

## **Citizen Participation and Local Government in Latin America: Advances, Challenges and Best Practices**

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**Citizen Participation and Local Government in Latin America:  
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## **Summary**

In analyzing public administration at the municipal level, in addition to taking on the issue of fiscal decentralization as a condition for the sustainability of government action at the sub-national level, there must also be introduced a set of issues having to do with a particular perspective on local development and the process through which the construction of actors, institutions, and networks for exchanging best practices in conceptualizing social development policies and delivering social services takes place.

In Latin America, it is particularly at this level of government that the current process of strengthening participatory democracy, innovation in the design and implementation of policies of social development, and the construction of the public realm is most plainly evident.

In this document, we explore the issue of the participatory practices of local government that have emerged recently within the framework of the advance of the decentralization process, thereby complementing the first document prepared for the seminar, which was focused on the issue of fiscal decentralization. In that context, we show that the main challenge faced by local governments is that of promoting participatory processes of public administration that really help strengthen local governability through efficient, fair, sustainable, and democratic development policies, within the framework of the new rules of play for fiscal management.

### ***The New Institutional Perspectives on Local Development***

Over the course of the 1990s, international development agencies have made a radical shift in their aid strategies toward strengthening local governments. In so doing, they have responded to the rise of sociopolitical movements for the reform and democratization of the state in Latin America, which have helped propel decentralization and citizen participation in government decision-making.

In that context, the international agencies have advanced significantly in developing participatory approaches for the design and implementation of policies, programs, and projects in local governments.

These agencies have left behind the emphasis on aspects related to development financing as a condition for sustainability of local governments and have plainly recognized the political dimension of local governability, understood in terms of capabilities and institutions. In this sense, the fiscal issue is subsumed into the importance henceforth attributed to the proper exercise of authority.

This approach, based chiefly on citizen participation in local administration, is expressed in many ways depending on how each agency defines it. Nevertheless, they all converge on the importance of building local democracy, asserting that governments at this level have two major tasks: building networks of actors, and creating institutions locally, on the assumption that this complex set of actors involved in the design and implementation of local policies will behave in a responsible and cooperative manner in development actions.

Thus it is from this pluralistic and converging approach of the agencies that the local government development priorities are seen primarily as those strategies and policies aimed at strengthening political

processes of a participatory nature, which are viewed as absolutely necessary for democratic local governability.

Out of that framework, innovations in local development policies, programs and projects are being pressed forward. They encompass technical and political aspects of government management, and community participation mechanisms are being institutionalized to a significant extent at the local level.

New actors and leaders with accountability to the community itself are emerging in the new institutional realm. New types of association are emerging between the public and private sector, and, most importantly, the community is experiencing new ways of participating in government administration.

Raising the issue of participatory democracy has helped prompt local officials to define their own objectives and levels of activities in the main areas of delivery of services. So as to obtain and maintain the participation and cooperation of the community, local governments have found themselves increasingly pressured to demonstrate their ability to step in and deal with key municipal issues. Likewise, the mechanisms of control over their tasks have been enhanced, and by electing local government authorities, the community has increased its pressures on them to make them keep the promises and strategies for which they were elected.

Another significant aspect that appears in this process is that local governments cannot by themselves guarantee democratic governance in their respective areas, because this is a task that is very much of an intergovernmental and inter-organizational nature. The autonomy and sustainability of local governments rests very much on a framework of interdependent relations, the intertwining of municipalities with community associations and social movements, NGOs, private sector organizations, and municipal associations. Mayoral associations in particular have succeeded in consolidating a more decentralized power, by defending local autonomy and making mayors more independent of national party politics.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Local Governments and Social Management***

Citizen participation is regarded as the primary element of innovation in local governance. Since the late 1980s we have been witnessing a debate on this issue throughout the region. This debate has enabled us to move toward a fuller understanding of a set of processes, logics, and institutions that have helped achieve better levels of fairness and has led to the construction of what INDES has come to call the participatory approach of social management.

