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Public Policies in Education, Sports, and Physical Activity in South America: From the "Ought to Be" to Praxis

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Abstract

This article presents an ontological and pragmatic analysis of the development of public policies in education, physical activity, and sports—key spheres of social life in South American nations. It covers essential aspects of policy design and implementation processes, with a focus on public financing and its relationship with outcomes. The objective was to describe the regularities in the design and implementation process of public policies in education and sports in the region. The study included six countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru), utilizing bibliographic, content, and statistical analysis based on data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in the period 2001–2020. The findings indicate that secondary education coverage levels, educational investment, and recreational and sports processes remain inadequate in the region, with uneven performance across countries. Relationships between secondary education coverage and public spending were determined through linear regression analysis. The lack of robust data complicated the analysis, representing a significant limitation for the effective design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies.

Keywords: Public Policies, State, Education, Sports, Physical Activity, Sout America.

Introduction

The formulation and implementation of public policies are primary tools for the state and governments to execute projects aligned with their political vision across various national domains. This process occurs in an environment significantly influenced by disruptive technologies (Rajan, 2019) and increasingly collaborative settings (Bonny & Cahlikova, 2025).

The ontology of this process reveals that the state is increasingly concerned with managing social areas of interest such as education, physical activity, and sports—topics explored in this study.

From a public ethics perspective, the effective development of policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring processes aimed at improving citizens' quality of life is imperative, particularly in socially significant areas like education, sports, and physical activity. Ethics extend into the public sphere, shaping what this study terms the "ought to be" of the state and national governments in fulfilling their duties.

International organizations have long exerted varying degrees of ethical pressure in this regard. For example, de Sousa et al. (2025) describe how the World Bank promotes educational policies

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in developing countries within neoliberal frameworks, treating education as a commodity capable of generating high returns.

Beyond these extremes, there is consensus on recognizing these social activities as engines of national development, especially education, which is regarded as a pillar of modern societies. Meanwhile, sports and physical activity have been viewed for years as positively correlated with various aspects of human health, such as the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases (Brazil, 2024) and emotional well-being (Kopp et al., 2024), among others.

However, beyond the "ought to be," global statistics indicate significant shortcomings in both areas. UNESCO reports that 754 million adults worldwide are illiterate, most of whom are women (UNESCO, 2024), while achieving "quality education" remains an aspiration embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNO, 2015). In the second area of interest, it was determined in 2022 that only 33.9% of the global population participated in recreational physical activities, while the physical activity industry was concentrated 91.24% in North America, Asia, and Europe, with Latin America accounting for only 4.46% (Statista, 2024).

The gaps between the "ought to be" and praxis in public policy management in these areas, along with structural and contingent factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, complicate the search for effective and timely solutions. Addressing the subject of this study requires solutions in two directions: first, ethical approaches aligned with coherent, financially sound political projects (budgetary aspects); and second, the development of effective technical processes. In this regard, Galvin (2025) emphasizes the need for empirical observation, data analysis, synthesis of primary and validated studies, and efficient public policy intervention and evaluation.

The evolution of public administration and policy processes trends toward participatory governance, digitalization and e-government, collaborative and inter-institutional management, transparency, inclusion, organizational transformation, and other aspects that demand profound changes in the public sector (Onder & Nyaburi Nyadera, 2024) to better achieve the "ought to be."

Latin America, due to multiple historical, cultural, and structural factors, remains a region composed mostly of developing countries, according to human development indicators (UNDP, 2024). In education and sports, greater state investment is necessary, making budgetary issues central to the region's challenges (ECLAC, 2024). Additionally, the ability to manage these budgets effectively through relevant programs and projects that guarantee medium- and long-term changes is crucial, as social issues of state concern typically extend beyond governmental terms.

This study aims to uncover key aspects related to the ontology and praxis of public policy processes in the education, physical activity, and sports spheres in South America. This subregion was selected because Ecuador is part of it, allowing for a comparative study among six countries. The study highlights the difficulty of conducting such public sector research due to the frequent lack of data necessary for comprehensive analysis.

Materials and Methods

The study had an exploratory scope and employed a mixed-methods approach, applying theoretical and empirical research methods, including bibliographic, content, and statistical analysis techniques.

The selected South American countries were those with available data in the Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2025) database: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru. These nations represent 50% of the 12 countries in the region.

For the educational sector, the following indicators were considered for the period 2001–2023:

- "Percentage of the population aged 15 to 19 with completed primary education" (I1: Primary education coverage)
- "Percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 with completed secondary education" (I2: Secondary education coverage)
- "Public spending on education (percentage of GDP)" (I3: Public spending on education)

For descriptive data analysis, the mean, median, and standard deviation (SD) were calculated. Inferential analysis involved correlation and linear regression analysis using SPSS v.25.

