

Public policy towards protected agriculture in the López Obrador government

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Abstract

During the Vicente Fox Quesada government, a public policy oriented to the development of protected agriculture was implemented, within the framework of the strategy to increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, which is a source of foreign exchange, and to complement the north American and Canadian economies in the supply of vegetables and ornamental plants. The area, the number of structures and production grew thereafter, but in the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government, business agricultural producers lost power to direct policy to the benefit of their interests as a result of changes in the correlation of forces. The objective of this paper was to analyze how this policy was terminated during 2020, based on a critical perspective of the conflict between social groups to advance their affairs and block the projects of their rivals. The study is based on texts on production and information on the positions of producers' associations and the government. The results are a completion of supports for the production and commercialization of protected agriculture.

Keywords: budget for agriculture, change of agricultural public policy, struggle of interests in agricultural public policy.

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Introduction

Since its inception in 2018, the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government, with an emphasis on exercising austere spending and fighting corruption, began to question various programs of previous governments, such as the 3x1 Program for migrants, the Childcare Program and a large number of trusts, until eliminate them or reduce the budgetary resources, the labor force and its structure.

President López Obrador defined his term as the Fourth Transformation, understood as a peaceful transformation against corruption and impunity with a post-neoliberal model based on moral economy, participatory democracy and the separation of political and economic power (López, 2019). The priority projects would be the support and expansion of monetary transfers to the elderly, young people, students, the strengthening of Pemex and the Federal Electricity Commission, the construction of the 'Dos Bocas' Refinery in Tabasco, the Mayan Train in the southeast of the country, the construction of the 'Felipe Ángeles' International Airport in the Military Air Base No. 1 in the State of Mexico, the Mexico-Querétaro High Speed Train, to mention some of the most emblematic of his administration. In addition to being directed against the neoliberal regime, the purpose is that such peaceful transformation gives rise to a different regime.

López Obrador obtained 54.8% of the valid votes in 2018, won in 31 of the 32 states and in 267 of the 300 federal districts, an electoral 'tsunami' (Sonnleitner, 2020), achieved thanks to the application of a diversified communication strategy focused on the personalization of politics (Hernández, 2019) and citizen dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and the economy, which perceived, in a majority way, that the country was governed by a few powerful groups for their benefit (Latinobarómetro, 2018). All this made it possible to take advantage of the majority strength in congress to approve a redistribution of income in accordance with the government's priority projects (Bartra, 2019).

In previous periods, powerful business groups had enjoyed greater access to state power, thanks to the enthronement of liberal political elites focused on the international market in the face of the narrowing of the domestic market (Salas, 2014), which materialized in regulatory, fiscal, commercial advantages, but also in favorable official rhetoric and a strong propagation of their ideology, although under an atmosphere of conflictive political consensus (Hernández, 2014).

The López Obrador government focused on greater attention to poor and marginalized vulnerable groups, small businessmen, low-income wage earners, indigenous and peasant communities. But various business associations pushed for policy change in a way that would benefit them. In this context, the following questions arise: in what ways was protected agriculture affected by the policies of the Fourth Transformation? What were the reactions of entrepreneurs in this subsector? Why in the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government did business agricultural producers lose power to direct public policy towards protected agriculture, to the benefit of their interests? Why were there changes in the correlation of forces? For and against whom were these changes? And why did support for the production and commercialization of protected agriculture end?

The hypothesis of this work is that, due to the loss of strength of the interests of agricultural business groups in the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government, public policy towards protected agriculture reached a phase of completion, evidenced in the elimination of supports in the federal budget, in which the projects of the new government were prioritized. The objective of this paper was to analyze the termination of public policy for protected agriculture during 2020, based on a critical approach to the conflict between interest groups to advance their issues and block the projects of their rivals in the public sphere, from the perspective of the public policy cycle.

It is of interest to review this perspective because between the phases the possibility of the termination of a policy arises, a matter that deserves to be explained and for this purpose a consideration of the relations between the economic, the government and the normative fields can help, as well as the analysis of the contradictions due to the struggles of interests, which are expressed in state management. In methodological terms, based on the stages of public policies, official information and from producers' associations, a review of the growth of protected agriculture and its changes in public policy is made. By this route, an attempt is made to understand the reactions of the interests affected by the termination of the policy under the government of the Fourth Transformation and the relationship of this management with protected agriculture. At the end, the conclusions of the analysis are presented.