Social management seeks to foster processes through which citizen participation succeeds in having an impact on a true democratization of the process of shaping social policies. In that sense, participatory social management becomes an innovative practice as it strengthens a set of processes and objectives, such as those that we indicate below:

1. It promotes the establishment of rules and institutions for monitoring and involvement by the citizenry.
2. It fosters conditions whereby the citizenry can construct the public realm, a process that takes place through the culture and practice of deliberation, understood as a process that promotes individual and group practices for pondering, consulting, debating, and carefully analyzing the consequences of different options and considering the different points of view set forth.
3. It fosters processes of deliberation and decision-making that enable the citizenry to attain influence in guiding public policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Municipalities in the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America and The Caribbean, Meeting of the Consulting Group for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America and The Caribbean, Washington, D. C., December 1998.

4. It develops a sense of community and of social commitment that is absent from the traditional (technocratic) system for shaping and implementing policies, when the citizenry participates in the government decision-making process.

For all these reasons, in addition to contributing to the people's self-development, participatory social management forms citizens insofar as it fosters their involvement in the decisions that affect their lives.

In short, citizen participation helps build public space democratically, on the basis of a set of values such as civic commitment, social equality, solidarity, trust and tolerance, and respect for diversity and difference (Rimmerman,1997). Processes of citizen participation in social governance help enhance democracy and social equality, by creating channels and mechanisms inscribed in a new political and institutional framework of participatory democracy.

This participatory approach requires new domains, actors, institutions, and mechanisms that can generate consensus and articulate group action in a democratic context. Below we will review some experiences that reveal the relationships existing between community participation and social management.

### ***Experiences of Institutional Innovation in Latin America***

When we identify a set of best practices of participatory management of development policy on the local level, we are assuming that they meet a set of requirements having to do with the need to link the management of finances with efficiency, transparency and accountability, but also other criteria that assure significant changes in the processes and outcomes of the allocation and handling of fiscal resources, such as the criteria of fairness, sustainability, participation, and building of citizenship, as reflected in the experiences in this section.

During the 1980s the theme of citizen participation became more prominent in the political agendas of the countries of the region. Contributing to it were urban social movements and some political parties, with actions demanding a reform of the state centered on its democratization and modernization. We see emerging here in almost all countries and as a result of group action, the constitutional reforms that establish the frameworks for decentralization and citizen participation. This has helped broaden the scope of government policies, now strengthened at the territorial and municipal level, and has stimulated the development of new forms of citizen participation.

Since the creation of this new environment, experiences of institutional innovation have increased substantially in Latin America. Thus the civic movements that pressured for new constitutions in the various countries, also pressured for reforms based on territorial decentralization and participatory democracy, which we can see in those constitutions. The new demands sought to achieve a greater level of citizen participation in local and national development and to consolidate the democratic order. Their main approach was to redesign the state in order to make it more democratic and more competent, that is, more committed to law and justice, more decentralized, and more capable of achieving development with equity. Hence we see that the reforms have aimed basically at changing the politico-electoral system and at pressing for political, administrative, and financial decentralization.

Against this backdrop, efforts have been undertaken to make the municipality the foundation of the new state, by which municipalization becomes the cornerstone of decentralization. Henceforth, the municipality will be seen as the institution most closely connected to citizens and as the fundamental structure for organizing government services. The primary aim of these reforms over the longer haul is to strengthen democratic culture by institutionalizing processes of participation at the various levels of government.

Local governments have been strengthened through processes of citizen participation that have been extended, expanded and institutionalized to a great extent in many countries in the region. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that citizen participation in municipal policies is running into major obstacles that must be examined. Such difficulties explain why community participation is not deepening democracy as much as expected. Perhaps the main reason for that lies in the fact that the municipalities, most of which are poor, do not have the necessary resources and capacities to carry through with their initiatives. Practices of patronage are still very much present in the operations of municipalities, and their institutional capability continues to be weak.

