact that Phase 4 had not been evaluated, in December 2023 the program was terminated and replaced by *Renta Ciudadana* (Decree 1960 of 2023). This new program, which has been running since January 2024, is the core intervention of a 'Transfers System' that aims to provide conditional and unconditional cash and in-kind transfers to support households living in poverty and vulnerability (articles 65 and 66, Law 2294 of 2023).

Renta Ciudadana (2024-today)

In 2023, Gustavo Petro's administration eliminated FeA and changed the rules that govern social assistance. The creation of RC signaled a change in how CCTs are structured. Most importantly, the new program reduced the number of beneficiaries by more than 60%: RC has only 544.108 households while FeA benefited around 2,4 million households (DPS, 2024b). Via an executive decision (Decree 1960 of 2023), the president repealed Law 1532 of 2012 and Law 1948 of 2019. FeA was considered a 'state policy' due to the existence of these pieces of legislation; they introduced safeguards, checks

[11] The original values are in COP. For clarity purposes, I converted them into USD using the average market exchange rate during 2023. On average, during this time period 1 USD bought 4.325 COP.

[12] *Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial* – PDET (Development Programs with Territorial Approach) are a policy initiative created after the 2016 Peace Agreement that includes 170 municipalities deeply affected by the armed conflict.

and balances, and accountability mechanisms. Their removal from the Colombian legal order signals a turn in how social assistance is governed. Once again, the President has discretionary powers over CCTs given that a presidential agency (Department of Social Prosperity) is in charge of regulating RC.

Article 2 of Decree 1960 reads as follows:

> ARTICLE 2. MODIFICATION OF THE PROGRAM FAMILIAS EN ACCIÓN. From 1 January 2024, the program Familias en Acción will be transformed into a family and community assistance strategy (...) which will aim to guide households in their social mobility process and promote access to the government's social offer.

Renta Ciudadana was regulated via an executive order issued by the Department of Social Prosperity in January 2024. It should be noted that executive orders are not bound to the same kind of controls as legislation enacted by Congress. Before RC, the literature highlighted that FeA and other CCT programs had been institutionalized or locked-in to prevent new administrations from modifying them. The elimination of FeA and the creation of RC via executive orders show that CCTs have not survived due to their institutionalization: they might be harder to change, but it is possible to do so.

The new program consists of four types of interventions that mix conditional and unconditional cash transfers (Resolution 079 of 2024): value of care, Colombia hungerless, improvement of capabilities, and emergency assistance (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Interventions within *Renta Ciudadana*

	Description	**Eligibility**	**Type of transfer**	**Conditionalities**
Value of Care	It is the core of the program. It seeks to strengthen and value care work.	- Single-headed households living in extreme poverty with children less than 6 years old. - Households living in extreme poverty with one person with disabilities. - Indigenous households living in extreme poverty with children less than 6 years old.	Conditional cash transfer of COP$500.000 (USD$115,6) every 45 days.	- Every member of the household must be registered in the health system. - Children below 6 years of age must attend regular health checkups. - Children ages 5 or above must be enrolled in school.

Colombia Hungerless	Households not included in the above strategy are eligible for a transfer aimed at improving nutrition.	- Households living in extreme poverty with children less than 6 years old. - Households living in extreme poverty with children ages 6 to 18.	Conditional cash transfer to improve nutrition. Its value is yet to be determined.	Health and education. Specific conditionalities are yet to be determined.
Improvement of Capabilities	This transfer seeks to aid households with difficulties to escape poverty by investing in capabilities.	- Households living in moderate poverty with children less than 6 years of age. - Households living in moderate poverty with children ages 6 to 18.	Conditional cash transfer when certain goals are completed.	To receive the transfer, households must reach the goals set by the government. These goals include: - Attending health checkups and completing vaccination schemes. - Registering for the next school year.
Emergency Assistance	It is an adaptive and flexible strategy that allows the government to react in case of emergencies.	- Households living in extreme poverty and moderate poverty that reside in municipalities affected by an emergency or crisis.	Unconditional cash transfer. Its value is to be determined depending on the household's needs.	N/A

Source: Adapted from Resolution 079 of 2024 issued by the DPS (2024c).

This new intervention is very different from FeA, yet at its core it is a conditional cash transfer program that seeks to reduce present and future poverty by investing in human capital accumulation. Policymakers justify the creation of RC by resorting to the evidence produced by several evaluations of FeA. These evaluations, it is contended, demonstrate that the Colombian CCT program is effective in meeting its goals and has produced welfare.