Materials and methods

Between public and private management

A basic issue in public management, seen in an abstract way, has to do with the presence of constraints that undermine its effectiveness, since it is not a matter of a technocratic or administrative nature only but also and mainly economic and political. Marxism has highlighted the immanent contradictions to the development of capital and the class struggle that is inherent in it, which is why accumulation requires state management to make such contradictions manageable, at least during certain periods of time, the character of management defines certain types of accumulation regimes (Chesnais, 2003), to make manageable the self-paralyzing tendencies of capital.

This way of seeing things implies a State separate from the economy, but in reality the State is immersed in the very economic relations (Offe, 2015) and performs functions conducive and appropriate to accumulation (Figueroa, 1995). From another point of view of critical social theory, public management refers to the consideration of economic, political-administrative and normative processes (Offe, 1990).

State management is crossed by contradictions inherent in the universality that is exclusive to it in capitalist societies, since it must articulate the demands of contradictory interests, on the one hand and on the other, because it is responsible for the deficiencies of administrative processes and the tasks aimed at achieving consensus, which makes the State present itself as a superior power to ensure capitalist social reproduction (Boundi, 2020).

However, the demands go beyond the responsiveness of the system of government and its political-administrative institutions, so that disagreement and conflict are guaranteed, since, on the one hand, the private management of production and the tendency of companies to commodify everything that generates profits is opposed to the pressures of social sectors that seek to decommodify the satisfaction of their needs. From the perspective of the theory of capitalist democracy, the impossibilities of advancing beyond a certain point have to do with the irreconcilable conflict between the marginal efficiency of capital and the achievement of the interests of social groups (Figueroa, 2018).

These struggles of interests are expressed in the politicization of the project and the matter of the function of government, that is, public policies (Vilas, 2011; Guerrero, 2014), in each and every one of its phases: setting the public agenda, defining the problem, policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, redefinition and termination (Jann and Wegrich, 2007; Birkland, 2007; Sydney, 2007; Pülzl and Treib, 2007; Wollmann, 2007).

Although the power of the contenders to influence each of the stages of the cycle is variable, the struggle underlies all phases and since the frays occur within the framework of a Nation-state, from a governance perspective, the contenders 'are needed' (Aguilar, 2006) and collaborate to reduce the failures of implementation and the high costs of the politicization of regulation (Ansell and Gash, 2008). That is why the analysis of public policies requires 'a deep understanding of political processes' (Bustelo, 2011).

Since setting the public agenda, groups seek to have their demands included and try to exclude those of other groups that go in the opposite direction to theirs or that tend to hinder their full satisfaction. In these struggles, they try to have their demands recognized as problems and defined in the terms that suit them, trying to influence public opinion to have it in their favor (Williamson and Luke, 2020), which is often not easy, since at every step they are challenged by rival groups and affected, in addition to the inertia of the administrative structures and the set of their available resources.

Efforts to push issues forward and get them recognized still have a rather difficult road to go. The problem must receive proposals for alternative solutions and a formulation that will be implemented must be made, not always with the desired results, because the struggle between rival interests and values permeates the entire cycle of public policy. Public policies are subject to evaluation and scrutiny of different types, to a greater or lesser degree and may continue, according to the correlations of force, possibly reformulated or, it is feasible that the political groups to which this policy sought to benefit lose the fight against other contenders in a change of conditions and correlations of force, so that the public policy in question can be terminated or weakened until it is reduced to insignificance.

Termination is one of the least studied; however, 'the public policy established to face a problem can terminate, which strictly speaking would be understood as abandoning the state agenda, either to disappear completely or to return to being a problem or social issue' (Méndez, 2020). A degree of uncertainty permeates public policies in each of their phases, but when correlations lead to radical changes that cause successions of central power with a high concentration of force, redefinitions occur according to the state of the struggle of interests. There may be several reasons for the termination of policy, but the 'lack of political agreement' is one of the most common and

direct (Méndez, 2020). Next, an attempt to understand the circumstances by which protected agriculture gained strength in Mexico and was the subject of government actions, as well as the tendency to its fall from public consideration.