Below we look at two examples of the process of institutionalizing new spaces of citizen participation in public administration which make necessary specific curricular considerations for social management at the municipal level. The first example is the Bolivian Law on Popular Participation, enacted in 1994. The second is that of the social assistance councils in Brazil.

### The Bolivian Law on Popular Participation

The Bolivian Law of Popular Participation is part of the process of reform of the State, that has been set in motion there, reflecting major changes in the very foundation and conception of the State in the approach and practices of municipal administration in the exercise of local democracy, the distribution of fiscal resources, and the redistribution of power to local actors (Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano- Secretaría Nacional de Participación Popular, 1996).

Complementing that law is the Law on Administrative Decentralization (1996). Together they make up the main thrusts of the process of state reform and modernization in Bolivia. It has aimed at strengthening local governments through a decentralization process that has fostered change in the delivery of public services in keeping with a new territory-based logic.

Within that framework, the indigenous and rural populations, who until then were economically, politically and socially marginalized, achieved legal recognition, and established relations of a new stamp with government institutions.

Through a major institutional reform, an effort has been made to strengthen local governments. That reform has been centered on the election of mayors and municipal councils, increasing municipal resources, strengthening municipal autonomy, collecting their own revenues, and institutionalizing the participation of community organizations in government decision-making.

The following have been the main instruments of this law: i.) twenty percent of State tax revenues are distributed among municipal governments; ii.) where there are indigenous governments, the municipal governments have created indigenous municipal districts, appointing assistant mayors. Consequently, of the 311 existing municipalities, 200 of them have elected 400 indigenous persons to the municipal councils; iii.) the participatory tradition of the Bolivian population is respected, by granting legal standing to around 19,000 grassroots territorial organizations encompassing over 12,000 rural, indigenous, and peasant organizations, and over 5,000 urban neighborhood boards; iv.) oversight committees are created as spaces representing rural and urban areas in defining and carrying out development actions. They are called to examine the action of the local government in delivering services and building local infrastructure, and to participate in municipal development planning exercises. The oversight committees are able to monitor funds allocated to municipal governments for citizen participation; and v) participatory planning is established as an instrument for discussion and for reaching agreement and cooperation between the municipal government and civil society.

Despite the great significance of the law of participation in terms of enhancing both local governments and citizen organizations at the community level and the new relationships between State and civil society that it is fostering, the current balance sheet of this process in Bolivia allows us to identify not only the most important achievements but also its principal problems and challenges (Thévoz, 1998).

- a. Achievements.- The law sought to have implementation take place uniformly and simultaneously throughout the country. In that framework, administrative steps were taken for shaping the municipal governments, the administrative territorial division was rearranged with the participation of local communities, investments in rural areas were prioritized, and investments controlled by the regional and municipal levels were increased. Citizen organizations made extensive use of the provisions set forth in the law.
- b. Problems and challenges.- However, responses on the municipal and community level have not been uniform. In analyzing the effects of this law at the urban and rural municipal level we were able to observe that behavior varied around a set of interrelated factors, namely the following:
  - The effectiveness of the law depends on the municipal actors. Citizen participation is set within pre-existing local dynamics which are characterized by a certain relationship between actors that may be conflictive or cooperative, and which affects the quality of the decisions made. According to the empirical evidence provided by some studies, the law helped reinforce preexisting dynamics of conflict or of agreement between municipal actors.
  - Municipal ability to deal with conflicts is crucial for taking advantage of the law. Where the dynamics are predominantly conflictive, the bad relations between actors get worse. Where dynamics of reaching agreement are established, the creative capacity of the actors to generate consensus responses to problems is fostered.
  - Citizen participation requires significant levels of mobilization and organization of communities in order to demand that the law be applied and that the commitments of local governments to the population be fulfilled.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, we were able to identify the following problems and challenges:

- Inasmuch as this is a process that is aimed at transforming relationships between local governments and communities, the institutionalization of citizen participation requires certain rules and conditions that favor reaching agreement between actors, particularly in those issues that are fundamental for the entire population.
- The previous point entails developing a socio-cultural and socio-political process that transforms the prevailing authoritarian culture into a democratic culture by spreading the benefits and best practices of participation and the advances achieved with the development of deliberative processes in public decision making.