The transformation of the Colombian CCT program into RC suggests that the difficulties associated with welfare retrenchment identified by Pierson do not apply to CCTs in Latin America. Almost 2 million households stopped receiving cash transfers in the transition from FeA to RC. In addition, the institutional lock-ins created to keep FeA as a 'state policy' were dismantled. As a result, a different explanatory mechanism for the continuation of CCTs must be in place. As I will argue in

Chapter 6, the increasing importance of implementing evidence-based policies offers a better explanation for the survival of CCTs in Latin America.

5.3. Effectiveness and Impact[13] of *Familias en Acción*[14]

In the Colombian context, FeA has been evaluated both by academics and by consultancy firms contracted by the government. Some impact evaluations analyze the program's effects on health and education at the national, regional, and local levels, while others examine some of its unintended consequences in variables that range from beneficiaries' self-worth to crime in cities. Evaluations have been a key component of the project and have informed policy decisions (DNP, 2010). At the most basic level, these evaluations suggest that FeA reduced the number of people living in poverty because the transfer allowed some of them to rise above the poverty line. In 2023, the different transfers provided by the government (including FeA and other unconditional schemes) helped to reduce the share of the population living in monetary poverty up to 4,4% (DANE, 2024a). Without transfers, around 37,4% of the population would be deemed poor, whereas with transfers only 33% are. This data should be taken with care because it includes all the transfers provided by more than 8 different social assistance programs.

Beyond reducing current monetary poverty, there is strong evidence supporting that FeA has positive effects on children's health and nutrition. A government-funded evaluation focusing on rural areas found that beneficiaries' height-for-age increased by 0,213 standard deviations and stunting and chronic malnutrition were reduced by 6 percentage points (Econometría-SEI, 2012). Another government-led evaluation found that weight-for-age also increased by 0,24 or 0,37 standard deviations in different age groups (DNP, 2008). In addition, FeA had health spillover effects within households, meaning that not only children saw their health improved, but adults too. They were less likely to report ill in the short run and have lower rates of hospitalization in the medium run, compared to adults from non-targeted households (Contreras and Maitra, 2020).

The intervention has had mixed effects on education. On the one hand, it increased attendance in rural and urban settings (DNP, 2010) and increased the chances of finishing secondary education in

[13] This section heavily draws from my 4202 Poverty and Inequality critical case study.

[14] Given that *Renta Ciudadana* started on 1 January 2024, there are no impact evaluations of it. This section refers to the impact evaluations of *Familias en Acción*, which shed light on the major positive effects and shortcomings of CCTs in the Colombian context.

rural areas (Econometría-SEI, 2012). In big cities, the program also increased school attendance (up to 16,9 percentage points in certain age groups) and total years of schooling—up to 0,5 percentage points (CNC, 2011). Several evaluations found that FeA increased school attendance to a greater extent in rural areas than in urban settings (DNP, 2008; Attanasio et al., 2010).

However, FeA had a negative impact on school attendance of nonbeneficiary siblings, who are more likely to drop out than siblings in non-beneficiary households (Camilo and Zuluaga, 2022). It also increased the chance of repeating a school year, while reducing the chance of accessing tertiary education (Econometría-SEI, 2012; Llano, 2014). Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence supporting that the quality of education was increased by FeA. While one evaluation suggests that there is a positive (yet minimal) improvement (CNC, 2011), other studies suggest that beneficiaries access poor-quality institutions, which explains why there is no improvement in their standardized test scores (Econometría-SEI, 2012; Urrutia and Robles, 2015; Camacho, 2012). It appears that the lack of investment in the supply side has deteriorated the quality of education because the increase in the number of students has not been accompanied by an increase in the funding of each school (Benson, 2012). While FeA increased school attendance, it had no positive impact on learning and other educational outcomes, eroding its capacity to enhance human capital.

FeA has also had unintended effects on other social indicators. For instance, beneficiaries are 1,31 percentage points less likely to be engaged in child labor (Econometría-SEI, 2012) and they spend less time in income-generating activities in urban areas (Attanasio et al., 2010). Other unintended outcomes of FeA are the reduction in criminal behavior and teenage pregnancy in selected cities (Attanasio et al., 2021; CNC, 2011).

