

Democracy and social participation in Latin American cities

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Democratisation, structural adjustment, state reform (including decentralisation), and liberalisation of the economy (including privatisation) have brought about dramatic changes in the nations, societies, and cities of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). As central governments devolve greater responsibilities to them, local governments are obliged to perform new roles and strengthen their managerial capacity to cope with increasing urban problems and popular demands. In response to the state's inability to address local problems, there has been a flourishing of civil society organisations (CSOs) engaging in self-help initiatives, building social networks and mutual support groups in order to meet their basic needs (see article by Joseph in this volume; McCarney 1996). To deepen democracy and promote popular participation in resolving urban issues calls for clear guiding principles and methodologies. These should be based on the wealth of experience Latin American cities have acquired over the years.

Re-reading the context

Modernisation

Within the new global scenario, a series of social, economic, and political changes have spread across the planet. *Modernisation* has brought with it the reorganisation of both capital and the state. This is being achieved through the so-called *flexibilisation* of labour, which seeks to eliminate legal and trade-union-based forms of protection for workers, and through market *deregulation*, which seeks to stimulate commercial activity and allow private business to fix prices and determine the quality of products.

The state is being reorganised around the redistribution of a series of functions and responsibilities among non-governmental actors. Privatisation policies mean that the more profitable functions are being

sold cheaply to large national and multinational companies, while unprofitable social policies are handed over to municipalities, the churches, NGOs, and citizens themselves. This is accompanied by the streamlining of the state, which includes lay-offs as well as reductions in public spending and investment in the social sector. Meanwhile, the state's repressive apparatus, its mechanisms for controlling the population, and political patronage networks, remain intact.

Globalisation

The key to this scenario is the process by which national economies are becoming internationalised. Foreign trade is increasing, and a global economy is consolidating as transnational corporations grow stronger and develop new strategies. Countries and cities now depend to a greater degree on the dynamics and behaviour of the global economy, in which the movement of capital, information, and physical inputs determine the patterns of production and consumption. Yet the various macro-economic adjustments – the new rules for local markets and the dismantling of forms of social protection – benefit only a few and bring about the growing impoverishment of the majority.

Latin America and the Caribbean: an increasingly urban region

One component of this scenario in the LAC region is the tendency towards urbanisation. The region now has more than 500 million inhabitants (more than Europe), with 70 per cent of them living in urban areas. Currently, it has 36 cities with populations of over one million, two of the five largest cities in the world, and eight of the world's 50 largest cities. Populations are concentrated in one or two major cities in each country, but medium-sized cities are growing rapidly.

The 16,000 municipalities in the LAC region form a highly heterogeneous set of cities and towns. Even within countries, cities differ markedly in size, location, economic and productive functions, history, culture, and relationships with external environments and markets. It is thus difficult to speak about *the* Latin American city. But where cities differ least is in their concentration of populations whose basic needs are unmet and whose quality of life is deteriorating. And cities lack the capacity to receive new population influxes in the short or the long term.

The phenomenon of urban growth in the midst of economic recession has meant that cities do not have the necessary resources to

maintain, much less to improve, basic infrastructure and services (see article by Allen in this Reader). In addition, unemployment is rising, poverty is growing, private investments have dropped, and the norms of neighbourliness and co-existence are giving way to various forms of violence. Meanwhile, low-income groups face increasing problems of access to housing and urban services. It is no easy matter to promote equitable, democratic, efficient, and environmentally sustainable forms of urban development against such a backdrop.

Consolidating democracy and citizenship through local governments and civil society

A central issue in the current reform of the state involves the transfer of powers from national to local governments, principally in order to relieve pressure on national government institutions and to transform the municipality, assigning it roles and functions so that it can provide better services. The challenge here is also to transfer decision making, technical capacity, financial resources, and administrative autonomy in a way that facilitates democratic management of local affairs.

