

# Defining problems or providing solutions?

The role of ideas in policy debates

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## ABSTRACT

A common held believe is that the use of research can provide applicable and sound ideas for policies. But what are these ideas? How does research affect them? This paper presents the cases of two new laws enacted in Ecuador to explore what ideas are, how they evolve and how they affect the policy process. Based on three types of ideas – policy solutions, problem definitions and public philosophies (Mehta, 2010) – the cases exemplify the wide impact ideas have in the policy process. Unlike the common conception that research is useful in creating new policy solutions, the cases portray that research can have an even more critical role in defining problems and therefore shifting strategies on how to engage with stakeholders, who participates in the debates and what policy solutions are feasible. Policy solutions are highly contextual, and approaching them without a wider understating of the setting in which they evolve will likely be a fruitless endeavor.

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# 1. Ideas in policy debates

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There is a growing interest in understanding the way in which academic work (i.e. research, evidence, theories) affect the policy processes and how policies are actually implemented. Evidence-Based Policy (EBP)<sup>1</sup> has become a framework for exploring the manner in which policy and research interact. However, a critical analysis suggests that EBP is a normative discourse; and by no means non-political. As Du Toit (2012) states, “EBP is a meta-political project; a policy *about* policy”. By this he means that EBP states a particular understanding of what policymaking is: finding what works, making practical and efficient decisions and keeping the process free of ideological considerations. Decisions, however, are not a direct output of research but of a process – which includes many variables – that ends in an idea being put forward. And since a policy decision is about the allocation of resources from and to different objectives and constituencies it is an inherently political process.

Instead of trying to reshape and simplify the policy process, in this paper we seek to explore the ways in which it can actually become part of the policy process. For this purpose this paper explores the concept of “*ideas*”, which are the key to understanding policy decisions, and outcomes. They are also the link by which research and policy unite, since they can combine existing knowledge with a creative forward looking approach. This paper seeks to explore the concept of ideas in the interaction between research and policy, with an especial emphasis on how they evolve in the policymaking process.

By examining different dimensions of the concept of ideas, and how research relates to them, the paper traces the ways in which research is used in policy debates. Is research used to find the practical solutions for problems? Are research results considered in the decision making process? Is research used to set the scene for policy debates?

To accomplish this, the document explores two ideas that evolved into laws in the Ecuadorian context in the last years in the government of *Alianza País*, led by President Rafael Correa. The

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, some researchers and practitioners have claimed a difference between evidence based and evidence informed policy. However, the difference does not appear to be sufficiently meaningful. The term ‘based’ was never meant to, and has never been taken to, be literal: evidence based, as in other contexts, means that it is primarily informed and directed by the evidence (the data, the findings, and the ideas that emerge from the research process). Furthermore, the incorporation of methods such as impact evaluations and randomized controlled trials to the efforts of those claiming to promote evidence informed policy appear to contradict their claims of flexibility and openness to other policymaking frameworks.

paper begins by outlining the concept of ideas in the policy context and in relation to other relevant concepts currently used to understand the role of research in policy debates. Then, the Ecuadorian context will be delineated to present the two cases of specific policy changes, mainly two laws that have been enacted in relation to economic and education policies.

Without disregarding the use of research in other contexts, the cases analyzed show that the concept of evidence-based policy is difficult to apply in the context of the formulation of laws. By exploring the cases with the broad lenses of ideas, one identifies that research can be critical in defining problems more so than in finding specific solutions. Furthermore, the cases underpin the notion that policy solutions are highly dependent on the way the problems are defined and the broad societal perspective of the issues. This view expands the perspective of evidence-based policy to a more holistic perspective on the link between research and policy.

## 2. What are ideas in the policy context?

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When thinking about the definition of an idea in the policy context, one tends to think of it in terms of a bright innovation that solves a social problem. The concept of an idea is usually reduced to the answer given to a problem. This conception, however, limits the complex interaction in the process of understanding the political context, setting out policy choices and making decisions. In the specific case of policymaking, Mejta (2010) summarizes three levels of ideas: policy solutions, problem definition and public philosophies. These three levels of ideas interact to explain a given output. A brief summary of the dimensions he proposes is offered below:

**Policy solutions**, as suggested earlier, are probably the most common conception of what an idea is. These are the innovations created or imported to solve a given problem. Ranging from cash transfer programs, to the use of ICTs and the creation of voluntary initiatives, these are creative designs that show a way forward. These policy solutions do not always stem from the traditional conception of evidence, as proof that the idea may work. Policy solutions may be informed by research in the broader issue at hand, they can be inspired by solutions employed elsewhere, but the bottom line is, there is uncertainty of their successful, despite best efforts for them to be sound.