The literature suggests that FeA had some positive effects on nutrition and education to the extent that beneficiary households are more aware of the importance of providing adequate nutrition and keeping children in school (Llano, 2012). It is a fact that children today are healthier and attend school more regularly than two decades ago. However, the program's theory of change (contributing towards overcoming inter-generational poverty) is rarely assessed in the existing evaluations. There is no evidence supporting that FeA pulls people out of poverty by improving their human capital, which raises serious doubts when analyzing its effectiveness in reducing the inter-generational perpetuation of poverty (Urrutia and Robles, 2015). Alviar (2013) contends that the Colombian conditional cash transfer program had a marginal effect on the structural characteristics of the economy because it was implemented in a void, without more ambitious redistributive policies. She argues that FeA's limited

impact on future poverty was the result of its implementation within a context dominated by conservative economic models where the only path to development is economic growth.

The program's limited effect in reducing future poverty may have to do with the nature of the education system in Colombia and with the lack of employment opportunities for recent graduates. In low-income settings with low-quality services, educational attainment does not result in occupational mobility (De Schutter et al., 2023). In Colombia there is an 'educational apartheid' that excludes poor children from high-quality private education, offering them very low-quality public instruction (García-Villegas et al., 2013). For instance, 60% of children aged 10 experience learning poverty, which is heavily correlated with multidimensional poverty, attending public schooling, and living in rural areas (Demombynes, 2023).

By conditioning the cash transfer to school enrollment in the hope of increasing human capital, FeA disregards that the Colombian education system enhances income-related inequalities and that poor children can only access low-quality services (Cárdenas, Fergusson, and García-Villegas, 2021). Ignoring the (very low) quality of public education is one of the major shortcomings of social assistance policies based on the human capital theory.

An evaluation conducted to determine the program's impact on inter-generational poverty found worrisome results. Despite the positive results in school enrollment, beneficiaries have difficulties accessing tertiary education. This research also suggests that the program does not affect at all the labor market, which means that investing in human capital is not creating better job opportunities for beneficiaries (Llano, 2014). More recently, researchers at the Central Bank of Colombia found that the effect of Fea on the labor market was inconclusive (Acosta et al., 2023). In addition to low-quality education, high unemployment and a reduced formal labor market reduce the impact of FeA on inter-generational poverty because children are not accessing better economic opportunities once they finish secondary education.

These results have been used by the government to support the need to continue implementing a CCT program. Ignoring the fact that it has no impact on inter-generational poverty, policymakers justify the numerous transformations of *Familias en Acción* and the creation of *Renta Ciudadana* resorting to the positive impact on school enrollment and nutrition.

Chapter 6: Evidence-Based Policymaking and CCTs

After analyzing in depth the Colombian case, I suggest that there is an additional element beyond electoral motives and the existence of an epistemic community that helps to explain why policymakers decide to continue with CCT programs in Latin America. These programs are regarded as successful in a context that appreciates 'objective' data. The strong push for evidence-based policies in Colombia has contributed to the survival of CCTs because there is (some) evidence of their success.

However, as argued by Cairney (2016, p. 22), in their search for evidence, policymakers that adhere to the evidence-based approach sometimes 'pay disproportionate attention to limited information and act before the evidence is clear.' The Colombian case seems to prove Cairney's point. As shown in the previous sections, the evidence of the success of *Familias en Acción* is contested and mostly refers to very specific social indicators. Nonetheless, Colombian policymakers designed and continued the program arguing that the evidence shows its success. There are some particularities of the Colombian CCT program that support this general claim.

First, contrary to what the literature suggests, reducing current and future poverty is not the explicit goal of the Colombian CCT scheme. Its explicit objective is to promote health and education among poor children. These narrow objectives have a very close relationship with poverty and well-being but allow policymakers and program officers to focus on specific outcomes to produce tailor-made evidence, disregarding broader transformations that would reduce poverty.

The literature that analyzes CCTs is consistent in claiming that these programs have a dual objective. The title of Fiszbein and Schady's seminal World Bank report, *Conditional Cash Transfers: Reducing Present and Future Poverty* (2009), is indicative of how conditional cash transfer programs aim to reduce present and future poverty. Notwithstanding the assumptions inherent to CCTs, the policy documents in Colombia include different, narrower objectives. There is no mention of future poverty while improving nutrition and school enrollment take the front lead. In some policy documents, there is no mention of poverty reduction at all; the voice 'poor' tends to appear only when referring to potential beneficiaries.

Originally created to mitigate the negative effects of an economic crisis, the Colombian program has been deemed primarily as an intervention to reduce school dropout (Lora, 2021). In 2000, when it was piloted with the aid of international financial institutions, FeA had the objective of supporting poor families 'to keep their children in school and provide them with adequate levels of nutrition and

health care' (CONPES 3081). In 2012, when it was made a 'state policy' with the enactment of Law 1532, FeA was described in policy documents as an intervention 'consisting of the delivery of a conditional cash transfer to complement household's income and improve the health and education of children living in poverty' (article 2). At best, the program was expected to 'contribute towards' poverty reduction by investing in human capital accumulation (Law 1532 of 2012, article 3).