Results and discussion

Rise of agriculture in Mexico and its public management

Protected agriculture is that carried out under a controlled or relatively controlled climate, with plastic, metal and glass structures, equipped in such a way that it supplies water and nutrients in more efficient ways and optimizes inputs, materials and labor to obtain higher yields production with better quality and that can be carried out without following the seasonality of open-field agriculture. In Mexico, it is mostly dedicated to the cultivation of vegetables, some types of fruits and ornamental plants (Figure 1).

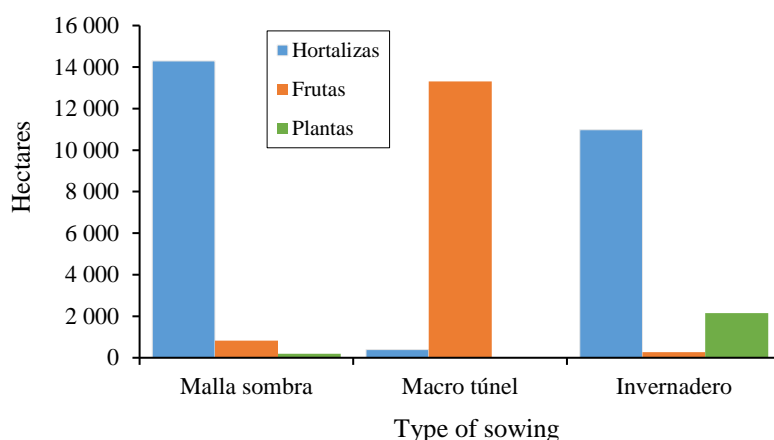


Figure 1. Agricultural area in Mexico 2017 (AMHPAC, 2018).

As can be assumed, an agriculture of this kind requires large sums of investment, depending on the type of structure in question, which is why it is carried out mainly by producers or producer organizations of a business type, some of them with an export orientation. With the advance of capital in agriculture, the protected type began to be used in the middle of the 20th century and from the beginning of the 21st it expanded rapidly in several regions of the country. It is currently practiced in most agricultural areas of Mexico, but in terms of area it is more concentrated in a few entities, mainly in Sinaloa, Jalisco and Michoacán, which account for 56% of the surface, followed by Sonora, Baja California and San Luis Potosí, the State of Mexico and Guanajuato (AMHPAC, 2018).

The area destined to protected agriculture increased from 132 ha in 2003 to 4 877 ha in 2009 and by 2017 it had reached 42 515 ha. Only in 2008, 2013 and 2015 was there a reduction in the area sown compared to the previous year, but the upward trend continued (Figure 2). To develop in this way, this form of agriculture had favorable market conditions, a favorable social environment and proper government management, which helped the success and expansion of this type of business of production and commercialization of food and ornamental plants.

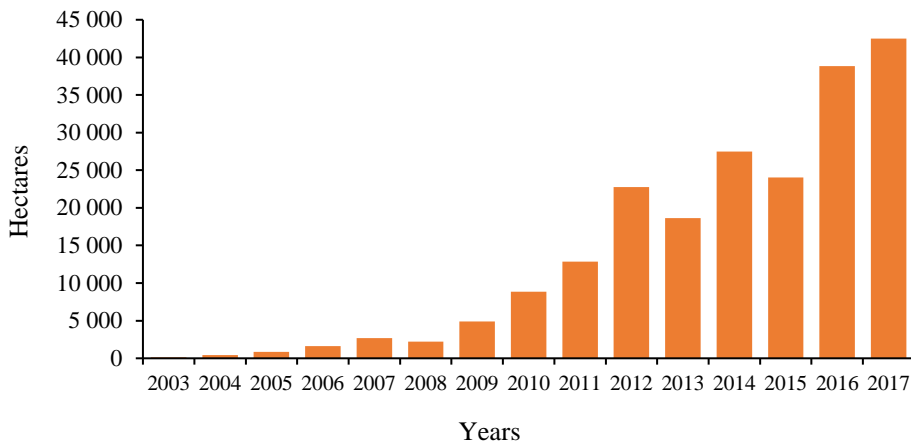


Figure 2. Sown area of protected agriculture, 2003-2017 (AMHPAC, 2018).