EBP is closely linked to the concept of policy solutions, since it encompasses efforts to determine what the best policy choices are. As Trinder (2000) suggests, this is a result of the managerial emphasis on policymaking, where efficiency and efficacy drive the choices being made. Radin (2013) ratifies this when she reflects that in the past the objective of policy analysts was to come up with “new programs and policies” to reach goals that seemed agreed upon. This perspective on policy analysis and research is closely linked to the notion of policy solutions, but, as Radin notes, the work is much more complex as the roots of the problems are hard to identify and are contested among different stakeholders. Furthermore, identifying what works is not only a question of knowledge, but one of values and what is important to different stakeholders (Parson, 2001).

Reaching a policy solution implies that there is a problem to solve. The **problem definition** is the other type of idea. The way in which problems are defined is critical to understanding the solutions that are put forward. A problem is not only defined once, or in one dimension. Problems may be conceptualized, then someone or something is blamed for it and someone is held responsible for solving it. These dimensions of a problem definition are what Felstiner, Abel and Sarat (1980) have called, “naming, blaming and claiming”. These dimensions of a problem are not usually clearly stated from the onset but evolve with time. They may change and be modified and may even be created after a solution has been crafted.

Defining a problem can be influenced to a larger extent by existing knowledge, since it can actually be used as an explanation or a proof of its existence. Realizing, however, that these definitions evolve and mutate makes it clear that they are not objective but crafted, in the same way solutions are. Creativity and ingenuity are as relevant in the process of questioning, defining a problem as in coming up with the answer. Furthermore, the way in which problems are constructed changes power relationship, and so it is a process that does not go uncontested (Lewis, 2003).

Policy solutions and problem definitions have played a significant role in understanding policy processes. Argumentation (Majone, 1989; Lewis, 2003) is seen as a key aspect of policymaking. In these process both problem definitions and policy solutions are used in the creation of narratives and arguments to convince others of the validity of a claim. The need for an argument in policymaking supports Kingdon’s (1984) notion that problems and solutions coexist mostly unconnected until there is a need to put them together. These interconnections between problems and solutions happen in specific contexts, with complex interactions taking

place. From the wide range of dimensions that this context contains, here we are interested in the current beliefs and assumptions that surround policy processes.

**A public philosophy (zeitgeist)** refers to those broad conceptions held within groups, parties, or the societies as a whole. Assumptions, values and circumstances affect this public philosophy. These concepts may be seen as the limits of the policy field, since within them policy problems must be defined and solved. Problems that have existed in the past but that are now seen more clearly, or solutions that were banned that latter gain momentum may be explained by shifts in this public philosophy.

A public philosophy is related to the concept of policy discourse (Hajer, 1995) which is the ensemble of concepts and categories used to make sense of social phenomena. Policy discourses that gain recognition by various actors become dominant, and as such they can get engrained, through media and other outlets in a public philosophy. Policy paradigm (Hall, 1993) is another strongly related concept, which refers to a framework for the policy discourse that is comprehensible and plausible for those involved. As Hall describes, policy paradigms – much broader than specific policies – are more likely to be publicly debated and can be determinant on the relationship between the state and the wider public.

A public philosophy, however, is not only related to the policy processes, but also accounts for aspects of the general societal assumptions that may affect the policy process, and its interaction with other spheres, including academia. In this sense, a public philosophy may determine the validity of research, and may frame the questions asked in research.

Mejta's (2010) framework is closely related to Hall's (1993) concept of "policy learning process" as a way of explaining how policy changes occur. He describes three types of learning processes: first-order learning, which is related to learning about the policy instruments; the second-order learning which is focused on the setting of the policy instruments without a change in the goals; and, third-order learning which relates to changes in the policy paradigm (which includes the instruments, the goals, and the nature of the problems). Combining both frameworks one can relate policy problems and solutions with the first- and second-order learning, while the changes in public philosophies are linked to the third-order learning. Consequently, the processes of changing different types of ideas are distinct, but interrelated.

