

Colombia and Hirschman¹

The Colombian capital was Hirschman's entry point to the world of development, and his point of departure for a long journey towards progress in Latin America.

As Hirschman acknowledged in the preface of the *The Strategy of Economic Development*, this book was his effort to "elucidate" his "immediate experience" in Colombia. Hirschman arrived in Colombia in March 1952, hired as Economic and Financial Adviser by the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, to advise the National Planning Council in the elaboration of a development plan after the recommendations of the Mission led by the Canadian expert Lauchlin Currie two years before. Hirschman worked in the advisory body for two years and stayed two more in Colombia working as economic consultant. During his stay in Colombia, carrying the tag of the foreign expert, Hirschman participated actively in the formulation of development policies and investment plans. More importantly, as he acknowledged three decades later, during these years he developed a "point of view" about development which at that time went against the grain. In a sense, the critical stance his perspective on development assumed towards comprehensive planning, cure-all policy recipes, and the blind delegation of decision-making to experts were shaped by his field experience in Colombia.

Hirschman left Colombia in 1956 but his journey did not finish then. He returned to Colombia to support the creation of economic research centres, such as the Centro de Estudios sobre Desarrollo Económico, and the consolidation of independent think-thanks, such as Fedesarrollo. He also revisited Colombia in his writings to show his Latin American(ist) colleagues how agrarian reform was possible in Latin America (in *Journeys Towards Progress*), and why authoritarianism was not the necessary outcome of economic development (in *The turn to authoritarianism in Latin America and the search for its economic determinants*).

In Colombia, Hirschman found ways of combining theory and practice, reasons for adopting a bias for hope, and displayed a tireless passion for the possible. Following the practice of previous conferences, we would like to propose *Journeys Towards Progress* as the main theme of the 2020 conference on Hirschman's legacy. The elaboration of development programs and policies, the importance of social and cultural contexts, and of the actors involved in the political economy of reform, including experts and non-experts, are some of the central themes that could be addressed in this meeting. These themes are particularly relevant today, not only considering the invigoration of economic development in the economics discipline (see the recipients of 2019 Nobel Prize) but also because they inspire necessary reflections about institutional capacity and inclusiveness in the formulation of economic projects.

The reflection around these two elements of contemporary significance will allow scholars and policymakers interested in Hirschman's life and works to address his thought from two complementary angles. In the first place, discussing the methods development economists and policymakers use to understand and transform social reality, and the place experts have or should have in this; second, problematizing the interaction between different actors in decision-making and the role each of them play in the determination of priorities and in the design and in the implementation of plans, projects and policies. Hirschman's attention to details, his search for hidden rationalities, and his deep understanding of local knowledges and

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practices serves as a counterpoint to top-down approaches to decision-making that rely exclusively on technical experts and neglect the necessary interaction with different publics.