

How to transform childcare in Latin America^[1]

The examples of Chile and Colombia can help others in the region, but don't expect one-size-fits-all solutions.

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EXCERPTS

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How can a mother with a young child work without proper childcare available? The pandemic has reinforced how critical this question is for everyone, from families to companies and governments. In Latin America, the challenge may be new to some parents who could afford private daycares or had access to good public options, and now spend hours on Zoom classes with their young kids. However, for millions of others across the region – particularly among lower-income families – the drastic impact on mothers' careers of a lack of access to early education is not at all a new story.

Economists and education experts have been debating how to expand early education in Latin America for decades. Most of them agree on one critical point: Given Latin America's enormous socioeconomic and cultural diversity, we shouldn't be thinking in terms of a one-size-fits-all model for the region. "Each country has to develop their own responses and initiatives according to their unique characteristics," Lucía Scuro, a social affairs officer at ECLAC, told AQ.

However, the region can learn from two countries that, in very different ways, successfully expanded childcare services: Chile and Colombia. Their examples provide useful lessons and expose the trade-offs that policymakers inevitably face.

Chile managed to expand childcare coverage by 130% in two years, from 2005 to 2007, when President Michelle Bachelet first came into office and rolled out Chile Crece Contigo (Chile Grows with You). Bachelet wanted to attain universal preschool coverage for four- and five-year-olds and give access to public kindergarten programs for children under three from the 40% poorest households. The only condition to enroll a child: The mother had to be working, studying or searching for a job.

The administration increased investments in public childcare services four-fold starting in 2006. New public centers were opened and staffed with professionals who had at least a five-year university degree in education.

Chile saw a dazzling transformation. From 2006 to 2009, the number of public kindergartens surged from 700 to more than 4,000, while attendance in free daycares grew about five-fold. Early childhood education is still not fully universal in Chile, but today nearly 96% of five-year-olds attend preschool.

But Chile's strategy was based on a centralized and formal public model that is unlikely to gain the same traction in larger, poorer Latin American countries. With higher governance capacity, development levels and fiscal space, the Chilean government dedicated more than \$10 billion to the childcare program in the first two years alone. Very few in the region can afford that.

Plus, the expansion in early education did not immediately translate into more mothers joining the labor force. The professional benefits to women came only later. The initial program had certain rigid characteristics that made it hard for mothers to enter the job market, such as incompatible schedules between full-time working hours and daycare opening hours. Researchers found that the female labor supply significantly increased only after centers kept their doors open for longer hours. The share of female workers went from 38% to 52% over a decade.

Experts agree that the investments in early childhood education helped this progress. But the delayed effect had one main reason: Boosting mothers' careers was not the focus of policymakers who designed the program, but a secondary policy goal.

"For childcare programs to have a positive effect on mothers, gender equity needs to be in the policy design, so that it becomes part of the goal of the program," Merike Blofield, a professor of political science at the University of Miami, told AQ.

Silke Staab, a research specialist at UN Women, argues that the "more logical" path for most governments is to build on existing programs.

Leveraging resources

Colombia moved decisively in the direction Staab recommended. Instead of creating a formal structure for early education, it decided to leverage existing – and more informal – care services, typically provided by immediate and extended family members and friends. Starting

in the mid-1990s, the government began regulating a home-based care system by training and certifying caregivers and offering them a stipend to help cover costs.

The system expanded childcare coverage dramatically. The program, called Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar (Community Well-Being Sites), currently serves more than 1.7 million children, making Colombia the country with the greatest coverage for newborns to four-year-olds in the region. Research indicates that the program, with more flexible hours, increased by 25% the likelihood that mothers would work outside the home.

Blofield, from the University of Miami, points out that this type of “convenient childcare” allowed mothers to find better jobs with regular hours, sometimes moving from the informal to the formal economy. It also created employment opportunities for women — including mothers — with lower levels of education. Childcare providers are only required to have a high school degree and take a 40-hour training course before opening a center. Currently, around 80,000 women are employed in the public childcare service program.

However, this more informal system comes with high social and economic costs. Up until 2014, caretakers earned less than half the minimum wage with no benefits. It took more than 20 years of social pressure before the Colombian Constitutional Court ruled that care workers must receive the minimum wage. Today caretakers still earn approximately 28% of the average public sector monthly wage.

Unintended consequences

The examples of Chile and Colombia show how certain characteristics, like convenience and continuity, are critical for the uptake of services, easing the childcare burden on mothers. Across Latin America, these initiatives inevitably depend on some degree of policy experimentation, with risks involved. Good ideas are not enough — and in some cases they can lead to pernicious outcomes, undermining mothers’ careers.

Take the case of Argentina, for example. In 2009, the government introduced a Universal Child Allowance, a stipend given to low-income mothers with the goal of helping provide for and improve the quality of childcare. The program currently covers around 30% of children in the country, making it one of the largest social assistance benefits in Latin America.

Yet according to some experts, the evidence suggests that the program actually creates disincentives for women to enter the labor force. Researchers found that married women who receive the stipend are 25% less likely to join the labor market. The causes of the problem are the “relatively large amount” targeting mothers, explains Santiago Garganta, from the National University of La Plata. The aid may also reinforce gender stereotypes related to caregiving. The program assumes that mothers bear the responsibility of being the primary caregivers.

Chile also had a misfire prior to Bachelet’s program. In 2002, the government passed a law mandating large employers to provide and finance daycare services. A few years later, however, researchers found that women hired in those firms received starting wages on average 9% to 20% lower than their counterparts. In other words, the program became a wage penalty for mothers.

Continuing to measure social policies’ impact on women can help policymakers avoid these traps when designing new policies. Also, technology will likely play an increasingly larger role in bridging the gap between early education and mothers’ careers.

Uruguay has recently developed an app to nudge parents to take their children to centers instead of using family arrangements for childcare. Mercedes Mateo Díaz, an education specialist at the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank), urges other governments in the region to explore these tools moving forward.

According to Díaz, apps can be particularly useful to break cultural pressures for mothers to stay home raising their children. She argues that, again, the key is not to see childcare as a standalone policy. “Governments must have a vision of integrated care.”

Region: Latin America and the Caribbean ^[3]

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