This conceptualization of ideas in the policy context is extensive and facilitates the discussion about research more broadly and not only in the specificity of policy solutions, one of the three

levels previously described. In the following section two cases of new legislation enacted in Ecuador within the same timeframe and government will be analyzed. First, an overview of the policy process that ends in the approval of the laws will be described. Afterwards, an analysis of the different dimensions of ideas in these cases will be examined. Finally, an analysis of the interplay between these dimensions will be carried out to identify the ways in which research is used on the policy debate. To carry out the research, interview with key stakeholders were carried out, research on both topics was revised, and media clippings were analyzed.

### 3. Ideas for new laws in Ecuador

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#### *The Ecuadorian Context*

The policy environment in Ecuador has changed dramatically in the last six years. While the period between 1994 and 2006 was characterized by instability and a weak and hands-off state, the period 2006-2012 has seen a process of strengthening of the State, its public policies and its capacity to intervene in the society and the market. For example, in the former period, Ecuador had seven different presidents, while in the last eight years one strong government has been in place with power in all branches of government. While in the first period there was a strong focus on promoting a lean state and strongly liberal economic policies, the second has been characterized by policies that build up the presence of the State in different aspects of society, having a broader regulatory power in economic and social aspects. In this context, a variety of new policies have emerged, and others have been re-packaged to fit into the National Development Plan that sets forward goals in four-year periods<sup>2</sup>.

Because of this context, Ecuador is an interesting laboratory in which to examine what is behind the adoption of new policies. Hereon, two cases of legislations are presented. The first one is a law to promote a new economic system called the ‘popular and solidarity economy’. This concept was developed mostly in the nineties to denote an economic system where wealth and accumulation are not the primary reason for entrepreneurship. In terms of public policies, the term is used to encompass the activities of cooperatives, associations, community business and other joint ventures that allow people normally excluded from the mainstream economic system to participate in the production and consumption of goods and services (Icaza and Tiribia,

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the Ecuadorian context I suggest reviewing Carlos de la Torre’s work. For instance his paper on [Technocratic Populism in Ecuador](#) and [Between authoritarianism and democracy in Latin America's re-founding revolutions](#) critically analyze the political context in Ecuador and other Latin American countries.

2003). The second case is the new legislation for higher education, which regulates the activities of colleges and universities. In the next section, the cases will be briefly presented, and then an analysis based on the dimensions of ideas will be carried out.

### *Setting the scene for new policies in Ecuador*

During 2005 and 2006 a group of scholars prepared a text known as the “National Plan of the Government of the Citizen Revolution” to the electoral authority in order to register *Alianza País*, the movement that would lead to the election of President Rafael Correa. This government plan was the roadmap delineated by the party for the next four years and it contained five priority areas all denominated ‘revolutions’.

The “economic and productive revolution”, as the plan called it, touched on various aspects including the promotion of the *popular and solidarity economy* as an engine for local development. Promoting this economy meant creating a popular economy system based on the communities’ current entrepreneurial activities. The plan specifically stated developing an active policy to support the development of small enterprises, cooperatives and community business associations. In turn, the same plan also stated the relevance of higher education in Ecuador, but less clearly than the importance of the popular and solidarity economy. The improvement and modernization of the financial and technical aspects of higher education were broadly touched upon in the proposed “education and health revolution”.

Once in power, *Alianza País* progressively complied with the promises set forth in its plan of government but through different paths. The original ideas evolved and transformed with the changes in the political scenario and the knowledge acquired from the stakeholders involved in the discussion. Although both ideas were originated in the government plan described above, they became an official mandate in the Constitutional Assembly in 2008 when a new constitution was drafted. In terms of the idea of the popular and solidarity economy, the constitution acknowledged it. This meant that the government had a mandate to establish public policies to strengthen and promote, instead of being only a temporary or spontaneous programme. In the case of higher education, the new constitution established that colleges and universities had to articulate themselves with the new vision laid out in the Constitution and the National Development Plan. Furthermore, the Constitution established a concrete mandate for the legislature to draft a new law to regulate colleges and universities within the next year. The constitutional mandates were also referred to in the National Development Plan which guided



the actions of the Executive Branch. Despite this similar initial path, the development of these two ideas into policies and laws followed two distinct paths.

