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Original Article

Information systems and intergovernmental relations in Brazilian social policies: a study on users' adaptations to the local context

Sistemas de informação em políticas sociais no Brasil: um estudo sobre os usuários no contexto local

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is to identify barriers to the adoption of information systems in Brazilian federal government social policies at the local level. The study focuses on users of information systems from other intergovernmental organizations that helped the federal government in the implementation of social public policies, especially at the local level. The federal government has been using information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve federal coordination of various social programs. This means that technology has been another component in the implementation of these policies. This paper adopts the assumption that users of information systems can change the context of technology use, not only the technology or information system itself. These changes, which were not foreseen by the system designers or policymakers, may explain the success or failure of the adoption of these systems in social policies coordinated by the Brazilian federal government. Case studies of two social programs in different areas (education and social assistance) were carried out in two Brazilian states (Pará and São Paulo). The focus of the article was to identify how users of information systems alter the context of information systems use. The findings helped to identify two dimensions that can cause difficulties or changes in the use of intergovernmental information systems at the local level: the technical and administrative capabilities of local governments and the rigidity of information systems and sharing of data and information to subnational participants of federal government social policies.

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Keywords: Intergovernmental relations; Information systems; Social policies

Resumo

O objetivo neste artigo foi identificar barreiras na adoção de sistemas de informação em políticas sociais do governo federal para coordenar e monitorar a implementação dessas políticas no nível local. A análise foi construída a partir de um estudo sobre os usuários desses sistemas de informação que envolvem diferentes níveis federativos, especialmente no âmbito municipal. O governo federal brasileiro vem utilizando as tecnologias de informação e comunicação (TIC) para melhorar a coordenação federativa de diversos programas sociais. Isso significa dizer que a tecnologia é mais um componente na implementação dessas políticas, que são desenhadas para serem compartilhadas com os entes subnacionais, e se tornam, conseqüentemente, um dos aspectos que merecem ser estudados. Neste trabalho adota-se como pressuposto que os usuários de sistemas de informação podem mudar o contexto do uso da tecnologia e não apenas a tecnologia ou o sistema de informação em si. Essas mudanças de

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uso que não estavam previstas na formulação do programa podem explicar fatores de sucesso ou fracasso da adoção desses sistemas em políticas sociais coordenadas pela instância federal. Assim, foram realizados estudos de caso de dois programas sociais de diferentes áreas (educação e assistência social) em dois estados brasileiros (Pará e São Paulo). Portanto, o foco da pesquisa foi orientado para identificar como os usuários de sistemas da informação dos programas escolhidos alteram o contexto de uso desses sistemas. As conclusões do estudo identificaram duas dimensões que podem trazer dificuldades ou mudanças quanto ao uso de sistemas de informação intergovernamentais no âmbito local: capacidades técnicas e administrativas dos municípios brasileiros; e, rigidez dos sistemas de informação e compartilhamento dos dados e informações com os entes subnacionais participantes das políticas sociais.

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Palavras-chave: Relações intergovernamentais; Sistemas de informação; Políticas sociais

Introduction

The topic of intergovernmental relations has been widely discussed in Brazilian literature, especially in the context of the decentralization of public policies in the country. This movement gains special attention from the changes that occurred at the end of the dictatorship, such as: (i) the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which considerably increased the duties and powers of states and municipalities; and (ii) the state reform movements in the country, which, among other goals, aimed to improve public management by increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of actions carried out by public organizations (Abrucio, 2005; Arretche, 1996; Diniz, Faleiros, Porto, & Ribeiro, 2013; Farah, 2001). In this context, the intense use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in public administration activities aids their fulfillment, which involves the rationalization of internal processes, better public services, and the availability of information on the Internet (Cunha & Miranda, 2013; Ribeiro, 2009; Vaz, 2005).

The use of ICT by the federal government has also been adopted in social policies in order to facilitate their implementation and monitoring. One example is *Cadastro Único*, created to manage the data of beneficiaries of various social programs in a single registry information system. Among other duties, municipalities are responsible for entering information on citizens who benefit from these programs, while the federal government makes financial resources available and manages such information systems.

Among the studies that discuss the implications of the use of ICT in these social programs as a tool to articulate intergovernmental relations and ensure their effectiveness (Diniz et al., 2013; Licio, 2012; Silva, 2011), few are dedicated to evaluating the design and implementation of information systems in public policies from the perspective of users. In the field of information systems, studies addressing the perspective of users are more common and usually point out ways to overcome the gap between designers and users of these systems (Diniz, Bailey, & Sholler, 2014).

Thus, this paper fills part of this identified gap in the field of public administration by studying information systems in decentralized social policies in Brazil, focusing on the end users of these systems. This study, therefore, addresses the perspective of users of information systems related to social policies

of the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the Ministry of Social and Agrarian Development (MDSA). These users work at public schools and the Reference Centers for Social Assistance (CRAS).

The objective of this article is to identify barriers to the adoption of information systems in federal government social policies, analyzing how these systems are used by local public agents. The multilevel framework proposed by Pozzebon, Diniz, and Jayo (2009) was adopted as theoretical framework for analysis. This framework assists in analyzing the role of different stakeholders related to the context of adopting a particular technology and the negotiation process among these agents, whose objective is to guarantee that the chosen technology is embraced. In this article, the framework helps to identify actors that adopt interorganizational information systems in social policies, the implementation characteristics of these systems, as well as barriers in the use of these systems by users at the local level.

After identifying the implications of social policies and intergovernmental relations in information systems in the literature, two social program case studies were carried out in different federal government areas that have adopted the following systems: (a) PDDE Interativo (related to the Ministry of Education) and (b) Sisjovem (related to the Ministry of Social Development). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local public agents involved with these public policies in the states of Pará and São Paulo and federal government public servants in Brasília. In addition, documents that deal with these information systems, such as laws, news, booklets, and guides, were analyzed.

This study points out that the users of these systems at the local level can alter the context of the use of information systems in order to meet the conditionalities imposed by the federal government to beneficiaries enrolled on these social programs. This means that local public agents – users of the systems that control the social policies – adopt strategies that differ from those originally planned by system designers at the federal level.

Two barriers to the adoption of interorganizational information systems of federal government social policies emerge from this study: (a) the lack of technical and administrative capabilities in the Brazilian municipalities and (b) the rigidity of information systems for sharing data and information with subnational entities. Understanding such issues can help the construction of federal government strategies, minimize exist-

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