A 2019 operational document created by the DPS sets forth the program's specific objectives: (i) boosting children's access to health care; (ii) prompting school attendance; (iii) improving access to tertiary education; (iv) promoting community participation; and (v) contributing towards the reduction of inequalities between urban and rural settings (DPS, 2019). All of them are somehow related to poverty reduction, yet none of them directly mention or aim at reducing inter-generational poverty in the future.

Such dissonance between the program's underlying theory of change and its proclaimed objectives helps to sustain CCTs as an adequate policy option. For these policies to be successful, they must meet their narrow objectives and hope that the human capital theory will do the rest. CCTs' role in reducing future poverty is taken for granted, even though the Colombian program is not aimed at achieving future poverty reduction—at least explicitly.

Policymakers are eager to maintain and expand conditional cash transfer programs because they do not have to reduce poverty in the long run; at best, they must *contribute* towards poverty reduction (Espinosa, 2024). The difference is paramount. While the literature suggests that CCTs can and will reduce future poverty by improving human capital, policymakers are focused on specific objectives (improving health and education) that produce measurable results.

The increasing importance of evidence-based policymaking among Colombian experts and policymakers explains the program's emphasis on school enrollment and nutrition. *Familias en Acción* was the first policy in the country to follow the evidence-based approach (DNP, 2004). As a result, its explicit objectives were created in such a way that the effectiveness of the program could be evaluated in the short and medium terms. Their narrowness was instrumental in allowing the creation of evidence of its success or failure. Policymakers opted for circumscribed objectives bearing in mind that the CCT program would be evaluated, and positive results were expected—following the successful examples of Mexico and Brazil. Such a narrow understanding of CCTs has caused policymakers that adhere to the evidence-based approach to ignore one of its main goals: reducing future poverty.

Second, the evidence-based approach has helped to legitimize the CCT program because policymakers have strategically used the information provided by independent evaluations to support its continuation. They have done so in an attempt to depoliticize social assistance and transform it into a 'technical' matter. Evaluations have served a political purpose to protect the CCT programs and maintain them (Rawlings, 2005). Some of the former policymakers interviewed insisted that FeA was independent of political considerations because it was based on objective evidence provided by evaluations conducted by private firms. As shown above, policy documents produced by the DNP or the DPS replicate such an understanding. The results of the evaluations were used to justify the continuation of CCTs, transforming a policy with deep political considerations into a mere technical, evidence-based issue.

The use of evidence in an attempt to transform CCTs into a policy exclusively based on data helped its continuation during five different presidential administrations. Incumbent politicians had no incentives in transforming or dismantling the program. On the one hand, it provided the electoral profits that the literature discussed above has highlighted. On the other hand, it was seen as an evidence-based program that increased welfare without being tampered with by politics. By emphasizing on the results of the evaluations and 'taking politics out,' Colombian policymakers were able to maintain the CCT scheme in place without major criticism.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that in order to depoliticize the issue, the program was rendered successful in (almost) every aspect. FeA was the first public policy in Colombia to be evaluated to determine if it should continue. Given that the objectives of the program were narrow, evaluations tended to focus on these objectives. As the success of the intervention is determined by analyzing its explicit objectives (effectiveness), the impact of CCT programs in reducing inter-generational poverty was rarely assessed. Furthermore, the missing link between human capital accumulation and improving future income highlighted by critical scholars was usually disregarded.

In Colombia, the evidence shows that FeA was effective in improving nutrition and school enrollment of children pertaining to beneficiary households. It also reduced child labor and teenage pregnancy among treated families. These positive results were used by policymakers to continue the CCT program for so long. Policymakers who were part of the team in charge of FeA argue that every minor change made to FeA was based on the results of previous evaluations (Galvis, 2024). The distance that policymakers created between politics and evidence in CCTs can be seen in the 2023-2024 regime transformation. The elimination of FeA and the creation of RC responded to political motivations due in part to the different policy agendas of President Petro. However, policy documents

that justify the creation of RC use the positive impacts of FeA to support the need for a conditional cash transfer scheme (DPS, 2024). Evidence, then, is used to depoliticize CCTs.