### *Popular and Solidarity Economy Law*

The concept of a popular and solidarity economy has been central to the project of *Alianza País* since the beginning. This sector was considered essential to boost the economy and achieve social equity. The initial conception within the government was that strengthening small cooperatives and associations was an opportunity to achieve “the good living”, the paradigm that guided the government actions.

Although the concept had gained relevance within the government from the onset, the idea was not original to them. In fact, the social movement of cooperatives and associations was strong before the elections and decision makers within the government were familiar with it. As a result, the idea of having a new law for this specific sector was not only being developed within the government but also by a group of civil society organizations. In fact, the organizations were active participants in the debates and the drafting of that part of the Constitution. Since the government saw this sector as a positive opportunity, at that point, they were receptive to the ideas proposed by the civil society.

With the Constitution in place, both the government and civil society organizations wanted to develop a new law that would allow for the implementation of the ideas set out in the Constitution. A group of civil society organizations, in coordination with the Ministry of Social Development found a space for collaboration to prepare a draft law with perspectives from both sides. The law, therefore, became a participatory project, whereby 170 consultations and workshops were carried out throughout the country. Finally the executive branch sent the bill to the legislative as urgent, which meant it had 30 days for its treatment. In this timeframe the law was approved. Since then, the implementation of the law slowed down, with the secondary legislation taking several months to be approved.

### *Higher Education Law*

As mentioned earlier, universities and colleges already appeared in *Alianza País*' plan before elections in 2006. However, the plan was not as clear about their role, or the reforms that would be carried out. Once the president took office, the National Secretary of Planning (SENPLADES) was given the task to clarify their role within the National Development Plan.

Until then, universities were regulated by a Higher Education Council, which was integrated by Presidents of Universities. SENPLADES requested the Higher Education Council to prepare an assessment of the higher education system. The results showed a negative picture, and some of the issues encountered were: political manipulation in the creation of universities, a lack of quality in education and research, and corruption scandals. The assessment also provided some suggestions for policy reform that included: clarifying the roles of the institutions in the higher education system, redefining the regulatory framework and strengthening it. SENPLADES then organized a group of experts to conceptualize the policy reform based on the assessment.

Based on the work of this expert group, the Executive presented a bill to the legislative on August, 2009. In this case, another proposal from the opposition party traditionally aligned with the teachers union was also presented. The legislative then socialized the content of both proposals in a forum with the specific participation of teachers unions and universities. After such meetings, the legislative revised the law and a final version was approved in May, 2010. Since then, reforms in the Higher Education system have been fast and constant, and the universities have become a key stakeholder in the economic changes proposed by the government.

### *The public philosophy: the working of revolutions*

As has been stated by Mejta (2010), there is little scholarly work examining ideas in the context of public philosophy or *Zeitgeist*. *Zeitgeist* is also described at times as the spirit of times, or the dominant belief. This means that they are highly contextual and temporal. In political contexts, what dimensions of public philosophies are relevant to understanding changes in policies and how these occur? Are there aspects of the public philosophy that allow or limit the use of research in policy formulation? To explore this question, three aspects of the general social visions will be explored: i) the relevance of change over continuity, ii) the role of government and iii) the value given to research and knowledge.

The cases exemplified before shed light on the importance of whether there is a general urgency for change, or a comfort with continuity. In these cases, the new government took office at a time when change was publically demanded. Rafael Correa himself was an expression of this need for change. A university professor with a short career as a Minister of Finance, with a new movement got rapidly well-known in 2006, and won the elections over more traditional

politicians. One of the party's main promises was drafting a new constitution, a vague idea in terms of policy but that denoted a commitment to radical change.

The government became the Citizens' Revolution, conveying the idea that essential changes would occur. Those changes started with the approval of a Constitution with various innovative ideas, among them the idea of the popular economy, the rights of nature and others. As described earlier, even the party's original plan was organized in the pillars of five revolutions. The spirit of change observed in 2006 was incorporated into both the campaign and later into the governmental plan. In this sense, policy problems in this period were portrayed as a need for radical change, rather than small issues or glitches in current policies. Furthermore, policy solutions, despite their actual content, were portrayed as innovative and those that were already in place were renamed. The public philosophy was not only a key aspect that the government interpreted and introduced during elections, but one that was reinforced through the policy debates as the ones of the two laws described. Policy problems and their respective solutions reinforced the notion that radical change was necessary and taking place with each law that was approved.

