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Lauri Heimo & Jukka Syväterä

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The ghostwriting of a global policy script: international organizations and the discursive construction of conditional cash transfers

Lauri Heimo and Jukka Syväätä

Faculty of Social Sciences (SOC), Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; University of Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

More than 60 countries have implemented a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program. The predominant CCT narrative begins from programs created in Mexico and Brazil in the mid-1990s. The literature concerned with CCTs tends to take this narrative as a given. In this article, we examine the role of international organizations (IOs) in the global governance of social policy by exploring the use of narratives as a strategy IOs employ to claim and generate legitimacy for global policy models. We investigate how the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Food Policy Research Institute have discursively constructed the CCT model in their policy documents and thus crafted the CCT narrative. Our analysis sheds light on ‘ghost-writing’ i.e., the IOs practice of concealing their central role in writing scripts for policy models. Thus, our case adds a novel aspect to the existing scholarship on the global proliferation of policies.

KEYWORDS

Conditional cash transfer; global governance; global social policy; international organizations; narrative; policy model; world bank

Introduction

There is a general understanding that international organizations (IOs) play a crucial role in global governance (Deacon 2007; Kaasch and Martens 2015). IOs such as the World Bank (WB) wield significant power in defining the content of global social policy discourse and steering the formulation of social policy in low- and middle-income countries through development funding and the production of internationally followed norms and more specific scripts or models for national policymaking (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017; Park and Vetterlein 2010). A central element in the work of IOs is synthesizing and tailoring knowledge into products and ‘best practices’, while they seek to establish global consensus around certain ideas that they see as important for their policy purposes and international image (Boås and McNeill 2004, 2).

Since the 1990s, many low- and middle-income countries have been building their social protection systems from the ground up or expanding systems that were retrenched during the structural adjustment era (Barrientos 2013). Hence, contemporary discussion about social policy principles and the course of welfare reform is also increasingly
informed by policy adoption in the Global South. Importantly, the decisions regarding the type of social policies implemented structure the direction of future reforms, as policy arrangements tend to get locked in and become fundamental institutional frameworks, creating constraints on and incentives for future political action (Myles and Pierson 2001, 312).

This raises important questions about how IOs seek to establish a global consensus around their policy ideas and how these organizations ‘theorize’ (Strang and Meyer 1993, 492) or engage in ‘script-writing’ (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017, 1068) so as to create behavioral templates for national policymakers. In this article, we examine the role of IOs in the global governance of social policy from an interpretive perspective by exploring the use of narratives as a strategy IOs employ to claim and generate legitimacy for these templates. We do so by investigating how the WB, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) have discursively constructed the conditional cash transfer (CCT) model in their policy documents and thus crafted the CCT narrative.

According to the WB’s definition, CCTs ‘are periodic monetary benefits to poor households that require beneficiaries to comply with specific behavioral requirements to encourage investments in human capital (such as school attendance, immunizations, and health checkups)’ (Honarati, Gentilini, and Yemtsov 2015, 8). During the past two decades, CCT programs have been implemented in more than 60 countries (ibid.), with both governmental and non-governmental actors having played prominent roles in financing and implementing them. The CCT has now been established as a globally recognizable policy model. In conceptual terms, the CCT is thus ‘translocal’ (Simons and Voß 2018, 16–19), meaning that it leads a ‘double life’ as an abstract functional model constructed and codified by IOs and concrete locally implemented programs.

The story repeated in both previous research and reporting by IOs begins from the notion that the CCT model – an innovative approach to poverty reduction – was created more or less concurrently in Mexico and Brazil and then spread from those two countries (Ibararrán et al. 2017; Lamanna 2014; e.g. Sugiyama 2011). The first wave of literature concerning CCTs was produced mainly by IOs, program officials, and development organizations. It consists of evaluations and overviews that largely highlight the positive aspects of these programs (e.g. Morley and Coady 2003; Skoufias and McClafferty 2001). A second wave of research emerged around ten years after the first evaluations and sought answers to the rapid proliferation of CCT programs either through the lens of diffusion or by analyzing political processes at the local level of implementation. This literature has commendably studied the domestic and international determinants that have led to and facilitated the adoption of CCTs in different countries. While scholarly research has diversified from the early overviews, the vast majority of studies continue to reproduce the narrative that Mexico and Brazil created the CCT model.