The beginning and growth of protected agriculture in the country did not occur in isolation. The demand for vegetables by the United States of America and Canada at times of the year when these countries have greater climatic difficulties to produce them explains the role of Mexico in this area, under the protection of the trade integration regulated by the North American Free Trade Agreement, signed in 1994 by the presidents of the three countries, since this type of agriculture is focused, to a large extent, on export, at least that of the big entrepreneurs of this subsector and mainly in three products: tomatoes, cucumbers and bell peppers (Figure 3), although production has been diversifying into many more products, but without reaching the importance of those that are mentioned.

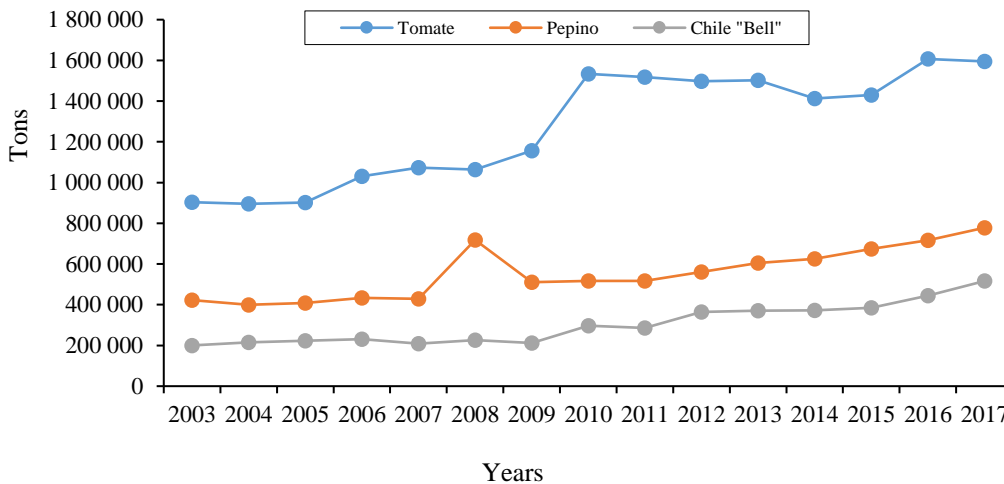


Figure 3. Volume of exports of tomato, cucumber and bell peppers, 2003-2017 (AMHPAC, 2018).

The arrival of Vicente Fox Quesada to the presidency of the republic (2000-2006) led to a greater presence of business groups in state management and with him began the access of business presidents to power in Latin America in this century, without intermediaries (Nercesian, 2021). Various secretariats and important positions were occupied by businessmen, figures from the private sector, educated in national and foreign universities with business orientation.

From the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGARPA), in charge of Javier Usabiaga, a large producer of garlic, support programs were promoted for the establishment of structures of protected agriculture, so that its surface began to grow, as has already been said. The objective was to promote the advancement of capital in agriculture in order to increase export volumes and favor the country's trade balance.

During the Fox Quesada government, a profile of a business-type producer was emphasized, with capital and capacities to establish themselves, sustain themselves and grow, even without the need for government support, but at the same time these were addressed to a large number of producers who did not have resources and could not remain in this environment, cause for which the number of protected agricultural structures grew but concentrated in less than one hectare and with an increase in abandoned or inactive projects (Hernández, 2020).

In the governments of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), protected agriculture continued to have budgetary support, basically for installation and maintenance of structures, although with Peña Nieto resources were reduced (Hernández, 2020). Seen through the perspective of the public policy cycle, protected agriculture rose to the public policy agenda with the direct arrival of businessmen to power, starting with the government of Vicente Fox in 2000 and until 2018 it remained in the field of agricultural public policy.

The fourth transformation and protected agriculture

The persistence of inequality in the distribution of income in the country (Table 1) and the high levels of poverty, beyond the divergences over their types and levels (Figure 4), coupled with the wear of previous governments, caused López Obrador to rethink or terminate several programs and policies.