Another dimension of the public philosophy that is relevant to understanding policy changes is the role that the government is given. In the case of Ecuador, since 2006, the dominant notion has been that the government must play a significant role in the economy and in society as a whole. Given its previous weakness, there was a general belief that strengthening the State was necessary. The government, once in place, used this general appreciation to gain more power and relevance in the economy and society as a whole. In the cases described above, the laws gave the Government a mandate to regulate both sectors. Given that public policies are intrinsically related to the working of the state, the wider perception of what its role in society is seems to be crucial to explaining the types of policies put in place. For example, there could be a case where there is a perception that the state does not play a role in a given issue, and as such, no public policies are put in place.

As Garcé (2013) has identified, the value given to science is key to understanding the supply and demand of knowledge. Although this is true, the value given to rationality affects not only the demand for knowledge, but the questions asked themselves, and the solutions that are created. Before elections in 2006, there was a consensus that part of the instability in government was caused by the lack of capacity of those elected to power. In this setting, Correa became a well suited candidate, as the holder of a doctoral degree from abroad. In the same line,

those that prepared the first plan for the party were scholars. Then again, there was an agreement between a general sentiment and the promises explicitly and implicitly stated by *Alianza País*. This increasing relevance of education, professionalism and knowledge in the government are seen in the use of technical and specialized vocabulary to describe problems and solutions. Even though these concepts are defined and explained for the public to understand them, data, numbers and specialized jargon are used to reassure that the policies are based on expert advice.

Exploring the concept of the public philosophy in these two cases exemplify its relevance in understanding policy debates. The cases also exemplify the interrelation between the zeitgeist and the policy debates. As stated earlier, these broad assumptions set the scene for policy debates, but interestingly, decision makers can use policy debates to reinforce a given policy. As Hall (1993) argues, a coherent and strong policy paradigm is critical to sustain changes in other aspects of policy. To maintain this paradigm, policymakers may reinforce the concepts in more specific policy debates. To change the paradigm, stakeholders may portray its incoherencies.

### *Problem definitions: differences between challenges and opportunities*

The second type of ideas is the problem definitions. As Broadbent (2012) proposes, defining problems can be described as a contest among a variety of actors. One could argue that different actors that participate in a policy debate see the issue through different lenses, and use a variety of evidence to support that perspective. At the end, it is the power struggle, the availability of resources, and the link with the public philosophy that probably determines which is the prevailing definition of a problem.

In the cases described above, a different approach emerges that could be useful in understanding how problems are defined, and how they evolve. In the case where the government has a particularly strong power on the public discourse, understanding how it approaches an issue seems crucial. From the perspective of the government, the popular economy was seen, from the onset, as an opportunity rather than as a problem. On the other hand, higher education was seen as problematic and even a setback for the governmental plans.

In the case of the popular economy, before the government started taking notice, this sector was invisible in the policy debates, and in the discussion of the economy, which was primarily focused on the export-driven industries. As a result, the sector had little political presence and

no champions in the political arena. It is likely that as a result, this sector was easily taken over and championed by government officials. Despite its political invisibility, the sector was important in terms of the number of associations and cooperatives and the number of people that were affiliated to them, becoming a source of political support for the government. This is probably the reason why the cooperatives and organizations that work on the popular and solidarity economy were able to participate in debates, and the process has been considered by those involved as highly participatory and inclusive. The positive perspective allowed for cooperation among different stakeholders that is unlikely in cases when there is dispute among the different actors. Furthermore, the lack of any previously available policy meant that the outcome, however incomplete or not aligned with the perspectives of the different stakeholders, would be seen as a progress. In the same line, since no policies were available the work carried out was mostly portrayed as innovative and creative.

From this initial optimistic perspective, further research was carried out within the government to understand the sector. Few researchers had focused on the popular economy, and the most prominent research had become part of the government; as a result, little knowledge was available from think tanks or universities. In fact, during the debates, all the actors used a standard set of indicators and data that was provided without a source. The source of this data was finally found, it was a diagnosis prepared by a consultant company to inform USAID on their assistance programs. This portrays the lack of knowledge available on the sector.