In recent and groundbreaking work on social cash transfers Leisering (2019) systematically and comprehensively covers all countries in the global South, all identifiable programs administered by national governments, as well as all major IOs involved (p.4). The book extensively covers ideational and discursive changes in the global social policy field formed around tackling poverty. The book, together with earlier works by Von Gliszczynski (2015) and Von Gliszczynski and Leisering (2016), examine the active role of different IOs in the construction of social cash transfer models and make an excellent
contribution by proposing a well-justified list of factors underlying their successful global proliferation. These scholars discuss CCTs as part of an overarching ‘metamodel’ of social cash transfers and pay attention to the WB’s central role in conceptualizing the abstract CCT model and in constructing it as a strategic uptake of innovative national models in the Global South. However, also this important body of research pays little attention to IOs’ involvement with the CCT model prior to the implementation of Mexico’s and Brazil’s national programs. Quoting Sugiyama (2011, 253–255) they emphasize that these programs:

> [W]here the starting point for CCT: Mexico’s PROGRESA, established in 1997, and Brazil’s Bolsa Familia, which started in 2003, with predecessors going back to 1995. Both examples attracted the attention of global organizations around 2000, particularly of the World Bank, due to positive programme evaluations (Leisering 2019, 121).

Accordingly, the authors conclude that the CCT case works as an example of how IOs pick up models from innovative Southern countries. While agreeing with most of their findings, our analysis nonetheless challenges the predominant CCT narrative, which too readily emphasizes the domestic and independent nature of the Mexican policy in particular by portraying it as a homegrown, pioneering program. We show that the discursive construction and codification of the CCT policy model by IOs likewise entailed crafting a policy narrative that excluded their involvement with the model preceding the launch of the ‘first pioneer programs’ and assigned it a place of origin in the largest economies of Latin America and regional leaders in Mexico and Brazil.

In a similar fashion to Leisering and von Gliszczynski we examine the key shifts in the process by which CCTs have become the globally recognizable and widespread policy tools they are today. However, we show, first, that the predominant narrative on the genesis of the CCT disregards certain essentially similar policies that existed before the Mexican and Brazilian CCT programs, that some of these programs were designed and financed by the WB and the IDB, and that they were involved with the creation of PROGRESA. Our results then show that the early studies conducted by IOs played an important role in the crafting of the narrative that influenced the discursive construction of the CCT as a global policy model. We argue that the WB resorted to ghost-writing the CCT script, thereby expurgating its own central role in bringing forth the CCT policy model, as a result of its legitimation deficit after the highly unpopular structural adjustment era.

The present article contributes to the understanding of IOs’ role in the global governance of social policy. We shed new light on that role by arguing that crafting narratives can be understood as a specific technique through which IOs contribute to the construction of global policy models. We approach global proliferation of CCT programs by highlighting the significance of ideas and discourse in interactive processes (Schmidt 2008) in the political contest over the content of global social policy (Deacon 2007). We add a new perspective to the scholarship on policy narratives by examining IOs as narrators in the discursive construction of a global policy model, thus pointing to the strategic use of policy narratives in the IOs’ attempts to advance their preferred policy ideas.
Formation of global policy models

Most approaches concerning global policy models have focused either on their diffusion or on policy transfer; how global models are created has received much less attention. Studies on diffusion and policy transfer provide considerable evidence for the interdependency of decision making (Baker and Walker 2019; de Oliveira et al. 2019). Both approaches share the view that policy choices in a certain country are shaped by choices made in others. Diffusion studies typically aim to explain why a policy has spread to some countries but not others or why some countries adopt a certain model early while others are laggards (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008). Thus, they are concerned with the conditions for diffusion, rather than how policies are formulated and altered during processes of adoption. The policy transfer literature, on the other hand, typically aims to trace the process through which a given model that emerged in one context has been implemented in another (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Marsh and Sharman 2009). Both approaches tend to assume that a model is first created in one context and then enacted in others. However, because these studies have mainly been interested in the spread of models, they have not paid much attention to the actual processes through which these models have evolved while spreading.

In this article we emphasize the bi-directional nature of the construction and spreading of global policy models, making clear that such models evolve in a process of ongoing construction even as they are already proliferating (Syväterä and Qadir 2015). This means that models are not first invented and only then diffused; instead, the theorization of the model continuously draws from previously enacted versions of the model. Seen from this perspective, the actual origin of a policy model is very much a result of the process by which that model is constructed. We argue that crafting and using legitimating narratives (Syväterä and Alasuutari 2013) is an important part of theorizing global models. Such narratives typically ‘explain’ the origin and effects of a model and give both instrumental and moral rationales for their adoption.