Table 1. Gini coefficient and distribution of total current income of households by quintile, with and without adjustment to National Accounts, Mexico, 2016.

Coefficient	Without adjustment to CN	With adjustment to CN
National Gini	0.463	0.588
CDMX Gini	0.439	0.542
	(%) income per quintile	
I	4.8	4.3
II	9.1	7.3
III	13.7	10.4
IV	20.6	14.7
V	51.8	63.2
	100	100

Damian (2019).

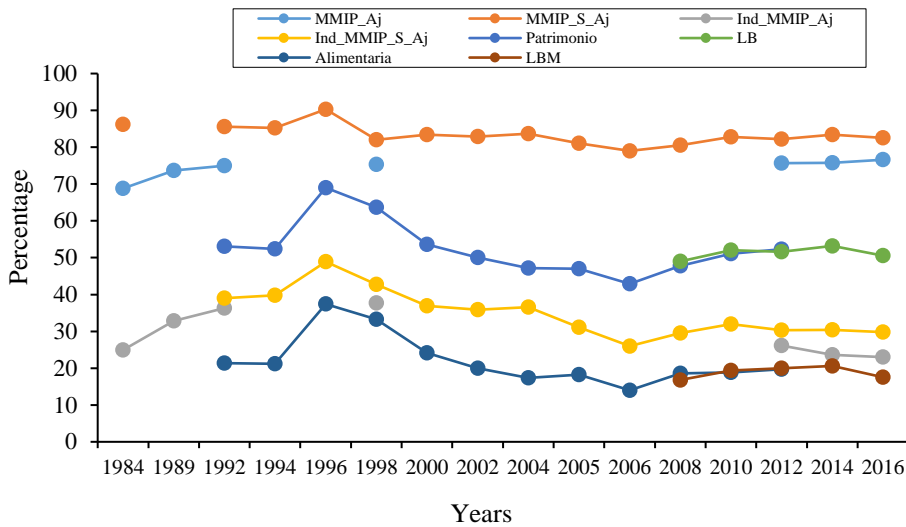


Figure 4. Evolution of poverty in Mexico, various methods (Damián, 2019).

Support for the installation and replacement of plastics of protected agriculture was stopped, credit and public financing were also reduced. In the process of defining the 2019 budget, there were heated debates and various demonstrations against the government by those who saw their support diminish.

Faced with the proposal of the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP) to reduce the budget of the Secretariat of Agriculture and Rural Development (SADER) in 2020 to 46 253.1 million pesos -it had had 65 434.9 million in 2019-, the Permanent Agrarian Congress, the National Agricultural Council, the National Confederation of Rural Landowners, the National Confederation of Livestock Organizations and the National Peasant Confederation disagreed by means of a ten-point letter, of which the following five should be highlighted as the most important.

The need not only for social programs that contribute to overcoming conditions of poverty and marginalization, but also for productive programs that strengthen productive inclusion. The possibility of a sharp fall in agricultural production and an imbalance in the agricultural trade balance, as well as a decrease in the income of rural producers, the deterioration of living conditions and social stability in rural areas.

The need to increase the budget of the productive programs of the countryside to reactivate the economy, the internal market and employment. The importance of not reducing the budget to the countryside, since there would be a risk of moving from a minimal State to a State that is absent and generates poverty. The benefits of taking root the rural population and rebuilding the social fabric through financing, technical assistance, training and support for cultivation, production and marketing, sanitary measures and insurance (La Jornada del Campo, 2019). The comparison between the SHCP’s proposal and what was approved in 2019 is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Budget of the Secretariat of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2019 and 2020.