The government carried out its own assessment of the situation of cooperatives and associations. This diagnosis, according to the interviews carried out for this paper, raised various concerns since the sector was actually more relevant than initially believed. There were more cooperatives than previously thought, and they were handling more resources than expected. At the same time, the diagnosis concluded that the sector had very little regulation; the cooperatives had poor governance structure and were highly vulnerable to shocks. This knowledge changed the perspective of policymakers within the government. From being an opportunity to strengthen what the government called the “economic revolution”, the sector became a hazard that could eventually affect many people that were saving resources in these cooperatives.

Although little changes occurred in terms of the government’s discourse, or the participatory approach, it is very likely that the assessment it undertook had a high impact on the final policy solution, in this case the new law. The bill, more than promoting the popular and solidarity

economy explicitly, created a body of institutional and legal regulations that would prevent the collapse of the system.

The case of the law of higher education shows the opposite path. Although the government initially perceived higher education as a problem, it evolved into an opportunity and a pillar of the revolutions it pursued. Unlike the previous case, before Rafael Correa's government, universities had been immersed in scandals due to the sale of diplomas and the poor quality of education. Furthermore, universities – both public and private – had received public funding with little to no accountability on how those resources were used. Here, the debate on whether universities generated research or its quality was not a concern. Rather, the main focus was on the educational dimension of colleges and universities. In addition, the Higher Education Council, in charge of regulating the universities, had been run by universities themselves. This fact was later conveyed by the government as an undesirable autonomy from the State. In accordance with the public philosophy stated before, the idea that more regulation from the government was needed gained momentum.

In the context of a problem, rather than an opportunity, the battle became one not only of ideas but also of defining a guilty party, a role which was eventually given to the universities and the Higher Education Council. This is probably the reason why the policy debate was expert-led, with little participation of other institutions, including university workers or students.

Initially, the government requested an assessment by the Higher Education Council which confirmed the concerns that had been previously exposed by the media. This assessment, therefore, was used to ratify a problem definition that was already in place. Then again, a regulatory perspective became dominant in the law prepared by the group of experts commissioned with the task of drafting the law. The regulations started soon after the law, with a new regulatory body being created, an evaluation and ranking of universities being published and low quality universities being closed down. As it can be expected, this has increased the confrontation between universities and the government both unable to cooperate – for the most part – in the application of the new law.

Interestingly, the perspective of the government on universities has also changed from being a challenge to becoming an opportunity. Now that a new regulation is in place, the government has given a new priority to universities in the context of achieving development and lowering the dependence on natural resources. The concept that the knowledge sector economic model

can replace the natural resource dependent model has gained momentum. In this context, universities are seen as a key ally for the generation of knowledge and the preparation of a different labor force. The regulatory framework is now portrayed not as a control of bad quality but as a promoter of excellence among institutions.

As seen from the two cases, the path of a problem definition may change from being a challenge to becoming an opportunity or vice versa. In both cases, research has played a role in this shift, by shedding light with new data or concepts. Whether an issue is seen as an opportunity or as challenge may also affect the way in which stakeholders interact and whether cooperation or competition is possible. In this sense, defining the issue may even have more impact on these relations among the stakeholders than in the policy outcome itself. As seen from both cases, despite the process by which problem definitions evolved, the policy solutions were both highly regulatory in nature, highly aligned with the public philosophy of the time: the need for a radical change and a strong government. The ways in which problems are defined is highly political and might define winners and losers even before solutions are put in place.

## Policy solutions

Policy solutions are what we tend to think of when discussing ideas. Which were the policy solutions put forward? These policy solutions share some commonalities but also some differences. In both cases, new laws were enacted, which were also mandated by the Constitution approved in 2008. Enacting these laws was symbolically important since they allowed the government to fulfill promises and also gain more real and symbolic power since both laws were presented by the Executive branch. Both laws were highly controlling in nature, creating regulatory entities and standards. As mentioned earlier, they respond to the public philosophy of the time they were enacted but they also hold their differences.

The origin of the law for the popular and economy is usually portrayed, by both participants from the government and the civil society organizations, as the result of a participatory and deliberative process. One of the law's proponents from the civil society made special emphasis on the fact that they participated in the actual wording of the articles in the constitution and of the law. He underlined the fact that they did not hire external consultants to support them with the drafting of the law. Although civil society seems to feel gratitude for the work of academics, they do not see a direct influence of that knowledge in the resulting law. This is surprising since the name itself, for this sector of the economy has been coined and promoted by scholars - in

Latin America especially by Jose Luis Corragio, an Argentinean scholar that actively participated in the debates.