Narratives are influential in politics and policymaking because they are used to organize reality in specific ways – several scholars have found that stories have a fundamental (even epistemically privileged) role in making sense of social reality (e.g. Czarniawska 2010; Stone 1989). This tendency is apparent in policy studies, as evinced by the diverse scholarship on policy narratives, which has directed attention to policy-relevant narratives in specific policy processes (Miller 2012; Rhodes 2018); that is, the narratives of public problems and concrete locally implemented programs. In the case of social cash transfers, Leiserig (2019, 267) refers to the IO’s use of ‘short narratives’ which illustrate the lives of the poor as part of creating forms of presentation that make new policy models appealing. Our analysis, by contrast, points to a narrative of a global policy model constructed and codified by IOs; that is, an abstract functional model. Our study is not an effort to reveal the true narrative of the CCT model but to direct attention to how narratives function in the construction of global policy models. Our specific interest in the predominant narrative around the CCT model focuses on the ways that IOs have crafted and used it to provide support for their goal of facilitating the proliferation of CCTs throughout the developing world. Because their success in this endeavor ultimately depends on national governments’ decisions, it is of utmost importance for the IOs to make their promoted model appear as beneficial, rational, and legitimate as
possible. In national policymaking, any reform must be justified by defining a policy problem; any such definition involves causal stories explaining how the reform will solve an issue or what will happen if the reform is rejected. The fact that a model has been adopted by several countries is itself a story that can be used in national policymaking as proof of the advantageousness of adopting that model (Sylväterä and Alasuutari 2013). As the analysis in this paper shows, stories about the genesis of a model are also important.

Increasing attention has been paid to IOs’ role in the production of internationally agreed norms, scripts, and models for national policymaking (Deacon 2013; Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017; Leisering 2019). Such norms are elaborated and supported by international declarations, treaties, conventions, guidelines, and best practices. There is now a widely shared consensus according to which IOs are not solely in control of constructing such norms and models; instead, the process involves multiple interactions between IOs, nation-states, and networks of experts and advocacy groups (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Stone 2002). Scholars have also paid attention to intra-organizational processes within IOs, where norms are codified into concrete policies and then promoted through research, financing, and policy recommendations (Park and Vetterlein 2010). Kentikelenis and Seabrooke (2017, 1066) refer to such codification of norms into prescriptive behavioral templates as ‘script-writing’. Following Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers (2010, 84), they define a script as ‘a medium by which [an organization] frames its own definition of a reform issue: a diagnosis of problems followed by a set of prescriptions’ (ibid., 1067).

Legitimacy is central to how a given script is embraced. Leisering (2019, 133) builds a theoretical model of ideational change in global arenas and names five mechanisms or strategies by IOs that help to legitimize a new model in global arenas: the assumption of a mandate by an IO; drawing on country examples; referring to expert knowledge; contextualizing and framing the new model by broader bodies of knowledge; and creating forms of presentation like giving a name and providing narratives. Our analysis adds an element to this by pointing out that the legitimacy of a model also depends on the legitimacy of the IO in question. Like Tallberg and Zürn (2019, 582–583), we understand legitimacy as ‘beliefs of audiences that an IO’s authority is appropriately exercised’ and legitimation as ‘a process of justification and contestation intended to shape such beliefs’. Legitimacy then influences whether IOs remain relevant to nation-states’ efforts to solve problems, which hinges largely on the ability of IOs to develop and secure compliance with new rules, standards, and norms. Accordingly, Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers (2010) argue that an IO’s legitimacy in script-writing rests on its prior record. IOs may be handicapped by legitimation deficits; their organizational histories, current practices, or attributes may detract from their authority among one or more audiences. Consequently, one element in the construction of regional or global influence is minimizing, redressing, and compensating for any such legitimation deficits.

We add a new perspective to the literature discussed above by arguing that crafting narratives is a crucial part of script-writing through which IOs may influence the construction of global policy models and advance their claims for legitimacy. Our approach can be likened to discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008, 2010), a term encompassing a wide variety of interpretive approaches that emphasize the importance of studying the role of ideas and discourses in institutional change. While the substantive characteristics of individual CCT programs have been extensively examined in a number
of studies (see Fiszbein and Schady 2009, for an overview), the ideational content of the CCT as a global model and especially the interactive process through which the model has been generated and communicated between IOs, other policy actors, and nation-states has only recently started to gather scholarly attention (Leisering 2019; Shrivisel, Kentikelenis, and Stuckler 2020). Therefore, we pay specific attention not only to how IOs have discursively constructed the CCT as a distinct policy model but also to how the features of discursive interaction itself (like repeating a particular narrative about the genesis and adopters of the model) have shaped the processes by which CCT programs have proliferated. Importantly, our analysis sheds light on ‘ghost-writing’ i.e. the IOs practice of concealing their central role in the writing scripts for policy models. Thus, our case adds a novel aspect to the existing understanding of the discursive construction of policy models as an important element in the emergence of global policy trends. To substantiate our argument, we trace the evolution of the CCT into a global model. Throughout the process, we identify instances where the CCT narrative has been crafted and used by IOs.