For indicators I1 and I2, normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the results of which are presented in "Table 1":

Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)	I1	I2
	.000	.095

Table 1: Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

According to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results, only I2 follows a normal distribution; therefore, it was selected to build the regression model with I3 as the independent variable. Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationship between variables.

Regarding the sports sector, the indicator "Central government expenditure on recreational and sports services (percentage of GDP)" (I4) was analyzed. This was the only available indicator in the ECLAC database, and no outcome indicators for public investment in this sector were found to facilitate a quantitative correlation analysis. The I4 indicator was considered for the period 2001–2020 for four of the six previously mentioned countries (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Paraguay), due to the lack of data for the others.

To determine the existence of indicators managed by these nations regarding results in the fields of sports, recreation, and physical activity, and to complete the respective methodological triangulation, a content analysis was conducted based on information published on the websites of national statistical agencies, as detailed below:

Country	URL
Brazil	https://www.ibge.gov.br/
Colombia	https://www.dane.gov.co/
Ecuador	https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/institucional/home/
Paraguay	https://www.ine.gov.py/

Table 2: Websites Consulted from National Statistical Agencies

Results

Table 3 presents the descriptive analysis of the three indicators considered in the study for the education sector:

Indicator / Country	I1			I2			I3		
	Mea n	Media n	SD	Mea n	Media n	SD	Mea n	Media n	SD
Bolivia	92.43	95.0	6.11	66.29	66.4	10.71	7.17	6.97	0.79
Brazil	94.75	95.6	2.95	58.29	59.9	10.76	5.26	5.5	0.83
Colombia	94.9	96	2.89	67.11	68.2	8.38	4.36	4.44	0.36
Ecuador	95.7	96.5	2.99	61.08	63.4	11.27	3.39	4.2	1.22
Paraguay	91.64	92.6	4.16	53.94	58.5	10.15	3.2	3.29	0.44
Peru	95.7	96.7	2.71	78.34	81.4	7.89	3.29	3.13	0.54

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of Educational Data

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

The selected educational outcome indicators show a performance above 90% in the case of the population aged 15 to 19 with completed primary education. Ecuador and Peru exhibited the highest coverage (95.7%), while Bolivia (SD=6.11) and Paraguay (SD=4.16) showed the greatest variations. For the percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 with completed secondary education, values ranged between 50% and 80%, with Peru showing the best performance (78.34%) and Paraguay the lowest (53.94%). Ecuador experienced the highest fluctuations in this indicator over the period (SD=11.27). As noted, secondary education coverage is, on average, more than 20 percentage points lower than primary education coverage, indicating that national efforts focus primarily on basic education.

Regarding Indicator 3, public spending on education as a percentage of GDP, Bolivia (7.17%) and Brazil (5.26%) exhibited the highest spending levels over the period, while Ecuador had the highest variations (SD=1.22).

The calculation of Levene's test to demonstrate the homogeneity of variances for the three indicators in the countries included in the study is shown below:

Variable	Sig.
I1	.028
I2	.490
I3	.000

Table 4: Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances (Educational Indicators)

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results. For I2, the value corresponds to the

homogeneity test based on the mean; for I1 and I3, it was calculated based on the median (as they do not follow a normal distribution).

As shown in Table 4, indicators I1 and I3 do not exhibit homogeneous behavior among the countries ($p < 0.05$), indicating that disparities in primary education coverage and public investment are associated with differences within each country studied.

The correlation analysis between indicators I1, I2, and I3 is presented below:

I1 e I3		I2 e I3	
Spearman correlation	Sig. (bilateral)	Pearson correlation	Sig. (bilateral)
.102	.004	.94	.004

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

A significant correlation was found between the dependent variables (I1 and I2) and the independent variable (I3). In the case of I2, the correlation is strong according to Suárez's (2011) scale, indicating the relationship between public spending and secondary education coverage in the analyzed countries.

Table 6 presents the characteristics of the linear regression model between the variables I3 (dependent) and I3 (independent).

R	R square	Ajusted R Square	Standard Error of Estimation	Durbin Watson	Anova	P
.0945	.892	.866	.11227	2.098	33.207	.004

Table 6: Linear Regression Model

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

The obtained linear regression model equation (1) is as follows:

$$\text{Secondary Education Coverage} = -2.202 + 3.780 (\text{Public Education Expenditure}) (1)$$

The statistical analysis conducted using a linear regression model demonstrates a significant positive relationship between secondary education coverage and public spending in the analyzed countries during the period 2001–2023. The coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.892$) indicates that 89.2% of the variability in educational coverage can be explained by public spending, demonstrating a strong model fit. Additionally, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirms the overall significance of the model, while the coefficient of the independent variable reflects that an increase in public spending results in an average increase of 3.78 percentage points in secondary education coverage. Similarly, when public spending is null, the model predicts negative coverage, emphasizing the need for state intervention to achieve basic coverage levels. Finally, the model's diagnostic, supported by a Durbin-Watson value of 2.098, suggests the independence of residuals, strengthening the statistical validity of the results.