#### Social Assistance Councils in Brazil

The creation of new public spaces as a fruitful way to strengthen democratic types of relationship between the State and Civil Society occurred in Brazil and many other countries in the region in the 1980s and took firm hold in the 1990s, as the outgrowth of the struggles for democratization and dealing with the social crisis that deepened during that period (Raichelis, 1998). Encouragement was given to shaping spaces of citizen participation, which have entailed the transfer of power from the State to organized civil society by setting up councils. These councils must be seen as the experimental design of a new institutional arrangement which involves different actors and spheres, leading to greater transparency of actions of the actors involved, the production of reliable and publicly available information for guiding government deliberations on problems and policies, greater social control over government decisions, democratization of government decisions, and the development of a culture of the public realm based on open socio-political involvement.

In Brazil, as social conditions worsened and the authoritarian character of the state was increasingly questioned, the struggle of the citizenry to democratize the State and society intensified, and was reflected in an impassioned debate on social policies. The upshot was the new constitution in 1988, where the rules guiding the relations between State and society were defined so as to create a new democratic institutional arrangement. The councils for working out social policies were established in that constitution, and they are regarded as one of the main democratic innovations in that domain.

The councils for managing social policies are arrangements for social participation on the three levels of government, which allow for the active participation of organized civil society in government decisions and in the exercise of social control over government actions. They exist in different areas: health, social assistance, children and juvenile rights, etc. They are composed equally of representatives from civil society and the government, and their main function is to deliberate on policies in each sector, and to monitor their execution. It is precisely this deliberative function performed by the councils that enables us to highlight their influence on the democratization of social policies, because they transform traditional state practices based on authoritarianism, patronage, and personal appropriation of public assets that are very much present in the countries of the region.

The most important aspects of the councils as experiences of citizen participation in social policy are as follows:

- The councils create new relationships between citizenry and State.
- They make it possible for citizen participation to influence government decision making
- They bring about changes in the State and society
- They build and democratize the public realm
- They are spaces in which many social subjects act collectively to build and give meaning to such spaces, primarily in the municipal domain
- They seek to broaden and strengthen local power

This experience of the councils has unleashed a broad process of social mobilization involving different forces such as citizen movements, community associations, NGOs, business organizations, welfare and philanthropic groups, thereby creating new spaces of debate and interconnection around social policies and programs.

Certainly, as they have developed, major challenges have arisen and are posed both to the State and to citizens. They have to do primarily with the need for those very government institutions to open up to participation, by changing their organizational culture and their own institutional practice. A second challenge lies in the need to articulate the different demands and interests of civil society, generating networks and encouraging forums and public debates. A third challenge has to do with the fact that the new spaces of citizen participation in reaching political decisions make it necessary to have a set of (analytical and proposal-making) capabilities and to keep developing them, just as it demands ethical attitudes and values consonant with the process of shaping and managing public policies. Finally, the councils should be accountable to society and hence they must open up and promote a broad debate with society, so that they can be at its service.

### ***Preliminary Conclusions***

In the new context of State decentralization, local governments increasingly have the enormous responsibility of contributing significantly to building equitable and democratic societies. In order for them to develop and take firm hold, local governments must take on a set of challenges that make it necessary to generate new knowledge, skills, and abilities as contained in the following themes:

- i. management of processes for reaching agreement, managing conflicts, and bringing about consensus
- ii. encouragement and development of community organizations
- iii. cultural change and learning at the organizational level
- iv. management of networks of government and social actors
- v. handling and coordination of relations with the community
- vi. handling and coordination of participatory spaces: assemblies, forums, workshops
- vii. strategic planning tools
- viii. tools for management and participatory evaluation of programs and projects

Management of social policies, programs, and projects at the local level is a participatory process full of complexities, uncertainty, and conflicts, but it is a road that must be taken in order to achieve equity and quality in the development of our local democracies.

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