Data and methodology

In order to study the construction of the CCT policy model and the related crafting and use of the narrative in legitimizing the model, we examine documents published by the IOs centrally involved in researching, designing, and financing CCTs. The documents analyzed include organizational reports, evaluation reports, research papers, funding agreements, background papers, and program descriptions. Hence, we are interested in policy discourse on CCTs. We examine the interactive process through which the model has been generated and communicated. Schmidt (2008, 2010) divides discursive interaction into two separate spheres. The ‘policy sphere of coordinative discourse’ is made up of the actors involved with the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas. In contrast, the ‘political sphere of communicative discourse’ consists of the actors involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of political ideas to the general public. From our perspective, the documents are not merely sources of information (Prior 2003); we consider them to have important consequences for the process by which the CCT has evolved into a global policy model. Therefore, it could be argued that the organizational documents function in both the coordinative and communicative sphere.

As the term ‘conditional cash transfer’ does not appear in documents until the early 2000s, we have selected the central documents for tracing the discursive construction of the CCT model from organizational documents of the WB, IDB and IFPRI. These organizations have each had a central role in the construction of the CCT policy model. IFPRI published the first impact evaluations of the Mexican program PROGRESA and, subsequently, many other CCT evaluations, reviews, and reports. The WB and IDB have facilitated and financed these evaluations, conducted research, and provided financing and technical assistance in designing and implementing CCTs; they have also served as key sources in conveying information about the policy model. The data was collected cumulatively by following up cross-references between documents starting with an oft-cited WB policy research report authored by Fiszbein and Schady (2009), which provides a comprehensive review of
the phenomenon and a list of all programs considered CCTs by the WB. Once a potentially relevant document was identified, it was retraced through search engines at organizational websites, using Google searches, or by requesting access to the document from organizational data archives. The final data base includes 66 documents published between 1983 and 2015, of which 47 came from the WB, 9 from the IDB, and 10 from the IFPRI. It should be noted that it is not the number of documents per actor that is significant, but rather their content and role in constructing and perpetuating the CCT model and narrative.

Our analysis was conducted in two phases. First, in a close reading of the main data, the following questions were posed: Where do the documents place the origin of CCTs? What qualities are attached to CCTs? Which programs are included in or excluded from the CCT category? What are CCTs compared to? Second, in addition to what has been reported and how it was framed, our interest lay in what has not been reported in these documents. Drawing on the main data we inductively listed the central features of CCTs. We then produced an index of programs established prior to 1995 that exhibited these features (a targeted cash transfer, conditionalities tied to school attendance and/or healthcare). The index was based on literature comprising academic scholarship, program evaluations, organizational documents, and legal texts. Finally, a systematic comparison between the main data and the index was conducted to examine which programs were and were not featured in the main data. Based on the results of the two phases of interpretive analysis, we identified four key shifts in the discursive construction of the CCT policy model. These shifts were identified to follow a chronological order – with a degree of temporal overlap – and each shift was understood to add new elements to the model from a discursive perspective.

**Key shifts in the construction of the CCT policy model**

After having spent the first half of the 1980s focused on trade liberalization, supply-side economics, and structural adjustment loans (Kapur, Lewis, and Webb 2011), the WB reassessed the role of governments and social assistance in economic development. This led to promoting social safety nets with the purpose of allowing governments to ‘fulfill their humanitarian duties and at the same time reinforce a social consensus in favor of economic growth’ (WB 1987, 58). The rededication to state-led anti-poverty measures was echoed in a volume issued by the WB and IFPRI after joint workshops and a conference in 1989 (Lipton and Van Der Gaag 1993). The papers from that conference served as background materials for the World Development Report of 1990 published by the WB (1990, iii), which outlines a two-part strategy for governments in developing countries to achieve sustainable progress against poverty:

The first element of the strategy is the pursuit of a pattern of growth that ensures productive use of the poor’s most abundant asset labor. The second element is widespread provision to the poor of basic social services, especially primary education, primary health care, and family planning. [...] The strategy must be complemented by well-targeted transfers, to help those not able to benefit from these policies, and by safety nets, to protect those who are exposed to shocks.
The report goes on to emphasize a strengthened focus on human capital investments through health, education, and nutrition and outlines a change to cash-based social assistance (WB 1990, iii, 79, 97). In a follow-up paper, the WB (1991, 20) states that a country wishing to access assistance and loans should adopt an approach consistent with the two-part strategy. In related poverty reduction reports, the WB (e.g. 1993) calls for efficient and strict targeting measures to identify the poor, highlights the importance of human capital accumulation, promotes the role of girls and women in development, and emphasizes the need for impact evaluations of social assistance programs. All these subsequent reports promote the two-part strategy, underpinning the importance of targeted cash transfers connected to investments in human capital among the poor.