Table 7 presents the descriptive analysis of government spending related to sports and

Indicador/ País	I4		
	Media	Mediana	SD
Brazil	0.02	0.02	0.01
Colombia	0.06	0.07	0.01
Ecuador	0.02	0.09	0.06
Paraguay	0.01	0.02	0.02

Table 7: Descriptive Analysis of Sports Data

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

The behavior of central government spending on recreational and sports services in the four considered countries ranges from 0.01% to 0.06% of GDP, with Colombia showing the highest spending during the study period and Ecuador displaying the greatest variation (SD=0.06).

Homogeneity of variances was calculated using Levene's test, as shown in Table 8.

Variable	Sig.
I4	.000

Table 8: Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances (Sports Indicator)

Note. Prepared based on statistical analysis results.

The indicator of GDP percentage dedicated to recreational, and sports services also does not exhibit homogeneous behavior among the four countries included in the study ($p < 0.05$), based on Levene's test.

The content analysis conducted to determine the collection of outcome indicators in this social sphere yielded the following results:

Country	Identified Indicators	Source	Some Results
Brazil	Indicator of individuals aged 18 and older who engage in the recommended level of physical activity during leisure time. Indicator of individuals over 15 years old who practiced any sport or physical activity during the study period. Indicator of the most practiced sports. Indicador de frecuencia de duración de la práctica deportiva. Indicator of frequency and duration of sports practice.	Primary data	In 2019, according to the National Health Survey, 30.1% of individuals aged 18 and older engaged in the recommended level of physical activity during leisure time. The household survey, conducted from 1992 to 2015, in its latest publication indicated that 37.9% of the population over 15 years old practiced some sport or physical activity during the study

			<p>period.</p> <p>In the 2015 National School Health Survey, it was determined that 19.7% of students aged 13 to 17 engaged in 300 minutes or more of physical activity in the previous seven days.</p>
Colombia	<p>Indicator of children under 5 years old who engage in sports activities with their caregivers.</p> <p>Indicator of individuals aged 5 to 17 who study and attend sports courses, practices, or schools outside of school hours.</p> <p>Indicator of individuals who practice any sport, dance, yoga, exercise, or go to the gym.</p> <p>Indicator of participation of sports-related products in national production.</p> <p>Indicator of construction of outdoor sports facilities.</p>	Primary and secondary data/Satellite account	<p>In the 2021 survey, it was determined that 6% of children under 5 years old engage in sports activities with their caregivers; 11.8% of individuals aged 5 to 17 study and attend sports courses, practices, or schools outside of school hours; and 11.5% of the general population freely engage in some sport, dancing, yoga, physical exercise, or gym activities.</p> <p>In 2020, it was estimated that 0.15% of national production corresponded to sports-related products, while the construction of outdoor sports facilities increased by 26.2% from 2021 to 2022.</p>
Ecuador	<p>Indicator of insufficient physical activity prevalence in children and youth (5-17 years). Median (in minutes) of sedentary behavior during a normal day in children and youth (5-17 years).</p> <p>Indicator of insufficient physical activity prevalence in adults (18-69 years). Median (in minutes) of sedentary behavior during a normal day in adults (18-69 years).</p>	Primary data	<p>In the 2022 survey, it was determined that 88% of children and youth had an insufficient level of physical activity, with a median daily sedentary behavior of 180 minutes.</p> <p>For adults, the prevalence of insufficient physical activity was 21.7%, with a median of 180 minutes of sedentary behavior per day as well.</p>
Paraguay	Indicator of sports or physical	Primary data	In the 2016 leisure time

	exercise practice in the last week.		use survey, the indicator was included; however, no documented measurement results were found.
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Table 9: Results of Content Analysis on National Indicators in Sports and Recreation

Note. Prepared based on content analysis results.

As observed, among the four countries, Brazil and Colombia manage the most central indicators through their national statistical agencies. Most indicators come from primary sources (surveys, cross-sectional descriptive studies), without stable measurement over time. This lack of robust statistical data limits the ability to construct series, trends, and control measures necessary for analysis and timely decision-making by the state and other stakeholders.

Additionally, efforts from other public institutions are documented in these countries. In Brazil, a longitudinal study by the Ministry of Public Health evaluates indicators such as the percentage of adults engaging in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week and physical inactivity rates. The latest results (2006–2023) indicate that in 2016, 40.6% of adults engaged in leisure-time physical activity, while 13.1% were inactive. In 2018, 37% of adults had insufficient physical activity (Brazil, 2024).

In Colombia, the Colombian Institute of Sports (COLDEPORTES), together with the National Administrative Department of Statistics (NADS), established a baseline of sports sector indicators in 2009, focusing on institutional management of the sports sector (Colombia, 2009).