Program	Approved PEC 2019 (Million pesos)	SHCP 2020 Proposal (Million pesos)	Percentage change
Social and sustainable agro-markets	6 708	-	-100
Livestock Credit to the Word	4 000	1 000	-75
Fertilizers	1 500	1 000	-33
Rural development	5 375	70	-99
Agricultural Productive Capitalization	763	-	100
Comprehensive Agricultural Public Policy Strategies	262	-	100
Agricultural Research, Innovation and Technological Development	987	-	100
Productive Improvement of Soil and Water	731	-	100
Boost to Capitalization	978	-	100
Fisheries and Aquaculture Production Packages	58	-	100
Program of Concurrence with the Federative Entities	2 000	-	100
Livestock Development Program	500	-	100
Access to Finance	424	-	100
Productive Assets and Agrologistics	356	-	100
Agri-food Certification and Standardization	13	-	100
Productive Development of the South Southeast and Special Economic Zones	331	-	100
Strengthening the Production Chain	77	-	100
Shared Risk	99	-	100
Agrifood Health and Safety Program	4 128	3 749	-9
National Information System for Sustainable Rural Development	104	-	100
National Agricultural Research System	35	-	100
Rural development	844	10	-99
Renewable Energies	145	-	100
Fisheries and Aquaculture Productivity Promotion Program	31	-	100
Purchase of milk from domestic producers	1 769	-	100

La Jornada del Campo (2019).

Finally, the approved budget for SADER remained almost as proposed by SHCP. The Fourth Transformation took advantage of its majority strength in Congress and 47 576 million pesos were approved (Cámara de Diputados, 2019). The Undersecretariat of Food and Competitiveness of SADER prepared a document with a diagnosis and the reasons for the policy change (Table 3), in

which it argued that in order to reduce poverty and social inequality, different policies had to be implemented. About the opponents, he wrote that: they intend to give an idea that when there were high budgets for the countryside, the economic and social indicators of the sector were ‘good’ and that in the PPEF 2020, rural producers are ‘abandoned’ to their fate [...], it is such a fallacy the fatality predicted for 2020. The socioeconomic indicators of the sector that are known and the results obtained showed a different and even contrary trend with respect to the growing budgets that were exercised during 2003-2018 (SADER, 2019).

Table 3. Diagnosis and reasons of SADER for the change in public policy for the countryside.

Producers’ incomes are stagnant	Growth in yields per crop is low
The trade balance is decoupled from the budget assigned to SADER	The impact of productive supports was low or null
There is food dependence on basic and strategic crops	Productivity in the agricultural sector is stagnant
The primary sector has a lower growth compared to the growth of the whole economy	There was little access to productive programs
Productive subsidies were concentrated and inequalities between regions and producers increased	The rules of operation of the programs were a barrier to access to supports and articulation
Eighty per cent of the budget was allocated to individual private goods and not to public goods that stimulated the actions of the population as a whole.	There was a high capture of supports by various actors to focus resources in favor of their interests and groups, without dispersing them to the productive regions.

Elaboration based on SADER (2019).

The Special Concurrent Program for Rural Development, as it had been implemented in previous governments, in accordance with SADER, in short: it did not generate better socioeconomic conditions in the countryside because of its orientation to individual private goods, its regressivity, which increases regional and producer inequalities; the decoupling of the various intervention strategies, which leads to duplication or the fact that interventions are cancelled out, the capture of resources by certain sectors of rural society, which generates high transaction costs and that a part of the public resource falls by the wayside; the excessive number of programs that pulverize government action, the lack of clarity in the target populations and in the targeting, which generates dispersion and that producers who do not have the problem are attended to and the high bureaucracy to access the supports, which is expressed in the rules of operation (SADER, 2019).

In this way, the ‘decisive support of the Mexican government’ in the form and terms in which it had been given for business agriculture ended (De Ita, 2014), which, among other things, over the years benefited from public investment in services and infrastructure, better land, greater access to the government in an organized way and a favorable narrative in the State (Turrent, 2018).

Because of the radical reduction in supports, one of the leaders of the National Agricultural Council regretted: ‘the fiscal resources disappear for FIRA, FND, FOCIR and reduce by 50% for Agroasemex, so that not only are the supports to the productive sector reduced, but also those that the development bank can grant in terms of financing and insurance’ (Haro, 2019). The strong struggle began to occur in the definition of the 2019 budget in the Chamber of Deputies, when peasant organizations, businessmen, governors, ‘pressure groups that year after year go to claim their own’ pressed not to be left out of the supports (Bartra, 2019). But the majority force of the group in power prevailed and in the Budget of Expenditures of the Federation 49 291 million pesos were programmed (Cámara de Diputados, 2020).