Those that represented the interest of cooperatives and associations value more the participatory approach than the perspectives of experts. In the case of those that participated from the Government in carrying out the diagnosis, the conceptual framework developed by scholars was used partially to frame their study. They however, complemented the academic perspective with a comparative analysis of laws in other countries of the region, noticing spaces for innovation. Furthermore, the government carried out the first-hand data collection on the state of cooperatives and had the most detailed information among those discussing the law. In the process of approving the law, both the government and the cooperatives united in favor of the law, while other stakeholders, specifically the banking sector expressed concerns regarding the extent to which cooperatives compete with the banking system and whether a different regulation is necessary.

Although from the onset of this government's administration, the popular and solidarity economy was seen as an opportunity, its role and relevance has diminished with time. The law, which was originally conceived as a mechanism to strengthen this sector, has been reduced to a set of regulations to control the way in which they operate and reduce the risks of insolvency or corruption. Some stakeholders revealed in interviews their concern that the new standards and regulations may actually change the nature of these cooperatives and may no longer reach the poorest people given the costs of the new regulations.

The law of higher education was created differently. Unlike the previous case, this law was developed by experts, and socialized briefly with those more closely involved. This approach responds to the way the problem was defined by the government, a lack of capacity of universities and their disconnection with society. As a result they could not be trusted with the task of creating a legislation that would solve the problem at hand. The reforms proposed by the expert group were informed by the diagnosis available and focused on the need for stronger regulation.

In the case of universities the objective was to make them more competitive and insist in higher standards measured by traditional numeric rankings. In terms of the link between this law and existing knowledge, those that participate in the interviews cited scholars that had inspired them, such Boaventura de Sousa Santos - a Portuguese scholar that promotes a radical change of



universities from the ivory tower model to a more participatory and inclusive approach. It seems, however, that there is no concordance between the perspectives cited and the law that was finally approved.

## 4. The role of ideas in new legislations

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In the previous section, two cases of new legislations have been examined through the lenses of the dimensions of ideas proposed by Mejta (2010) to examine how these dimensions interplay to result in a given policy outcome, specifically a law.

Policy solutions are probably seen as the most important aspect where research can be used and where researchers could focus their attention. These two cases, however, reveal how the available research had little impact on the direct policy solutions. Both laws had a strong regulatory approach to public policy, where the government gained control in the economy and in the educational sector. This approach was not informed by research but mostly by the public philosophy in place and the definition of the problem. The solutions are mostly based on the existing mechanisms of regulation available in the government in other sectors, or even on the previous institutions with slight changes in content and changes in names. The cases exemplify clearly how the public philosophy and the problem definition limit the extent to which a solution is considered appropriate and feasible. In this sense, researchers that focus on developing the solutions without fully exploring the prevailing assumptions and policy definitions are less likely to be able to participate in the policy debates.

The definition of problems in the cases evolved differently. After a new constitution was set in place, there was a need to convey that such changes were occurring rapidly. For these changes to occur, the popular and solidarity economy sector was seen as an opportunity and higher education as an obstruction. These perspectives on the sectors at the same time lead to different approaches from the government with the other stakeholders. The first one was more participatory and the second one was expert-led. At the same time, in the one case, the cooperatives were the government allies while in the second case, universities were opponents. Such was the confrontation that a different law was also sent to the legislative to compete with the official proposal.

The cases portray the evolution between an issue being an opportunity and a risk. This is likely to happen constantly as policy solutions are decided upon and implemented. An issue that was initially an opportunity may become a problem with the implementation of specific policies. At the same time a risk can publically become an opportunity. These shifts are likely to occur thanks to new knowledge available but also as a necessary step in the reform process.

In the context of a strong government, the way a problem is identified within is a crucial aspect to explain the policy outcome. In these cases, knowledge and research prepared within the government were important in shifting the perspectives on the issues, from being an opportunity to being a challenge and vice versa. The stakeholders within the government that were interviewed coincided that their perspective changed once a more detailed diagnosis was available. It is important to note that there was no research presented from organizations outside the government so the cases allow for little reflection on the role of other research organizations in the debate.