There is another key issue with evaluations that has contributed to the survival of CCTs in Latin America: they do not evaluate the program's impact on future poverty. For over a decade, the literature has noted that CCTs' role in reducing inter-generational poverty is yet to be seen. At first, this absence was reasonable because not enough time had passed since the inauguration of the programs. Today, over 20 years later, one could expect that there is solid evidence of the long-term effects of CCT programs, particularly in increasing the income of beneficiary children once they graduate. Nevertheless, as this issue is not evaluated, most analyses conclude that CCTs are successful because they have great impact on improving nutrition and school attendance (which is true). The fact that the program's impact on inter-generational monetary poverty is not assessed helps the intervention to be rendered successful.

By ignoring such nuances that should be considered when analyzing the effectiveness and impact of CCTs, policymakers created a narrative according to which program is successful beyond any doubt. As argued by Cairney (2016), the use of evidence in policymaking is political. In this case, the use of evidence in policymaking serves to *avoid* politics. The richness and nuances found in the literature that explores CCTs and in the evidence of the Colombian program are simplified. Only the main, simple takeaways are considered. The fact that some strand of the literature suggests that there is a missing link between CCTs and future poverty reduction is ignored.

In Colombia and other Latin American countries, several evaluations show that CCTs have increased consumption and school enrollment, improved nutrition, and reduced stunting and other health problems. However, other evaluations contend that beneficiaries' future income does not improve and there is no inter-generational poverty reduction. When confronted with this paradox, most interviewees argued that it is not that FeA did not have an impact on future poverty. They contended that the impact has not been adequately measured, but it will certainly come.

This understanding of the evidence-based approach is instrumental for CCT survival. Colombian policymakers have focused on the positive effects of conditional cash transfers while ignoring some of their limitations because nuance would open the door for politics. If the program is presented as having both benefits and limitations, there would be a political decision to be made. In their attempt to depoliticize social policy, policymakers opted for simplifying the evidence regarding CCTs.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Several reasons could support the survival of conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America for over two decades. First, the literature that discusses diffusion suggests that an epistemic community that adheres to a specific policy paradigm regarding poverty reduction was created in the early 2000s in the region. Second, the literature has shown that social assistance policies are deeply political: their adoption and continuation are heavily influenced by electoral motives. These explanations offer an important framework to understand the politics behind CCTs but miss an important element. I suggest there is an additional reason for the survival of CCTs beyond their popularity among the poor and the existence of a policy paradigm: they have been regarded as pure, evidence-based policies in an attempt to depoliticize social policy. By justifying the continuation of CCTs on localized evidence of their effectiveness, these policies seem 'technical' as opposed to other poverty reduction policies. In the end, understanding conditional cash transfer programs as unrelated from politics serves policymakers. They have justified the continuation of these programs based on positive results that refer to very narrow objectives and disregard the nuances derived from some evaluations and the work of critical scholars. The Colombian case is paradigmatic of how evidence became central for CCTs in Latin America. Every modification to the CCT program was, as an interviewee contended, 'based on the best available evidence' (García, 2024).

Conditional cash transfer programs were adopted by Colombian policymakers in the early 2000s with the main objective of helping the poor withstand a massive economic crisis that hit Latin America in the late 1990s. Albeit minor changes to improve targeting or increase coverage, the CCT scheme created in 2000 (*Familias en Acción*) functioned until 31 December 2023. In 2024, the first-ever left-wing administration eliminated FeA and created *Renta Ciudadana*. Notwithstanding their reliance on the human capital model, there are considerable differences between these programs. For instance, RC benefits almost 2 million households less than FeA. However, policymakers justify their existence, continuation, and transformation by relying on the same evidence.

This situation cannot be explained by the electoral profits obtained by CCTs or by resorting to the concepts of policy paradigm or welfare retrenchment alone. I argue that the politics of evidence-based policymaking helps to understand why CCTs have survived for over 20 years in Latin America. Policymakers promote policies that are the result of 'objective' analysis because they are convinced of

their effectiveness and to depoliticize public policy. In Latin America, CCTs have been instrumental in this paradigm change towards evidence-based policies.

In a context where evidence-based policies are well regarded, Colombian policymakers opted to continue CCTs in an attempt to depoliticize social policy and transform it into a technical matter. Independent evaluations suggest that FeA increased school attendance and improved child nutrition, while also showing that the program had no impact on inter-generational poverty. In their quest for 'taking politics out', policymakers ignored such nuances and proclaimed the success of CCTs. Their appraisal of (some part of) the evidence helped to maintain CCTs in place for over two decades.

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