The budget for business agriculture and within it, protected agriculture, was reduced. However, businessmen continued to push for the government to reconsider policy towards the sector. For example, in the face of the health crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2 that causes the COVID-19 disease, on October 14, 2020, the Mexican Association of Protected Horticulture (AMHPAC) published a text in which fruit and vegetable producers in Ontario, Canada, expressed their satisfaction ‘with the announcement of joint funding from the federal and provincial government of an additional \$11.6 million to further support producers in their efforts to protect agricultural workers during the COVID-19 pandemic’ (AMHPAC, 2020). It is a way of comparing the support that producers in another country receive, compared to the one that is not given to them in Mexico.

Despite criticism, the government backed Mexican agri-food exporters in other ways. For example, in mid-2019, the president of the United States of America threatened to impose tariffs on imports of Mexican tomatoes, but the president of Mexico declared that such a measure would not favor the containment of Central American migration (López, 2019).

The threat was withdrawn but the tomato exporters did not recognize any merit to the López Obrador government, since in a statement of September 19 of the same year, AMHPAC mentioned the suspension of the measure signed by it, the Confederation of Agricultural Associations of the state of Sinaloa (CAADES), the Agricultural Council of Baja California (CABC), the National Tomato Product System (SPTN) and the Association of Vegetable Producers of Yaqui-Mayo (APHYM) with the United States Department of Commerce, without recognizing the support of the regulatory framework, the signature and the political support of the Mexican authorities (AMHPAC, 2019).

It must be said that in the state-of-art protected agriculture in Mexico operate not only national private capital, but also foreign, especially from the United States of America and Canada, highly technified and with access to various financing sources and strategies, led by ‘businessmen and scientists’, since ‘because of how profitable it is, protected agriculture is taken as an investment fund and there are companies that are listed on stock exchanges, at the same time that they use big data and artificial intelligence’ (González, 2020). For small and medium-sized producers in the subsector, basically oriented to domestic markets, the scenario is more complicated due to financial, technical, administrative and marketing problems (Hernández 2020), which are not new to the government of the Fourth Transformation, but they have not disappeared either, unlike financing.

Conclusions

Elements have been contributed to the hypothesis that public policy towards protected agriculture reached a phase of termination with the Andrés Manuel López Obrador government. According to a critical perspective of the public policy cycle, a change in the correlations of forces in state management is a fundamental factor for the completion of a public policy, as was the case of the one analyzed here. Specifically, the following answers to the questions posed in the introduction are reached: The federal government proposed the reduction of public resources for the countryside from the 2020 budget and a reorientation of them. In the project to restrict public spending on the sector, supports for protected agriculture were eliminated.

Agricultural businessmen reacted through their associations and lobbied to prevent the passage of the measure in the Chamber of Deputies, but they did not have enough political strength to achieve it. The loss of power of agricultural businessmen meant the breaking of the cycle of public policy towards protected agriculture and the defeat of their interests in the budgetary field.

The reorientation of the policy towards the countryside, with the weakening of agricultural business interests in the budget and the completion of protected agriculture, took place within the framework of the broad electoral victory of the movement led by López Obrador, in which other priority projects were proposed and had sufficient strength to advance them, with the conviction that a reorientation of policy was necessary to reduce poverty and inequality.

In the struggles that took place from the second half of 2019, over the orientation of the policy for the countryside, the allocation and composition of the budget of the sector, the producers of protected agriculture failed to redefine public policy in their favor. The federal government, faced with multiple demands, with scarce fiscal resources and the decision not to resort to more debt, opted for the disappearance of the supports, taking advantage of its majority strength in Congress. In other words, objective factors were combined with political decisions aimed at a reorientation of government actions.

The critical perspective of the public policy cycle holds that, throughout each of its stages or moments, groups do not stop fighting to push their issues towards the consideration of public management and in order to prevent others from advancing theirs. The political strength of the López Obrador government allowed him to uphold decisions on the issues discussed here and public policy towards protected agriculture was terminated.

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