Public philosophies appear to be crucial in understanding both the way in which problems are defined and solved. Although traditionally it is believed that the media has a significant role setting in these dominant paradigms, the cases portrayed above reveal that the government can play this role, especially when it is in confrontation with the media and has significant direct presence in the media. Throughout the cases, it is clearly seen that the public philosophies are reinforced with the way in which the problems are defined and solved. In both cases, laws are portrayed as being innovative and revolutionary. Whether the revolution is conducted by including new actors in the government or by limiting the power of hazardous actors, change is a key aspect being communicated. Within this change, new names are given to existing institutions, and new ones are created. The relevance of the executive branch was reinforced with the two bills, with the regulatory agencies being led by representatives from the government. This is yet another reflection of the public philosophy in place. Finally, the government officials have expert knowledge of their sectors. They have the data, and know the scholars of their field. There might not necessarily be a correspondence among research and knowledge and the final policy outcome, but this information is readily available to back the adopted decisions. In these two cases, the knowledge used and portrayed has mostly been generated by the government itself, or are references to international scholars. No direct participation of other researchers was clearly encountered.

## Conclusions

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Throughout the analysis of the cases, evidence-based policy has not been used or analyzed, but rather, a wider framework of ideas was employed. The objective was to portray the extent to which research is present in the ideas in the policy debate either as broad discourses or specific solutions. The paper is based on a particular scenario, as such, it is not meant to underestimate the ways in which research is used in other context, but rather to give additional insights based on other political scenarios. The context, that can be described as that of a country with a strong government portraying its actions as revolutionary is not unique to the Ecuadorian setting, and some of the presented questions and perspectives might be useful in other settings.

Evidence-based policy has become a framework that seeks to relate research and policy. With the concept of ideas proposed before, evidence-based policy can be summarized in these three aspects: i) a strong value to rationality in the public philosophy, ii) a lack of knowledge or use of it as part of the content of the policy problems and as a result iii) the use of more research in designing policies as the solution. In that case, it would be expected that knowledge could play the most important role in creating policy solutions.

The cases exemplified in this paper divert from the perspective that research is useful for creating policy solutions. The laws that were enacted were more inspired by existing institutional arrangements or regulatory models. In the case of the popular and solidarity economy – an innovative concept in public policy –, and in the reform of universities – a more traditional sector –, the policy solutions are not original, or based on research but rather on experience within the country or internationally. Specific knowledge played a minimal role in determining the solutions. It could be argued that once the policies are implemented, research can be relevant in providing information to have better policy instruments in place. However, in the debate of the law, the problem definition, the stance of the different stakeholders and the public philosophy of the time are more relevant. This is not to say that research cannot be influential in developing policy solutions but that focusing only in the policy solutions misses other aspects of the policy process where research can be a valuable addition to the debate.

Research played a more significant role in the definition of problems and in shifting the perception of the issue from a problem to an opportunity and viceversa. It is likely that the fact

that the research was carried out within the government was crucial for its effectiveness in changing the government's perception. There was, however, no significant research available outside the government in these realms that other actors could use. The way problems are defined and how they evolve over time could even be more relevant than the policy solution itself. In the wider context of the policy reforms of the two sectors, laws are just one tool for policy change and innovative ideas can be put in place without changes to the law. The way problems are defined and understood by the public plays a long term role in the reforms, and must also shift if stakeholders want to introduce changes or new ideas.

This can be also linked to the distinction made by Grindle (2007) between the 'political arena' and the 'bureaucratic arena'. The cases exemplify that debates in the political arena are strongly related with power struggles and where the wide paradigms are discussed. Research, it seems, could have an influence in these ideas, but significant time and resources are needed to change them. In the context of a strong government, with an urgency to change laws, external stakeholders have limited space for participating and introducing different approaches to the one stated by the government. The cases show that participation was valued when there was an alignment between the government and the external actors.

Evidence-based policy narrows down the use of research to develop policy solutions. The cases, however exemplify how strongly the public philosophy and the problem definitions affect the policy decision. To further explore the question of how research affects these different types of ideas, a more detailed analysis is required in terms of the research that is available. Since in these cases, research did not play an important role, it would be useful to explore, with other cases, how different types of research can be of use to either change the assumptions the public holds, the way problems are defined and the policy solutions put forward. Exploring this would shed more light on the relationship between research and ideas in policy debates.

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