In addition to promoting these ideas, the WB and the IDB began to design and finance corresponding programs. In Honduras they funded and established the Programa de Asignación Familiar (PRAF) in 1990, which featured a targeted cash transfer conditioned on children’s school attendance, along with cash transfers to pregnant and nursing women and mothers of small children, all of which were conditioned on regular visits to health centers (IDB 1995, 9). It has since been expanded and continued through IDB loans, with the IFPRI and IDB responsible for the design (Moore 2008). Another example is the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP) in Bangladesh; it was piloted in 1982 and gradually scaled up in 1994 by the WB in partnership with the national government (Schurmann 2009). The FSSAP is a cash transfer targeted at girls in rural areas and conditional on school attendance, test scores, and remaining unmarried until passing the secondary school certificate examination (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). The central rationale for WB involvement with the FSSAP project is reported to have been its value as ‘a testing ground for innovations’ (WB 2001a, 2). In most of the documents analyzed, the PRAF is listed as having been initiated in 1998 and the FSSAP in 1994, obscuring the reality that these programs were already established in 1990 and 1982, respectively.

In addition to programs directly financed and designed by the WB and IDB, comparable initiatives had been implemented in Latin America in the 1980s. The targeted and conditional family allowance program Subsidio Único Familiar (SUF) was launched by Chile’s Pinochet regime in 1981 (Ley 18020 1981). In 1989, Venezuela implemented Beca Alimentaria, a cash transfer targeted at families of schoolchildren living in low-income areas on the condition that their children attend school regularly (Lima 1995).1

Then, at the turn of the millennium, the WB, IDB, and IFPRI began to publish documents spotlighting an emerging phenomenon in Latin America: Mexico had created a new and innovative program called PROGRESA to tackle intergenerational poverty. This successful initiative sparked a chain of events in which other countries in the region began to emulate it through programs that were eventually placed in the CCT category.

The first shift: Attribution

In retrospect, according to the subsequent classification of the characteristics of the CCT policy model, all the programs from Honduras, Bangladesh, Venezuela, and Chile noted above could be categorized as CCTs. However, these programs gained little international recognition as pioneers of this now widely acknowledged approach to social assistance. Interestingly, in some of the more prominent CCT publications, the Honduran PRAF and the Chilean SUF are listed as having been initiated in 1990 and
1981, respectively (Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Morley and Coady 2003; WB 2003), but the lineage of CCTs is not traced to these programs. Instead, the CCT model is distinguished by focusing particularly on the Mexican program PROGRESA.

**Mexico**

A rudimentary frame for a program resembling PROGRESA was outlined by Santiago Levy in a 1991 WB working paper. Based on the proposal, a pilot program ran in 1991 and 1992, and incorporated many of the policy recommendations of *World Development Report* of 1990, although the program lacked the fundamental components of cash transfers conditioned on children’s education – in other words, human capital accumulation – central to the CCT policy model. According to the former national director of PROGRESA, the Mexican country assessments conducted by the WB and IDB between 1993 and 1994 were central to the human capital approach emerging in Mexico and Brazil; they highlighted the ineffectiveness of the then current policies to fight poverty and the need to invest in human capital (Tomazini 2019, 32). Mexico implemented a targeted cash transfer program conditioned on school attendance, health care, and nutrition interventions in 1997. It was based on a pilot effort that started in 1995 and had impact evaluations incorporated into its design. The evaluations were conducted by the IFPRI and financed by the IDB (Behrman 2007); they reported positive results of the program’s core functions (Skoufias and McClafferty 2001). Following these initial reports, the IFPRI produced overviews of PROGRESA, in which they distinguished the phenomenon from similar policies being adopted across Latin America. Mexico was designated as the innovator of the model:

> Because of Mexico’s new and innovative Education, Health and Nutrition Program (PROGRESA), poor Mexicans are beginning to see improvements in the health, education and nutrition of their children. [...] Mexico is implementing an effective program that is serving as a model and beginning to take hold across Latin America in countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua, and Argentina. (Skoufias and McClafferty 2001, 3.)

 Shortly after the IFPRI published the first evaluation results, the WB and the IDB began to feature PROGRESA in their key publications. It was introduced in a flagship report (WB 2001e) and in other notable publications (Blomquist et al. 2002; Klugman 2002). It was described at length and referred to as ‘the pioneering targeted human development program in Latin America’ by the IDB (Lustig 2000, 164). The WB and IDB presented the program as an innovative and domestically created initiative that was discovered by these development banks after early evaluations had demonstrated its success. The ‘Mexicanness’ and pioneering nature of the program were highlighted:

> In August 1997, the Government of Mexico introduced a new and innovative program, called PROGRESA. [...] The program is very much designed and implemented by the Federal government. [...] One of the most innovative aspects of the program was the emphasis placed from the beginning on ensuring that it had a built-in and credible evaluation process. As with the design and operational details of the program, this aspect was homegrown and not imposed externally by, for example, international donors – in fact, the program was fully financed domestically rather than by international development institutions. (Coady 2003, 2–3, 8)
The construction of the program’s origin as an innovative national creation was underlined in a cover story in IDB’s magazine IDBAmérica (Bate 2004). The story ran with the title ‘The story behind Oportunidades: How two visionary social scientists forged a program that has changed the lives of millions of Mexicans’ and attributed its unique design to Santiago Levy and Jose Gómez de León.

