Public Policy to Reduce Inequalities Across Europe. Hope Versus Reality

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BOOK REVIEW


This book is one of the outputs of a research project on spatial justice and territorial inequalities funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 program. The book offers a comprehensive overview of different theoretical and conceptual perspectives on policy learning, policy transfer and policymaking and rich empirical descriptions of policies to reduce inequalities in various international, national, and regional arenas. A part of the book (specifically chapter 5) focuses on countries with large regional differences: the UK, Belgium, Spain and Italy. Coincidentally or not, all authors were based in Scotland at the time the research was conducted. I think the greatest contribution of the book is that it provides a conceptual lens to unravel the overwhelming amount of policy fields that – directly or indirectly, intendedly or unintendedly – affect inequalities.

The starting point of the book is that there are two perspectives on the issue of (territorial) inequalities. First, the functional perspective focuses on sectoral (i.e., economic, health care) policies that aim to reduce inequalities. Second, the territorial perspective focuses on the politics and policies aimed at regional differences within countries. The authors sum up their perspective as follows: “The responsibility for policy to reduce territorial inequalities is spread across many levels and types of government, each using their own ideas, rules, and networks to make sense of policy problems.” (p. 34)

The book consists of three parts. The first part provides an elaborate theoretical overview which addresses a lot of policy theories and issues, including policy transfer, policy learning, policy instruments and regional governance. The second part focuses on three domains of inequalities: health inequalities, inequalities in education, and gender inequalities. For each of these domains, the authors identify and analyse the multitude of territorial and sectoral policies that affect these inequalities – positively or negatively, intentionally or unintentionally. In the third part, conclusions are drawn from the cases and the theoretical framework, specifically about the lack of policy progress to reduce inequalities.

With this book, Cairney and his colleagues convincingly illustrate the lack of coherence in the policies that deal with – or affect – the three inequalities. For instance, in the chapter about health inequalities they conclude that “The EU, along with its member states and regions, has many vague ambitions to foster greater health equity. They pursue them at the same time as the policies that are likely to have the opposite effect” (p. 111). To map the policies in each of the three domains of inequalities, the authors start by analyzing the direct and indirect policymaking responsibilities. With direct measures, they mean policy instruments designed to directly cause policy change (in the intended direction). Indirect measures have major impact on inequality outcomes, such as tendering rules in the domain of health. In addition, the authors use the NATO-model (Nodes, Authority, Treasure, Organization) for analyzing policy tools that has been developed by Christopher Hood (see, Hood, 1983; Hood & Margetts, 2007) to further categorize policy instruments. This conceptual approach works well to map the enormous variety of competences and tools in each of the domains and may be a source of inspiration for other scholars working on similar issues and for policymakers wishing to understand why their policy efforts often fail.

Public Policy to Reduce Inequalities across Europe is an ambitious book. It deals with three domains of inequalities, in a wide variety of territorial settings, including international agencies, countries and regions. Nevertheless, I would have liked to read some more reflections on the normative dimensions of regional inequalities. Redistribution across regions is a politically sensitive issue, specifically in countries with large cultural and economic differences between regions. This adds another layer of complexity to policy-making aimed at reducing health, gender, and educational inequalities. The authors touch upon this in the analyses of policies in Belgium, the UK, Italy and Spain (chapter 5), when they observe that “welfare has clearly been used as an instrument of nation-building or region-building in places with autonomist or secessionist movements” (p. 84). However, it remains unclear how inequality policies are as a tool to either strengthen or weaken subnational claims for autonomy or independence.

Despite this remark, I think this book is interesting material for scholars and professionals who wish to learn more about the complexity of policymaking to reduce health, gender, or educational inequalities. From a more general policy science perspective, the book offers a useful conceptual lens to study how sectoral and regional policies interact to produce intersectoral outcomes.

References

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