In Ecuador, no independent data collection by institutions other than the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses has been documented, despite sports being part of the state's strategic agenda in recent years. It is included in the Development Plan for the New Ecuador 2024–2025 under Objective 1 of the Social Axis: "(...) the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits, regular physical activity, and sports," which includes Policy 1.6: "Promote the appropriate use of free time among the Ecuadorian population through physical activity" (Ecuador, 2024, pp. 80-83).

In Paraguay, the National Secretariat of Sports proclaimed the National Sports Policy, incorporating baseline indicators from the First National Survey on Risk Factors, revealing that 53% of the population is sedentary and physical inactivity prevails at 75% (Paraguay, 2019). An interesting aspect of this policy was the identified need to design and implement a system of indicators for the sector. In 2021, the National Institute of Statistics partnered with the National Secretariat of Sports to conduct a technical process for identifying sports indicators and measuring their impact, motivated particularly by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Paraguay, 2021).

Discussion

Variations in the public investment indicator for education across the countries studied were minimal, indicating that the region still needs to place investment as a central aspect of educational policy analysis, as highlighted by ECLAC (2024). Although this variable was found to explain secondary education coverage, it remains significantly lower than primary education coverage, suggesting that national efforts diminish over time. Hernández (2011) explained this as evidence that authorities allocate scarce resources to actions that yield the highest social return, historically impacting higher education. The lack of robust data prevents a broader analysis of higher education levels, which could help identify whether this is indeed a trend in

public efforts in the region.

The study demonstrated a lack of homogeneity in two of the three educational indicators, providing empirical evidence for the widely accepted notion that Latin America is one of the most unequal regions, both within and between countries. According to Gaudin & Pareyón Noguez (2020), these structural gaps hinder long-term, inclusive, and sustainable development.

The region's educational challenges exemplify Rajan's (2019) argument that neither the state nor the market alone can address social issues, highlighting society's role as a key actor in seeking comprehensive solutions to problems affecting multiple generations of Latin Americans who struggle to improve their quality of life through education.

Regarding sports and physical activity, the lack of national data significantly limits the public policy-making process and the necessary technical analysis for its improvement. The analysis of public spending on recreational and sports activities revealed low and inconsistent performance across the four countries for which data was available, with Ecuador showing the highest variation during the study period.

Most outcome indicators are related to physical activity due to its connection with public health and the education sector. Additionally, efforts by other public administration entities in Brazil and Colombia to develop and implement sports-related indicators were evident. However, these efforts do not yet ensure the creation of a stable and robust dataset over time.

Brazil stands out for its public institutions' efforts, particularly in public health, to analyze physical activity levels and sedentary lifestyles as inputs for defining, implementing, and monitoring public policies aimed at reducing and controlling non-communicable diseases (Brazil, 2024).

To complement this study's findings, a survey conducted in 13 countries revealed that 14% of the population does not engage in any physical or sports activity during the week, with fitness being the most practiced sport (20%) (Ipsos, 2021). On average, men dedicate more hours per week to physical activity (6.9 hours) than women (5.4 hours). Among the South American countries studied, the survey included Colombia and Brazil, where 12% and 34% of the population, respectively, reported being inactive. Globally, 58% of respondents expressed a desire to engage in more physical activity, a sentiment shared by 78% in Colombia and 53% in Brazil. The main barriers cited for engaging in more physical activity were lack of time, financial constraints, inadequate facilities, and weather conditions. All these factors can potentially be managed through public policy interventions.

The lack of sufficient data is not exclusive to South America; globally, it is evident that a standardized metric has not yet been developed. Teixeira et al. (2024) highlight that measuring the impact of sports policies in Europe remains challenging due to limited data availability.

Consequently, UNESCO is currently leading the design of an indicator system for Ibero-America to measure the impact of sports on national development, assess policy evolution and improvement, evaluate public investment in sports, and address other educational and social issues. This initiative is motivated by the fact that very few countries have managed to standardize a nationally representative survey on sports and physical activity (UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusions

Although education, sports, and physical activity are widely recognized as essential social activities for national development, significant gaps persist between the "ought to be" and actual practice at the state, government, and international organization levels.

The analyzed South American countries exhibit discouraging figures in secondary education coverage, education investment, and particularly in recreational and sports processes. All these indicators demonstrate non-homogeneous patterns across countries during the studied period.

The application of linear regression analysis established a relationship between secondary education coverage and public spending in the six studied countries, emphasizing the importance of public efforts in achieving higher education levels for South American populations.

The study confirmed the importance of having robust data for analyzing public policy effectiveness. However, in the sports and physical activity sector, this was not achieved due to the absence of stable quantitative indicators in the region, which remains a fundamental premise for effective public administration management.

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