In addition, the process of creating PROGRESA was documented in two books (co-) authored by Levy, the latter prepared for the IDB (Levy 2007; Levy and Rodríguez 2005). The notion of Mexico’s pioneering an innovative approach to poverty reduction without external influences and input from IOs is reinforced in these volumes. None of the preceding initiatives are mentioned, not even the benchmarking mission to study Brazil’s programs in 1996 (Lindert et al. 2007, 12) or the meeting between representatives of the Chilean government and WB and IDB officials (Yaschine 1999, 56). However, Levy did clarify why PROGRESA was originally financed without the involvement of IOs:

[B]oth the IDB and the World Bank provided technical advice on different aspects of the program. Nevertheless, at that time it was not deemed convenient to obtain international financing for the program […] perhaps giving the impression that the program was the result of a mandate or an adjustment program agreed upon with international financial institutions. (Levy 2007, 114.)

Brazil

While IFPRI, IDB, and most WB publications promoted PROGRESA as the pioneer CCT program, the Brazil Country Management Unit of the WB began publishing reports on the Brazilian programs Bolsa Escola and Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil (PETI). In these reports (e.g. WB 2001b; WB 2001c), the Brazilian efforts are presented as the programs that set the proliferation of CCTs in motion. For example, one report (WB 2001b, 7) states that Bolsa Escola and PETI have become models for the rest of Latin America. Mexico’s PROGRESA is described as a ‘variant of the Bolsa Escola Program’ that ‘closely resembles its predecessor in Brazil’. The documents indicate that Brazil’s programs were established at the federal level before Mexico initiated PROGRESA and without any IO involvement. However, Brazil’s former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso has stated that the idea of and recommendation for these types of cash transfers originally came from the WB and IDB (Nunes 2009).

Even as different units within the WB were giving credit for CCTs to either Mexico or Brazil, they were simultaneously disregarding earlier CCT programs and downplaying their own role in their creation. The existence of a phenomenon was distinguished by referring to a ‘model’ and assigning it a place of origin in the largest economies of Latin America and regional leaders in Mexico or Brazil. The WB and IDB crafted a policy narrative where an innovative and domestically created initiative was discovered by these development banks, thus downplaying or even omitting their own role in recommending, financing, and designing these types of programs. Placing the origin of the model in Mexico and/or Brazil also distinguished it from earlier programs; the accepted lineage of the model is not traced to those programs, and the documents do not allude to their ideational influence.
**The second shift: classification**

Between 2001 and 2004, several documents were published that began to classify and synthesize the qualities of programs deemed to exhibit similar characteristics. Initiatives that were regarded as modeled after or inspired by PROGRESA were put into comparative perspective and their nature defined (e.g. IDB 2003b; WB 2003, 2004). The documents mapped the components of programs deemed part of the same phenomenon and discussed them under unified labels such as ‘targeted human development programmes’ (Sedlacek, Ilahi, and Gustafsson-Wright 2000). The core components included a *cash transfer, conditions on education and health*, and a *targeting mechanism* to identify the extremely poor. Some documents instruct policymakers by classifying the elements needed to qualify as part of the phenomenon:

Program objectives should be clearly stated and include measurable outcomes. In addition, the targeting and selection of beneficiaries are vital components of these programs. Targeted Human Development Programs should include education as well as health and nutrition components. (IDB 2001, 6.)

In addition to defining the necessary features, a core element in the definitions was the notion that programs represent a *new and innovative* way to tackle poverty, which was compared with older, inefficient forms of social assistance like in-kind transfers and different subsidies: ‘These programs’ reliance on market principals *[sic]*, using demand-side interventions to directly support beneficiaries, is a marked departure from traditional supply-side mechanisms’ (Rawlings 2004, 1). Hence, a category began to emerge before the umbrella term ‘conditional cash transfers’ was consolidated.

Although *unconditional* cash transfers (UCTs) would be the most comparable program against which to measure the performance of CCTs, such a comparative approach is largely absent from the early documents. The rare occasions when it does appear take up the comparison in theoretical terms contrasting the ‘implicit or explicit assumption that poverty is the responsibility of the government and that the poor have no role to play’ that underpins UCTs to the ‘conviction that poverty reduction is the joint responsibility of the child, the family, and the society’, which is characteristic of CCTs (2003, 90–91). This accords with the frequent description of CCTs as not ‘government handouts’ or ‘money for nothing’; CCTs are dissociated from the type of benefits that ‘can lead to dependency rather than productivity’ (IDB 2003a, 1).

Thus, the classification of the phenomenon was driven by finding common features in different programs that were treated as part of the same phenomenon and then contrasting this phenomenon against traditional forms of social assistance. Notably, instead of contrasting the performance of CCTs with UCTs, effectiveness was constructed around the notion of these programs outperforming inefficiently allocated in-kind transfers and other subsidies and serving as ‘productive’ rather than generating dependency. Although it still lacked a single label, the emerging model now had qualities depicting it as a novel and efficient policy approach to providing social assistance without inducing dependency among recipients.
The third shift: discursive consolidation

Despite the clear differences between the Mexican and Brazilian programs – Mexico had stricter conditions and emphasized human capital, while Brazil highlighted a rights-based approach – they nevertheless shared comparable core design features. However, neither the Mexican nor the Brazilian program explicitly used the term ‘conditional cash transfer’ or its Spanish or Portuguese equivalents. In fact, none of the programs implemented before 2006 and listed as CCTs by the WB (Fiszbein and Schady 2009) included that term in its nomenclature.

The term ‘conditional cash transfer’ first appears in documents published after the turn of the millennium and after several programs that would become known as ‘first-generation CCTs’ had been launched. Before this, a variety of terms were used, for example ‘targeted human development programmes’ (IDB 2001; WB 2000b) and ‘targeted conditional transfer’ programs (Sedlacek, Ilahi, and Gustafsson-Wright 2000; WB 2000a, 2001d). Although the ‘conditional cash transfer’ label does appear occasionally in documents published at roughly the same time, that term and the ‘CCT’ acronym were only consolidated after the WB financed the Workshop on Conditional Cash Transfer Programs (CCTs): Operational Experiences in Puebla, Mexico in 2002 ‘to provide a forum so that executing agencies or units of different CCT’s could share their experiences’ (WB 2003, 3). Following this event, a number of reports reviewing these programs were published by the WB (e.g. Das, Do, and Özler 2005; Rawlings and Rubio 2003) and the IDB (2003a); each document refers to them as ‘conditional cash transfers’, suggesting that the term had become consolidated, which served as a step toward the institutionalization of the phenomenon and finalized the process by which a bundle of programs from Latin America that had comparable features were grouped under a single umbrella term.

The fourth shift: institutionalization

Once the features of different programs were formalized under the ‘conditional cash transfer’ label, there was now a concrete policy model with an origin story, policy rationale, and components and projected effects of adoption. The WB began to provide further benchmarking and networking opportunities for policymakers currently or potentially working on CCT programs. Following the 2002 event in Puebla, the WB organized international CCT conferences and workshops in Brazil (2004), Turkey (2006), and Mexico (2008). Since 2001, the WB has also organized study tours, provided benchmarking opportunities, and facilitated a CCT Learning Community (Osorio Gonnet 2014, 153). In 2006, (WB 2011, 22), ‘client countries with the most developed CCT programs in the region […] asked the WB to act as a regional facilitator of knowledge, learning, and innovation for CCT programs’.

The institutionalization of the CCT policy model was crystallized in the publication of Conditional Cash Transfers: Reducing Present and Future Poverty, a WB report. In this work, Fiszbein and Schady (2009, 1) define, classify, and list all CCT programs in a way that has since become authoritative in the field. As noted above, none of the programs implemented domestically before 2006 used the ‘conditional cash transfer’ term. Only after this label was consolidated through the WB’s efforts did countries begin to implement programs that used it. Around the same time, scholars began to pay increasing attention to the phenomenon, and a second wave of literature emerged to entrench the
narrative even more deeply. With the institutionalization of the CCT policy model, the phenomenon became a tangible entity of the social world, involving a predominant narrative of the model’s genesis and content.

**Conclusion**

The extensive literature on transnational diffusion of policy models and ideas shares the understanding that ‘diffusion’ refers to a process wherein ‘the policy choices of one country are shaped by the choices of others’ (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007, 450). In such a process, the role of IOs has often been described as serving as mediators or carriers of transnational models and ideas. Our article contributes to recent research elaborating not only the role of IOs in spreading already existing models but also in the very process by which global models are theorized and codified by the IOs (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017; Park and Vetterlein 2010; Svyatera and Qadir 2015). As argued by Béland et al. (2018, 467) and demonstrated by von Gliszczynski and Leisinger (2016), it is important to conceive these organizations as agents actively promoting specific types of policies, instead of being only engaged in brokerage. In this article, we have examined the global governance of social policy by tracing the process through which the CCT evolved into a globally recognized policy model. We have focused on the reality-shaping power of ideas (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016), demonstrating especially IOs’ active role in producing and using a certain narrative in order to promote a specific model. Our analysis emphasized the bi-directional nature of the construction and spread of global policy models (Svyatera and Qadir 2015), which means that we have paid attention to how the CCT model has evolved in a process of ongoing construction even as it was already spreading to new national contexts, thus capturing the processual nature of the creation of the model.

Our analysis of the shifts in the process by which the CCT has evolved into a global policy model has revealed that the predominant narrative about evolving of the CCT policy model was largely produced by IOs and is now taken very much for granted in academic research concerning CCTs. For example, a recent article used the CCT efforts of Brazil and Mexico as examples of the emergence of novel social policy innovations, which ‘can be considered locally rooted […] and financed without the support of international organizations’ (Tomazini 2019, 24). Tomazini’s excellent discussion on the role of advocacy coalitions in the local policymaking processes actually points out that the ideas promoted by IOs had a significant impact on the formation of ‘pro human capital’ coalitions, which eventually were successful in advancing the adoption of CCTs in these two countries. However, what is almost entirely unrecognized in the existing literature is that equivalent programs had been operating years before. The unquestionably powerful role of IOs in diffusing the model beyond Brazil and Mexico has been widely recognized, but their important role in the processes leading to the model’s ‘invention’ has been largely ignored. Accordingly, Von Gliszczynski (2015) posed the following question concerning CCTs: why have certain programs in Latin America specifically attracted the WB’s attention?

The results of our analysis point out that these two programs were not exactly discovered by the WB. The WB (and IDB) was a central actor in constructing that policy approach from the very beginning. We see that the WB was successful in ‘framing its own definition of a reform issue: a diagnosis of problems followed by a set of prescriptions’
legitimation drawn Carruthers set struggles functionality over involved down policies creation highly why WB in social policymaking, Given identified that seek model, (Deacon 2007), WB has regularly sought to distance itself from its role as creator of the CCT, which is why it portrays the ‘first’ programs as endogenous inventions. This is understandable, because the WB had largely exhausted its good standing in Latin America during the highly unpopular structural adjustment era, and its involvement in the design and creation of CCTs could well have been controversial. As Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers (2010) have argued, the legitimacy of any IO engaged in script-writing is drawn from that IO’s prior record, so IOs with challenging pasts can be handicapped by legitimation deficits. In an effort to minimize its legitimation deficit and increase the social acceptance of CCTs, the WB resorted to ghost-writing the script by expurgating its own role in bringing forth the CCT policy model.

Constructing a policy model and crafting a policy narrative served as a way of reframing CCTs as something that leading countries in Latin America were doing rather than something that the WB was proposing or, worse, mandating. The programs ‘discovered’ by the WB were based on ways of understanding and operationalizing poverty and social protection that did not conflict with its own policy recommendations. These programs were then ‘proven’ to work and became promoted as models to follow, which legitimized the WB’s approach to poverty reduction (Heimo 2019). In a political contest over the content of global social policy (Deacon 2007), the WB was successful in legitimizing and disseminating its definition of a reform issue based on strictly targeted social assistance tied to human capital accumulation. It constructed a policy model with a compelling story that has significance for policymakers around the world and in the transnational discourse on social policy principles. The case of CCTs has informed debates over targeting vs. universalism and conditional vs. unconditional social assistance and, as shown above, continues to be used as an example of locally rooted policies assembled without IO input.

Going beyond the case analyzed in this article, it is likely that many other cases could be identified where IOs strategically aim to highlight the role of local actors while playing down their own central role in designing policy models. To fully understand such dynamics in evolving of global policy discourses it is important to distinct between what the actors involved in the policymaking say, mean, and do (Shriwise, Kentikelenis, and Stuckler 2020). Given the crucial role IOs have in setting norms and ideational landscape in the global policymaking, further studies could elaborate the extent to which it is even possible that global policy trends could emerge without the involvement of IOs. The political contests over the content of global social policy cannot be reduced to rational policy choices over the functionality of policy options; of central importance to such contests are the discursive struggles in which actors – including IOs – maintain and edit narratives in their attempts to set conditions for the successful spreading of their favored ideas.

Note

1. The program ran from 1989 to 1993 and continued under the name *Subsidio Familiar* (Padrón 1999).
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Notes on contributors

Lauri Heimo is a PhD candidate in social sciences at the Tampere University. His research interest include global social policy, policy transfer and diffusion, development policy, discourse and ideas in policymaking as well as international organizations. His doctoral dissertation is titled Construction and Viability of Conditional Cash Transfers: Analysis of a Global Policy Model.

Jukka Syväterä is an Academy Research Fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki. His research interests include political sociology, global and transnational sociology, and science studies. His current research project explores the evolving role of scientific authority in the politics of parliamentary policymaking. His recent studies have addressed organizations as epistemic authorities and the creation of global policy models.

ORCID

Lauri Heimo http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7776-7080
Jukka Syväterä http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5387-667X

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