The problems of Latin American cities create new demands on, and challenges to, the international community, national governments, local bodies, and local society. These go beyond current administrative, technical, and financial policies and capacities for managing urban development. The challenges require a broadening and strengthening of the capacities of social organisations and institutions. It is thus important to recognise the specific competences and dynamics of national government and municipal institutions, as well as those of NGOs and communities. Arenas for consultation, co-ordination, interrelation, and co-operation among all these actors are vital, for it is here that the conditions and guiding principles necessary for local development are negotiated.

Guiding principles for local development

- *Constituting a new realm of sustainable development:* The objective would be to balance human welfare with nature, based on the values of democracy, equality before the law, and social justice, for present and future generations; without discrimination based on gender, creed, ethnicity, economic, social, or political status.
- *Broadening the democratic management of cities:* This would entail forms of planning, building, operating, and governing cities that are based on the participation of and control by all social actors and local

social institutions, where the common good would prevail, with respect for local cultural values and attention to the need for long-term sustainability.

- *Constructing citizenship*: Inhabitants and their organisations would exercise their rights and would fulfil their obligations in full. Decisions would be based on consensus, multilateral dialogue, negotiation, and political will, in a context of transparency, public consultation, and adequate information and knowledge of the affairs related to the management of the locality.

Local governments, democracy, and citizenship

Local governments are the institution of government closest to the everyday lives and problems of citizens, and they exercise partial governance over the city.¹ This points to the need to broaden and strengthen citizenship as a starting point for deepening democracy, while at the same time assisting the municipality in managing the affairs of the city. It is in the meeting place between citizens and the state that progress can be made in building broader forms of democratic government, that is, *good government*. It is, therefore, vital that the municipality is strengthened through effective decentralisation and de-concentration, and through the existence of a free and active civil society (Rodríguez and Winchester 1996).

NGOs and popular organisations: initiating processes and influencing policies... the quality of life in cities is not a matter which only involves the state or which is exclusively conditioned by the market. In fact, civil society has exercised the right to intervene in the city. (Ediciones Sur 1996: 7)

Resolving the problems of cities and the urban habitat in Latin America is enormously difficult within traditional frameworks of government practice and formal market mechanisms. Bureaucracy, corruption, political patronage, and lack of creativity on the part of the state have been obstacles to addressing the needs of low-income groups. The private sector, because of its profit-seeking logic, is not geared towards low-income populations. Popular and grassroots actors have, therefore, developed their own strategies and mechanisms for fulfilling these needs and for some years now, NGOs, community-based organisations, and other popular organisations have played a role in habitat-related activities.

While acknowledging the limited reach and impact of their programmes, NGO-supported popular processes often reinforce the principle of:

ensuring that projects contribute to the development of autonomous social subjects, capable of representing themselves, capable of promoting their own interests in aspects which concern them, capable of interacting from a favourable position with other actors and agents each of which responds to its own logic. (Unda 1996)

Thus:

In the neighbourhoods of Latin America's cities, social organisations and non-governmental organisations do many things: they design and build housing, roads, streets, and pathways; they install potable water, sewage, and electrical services; they renovate neighbourhoods; they confront emergencies – earthquakes, floods, economic crisis, civil wars; they attend to food and health needs; they give courses and technical training in the development and management of socially oriented projects; they formulate proposals and develop studies; they revitalise neighbourhood-level economic networks; they hold meetings, broadcast the problems of the city, demand solutions, collaborate in forming groups, in linking institutions, in promoting spaces for multilateral dialogue and negotiation; they design, articulate, and manage socially oriented projects together with governmental agencies and institutions; they incorporate public and other available resources; and they seek to develop replicable processes. (Ediciones Sur 1996: 36)

The thousands of efforts of this kind around the world show that it is indeed possible for society to move forward, serving to initiate genuine political processes and influence public policy. Such efforts often inspire others and are replicated, transferred, and disseminated. As such, they offer a ray of hope. But to achieve their full potential, these organisations must be free to set up and initiate actions for and with residents, and to have the full moral support of local authorities in doing so.

Challenges for Latin American cities: obstacles and opportunities

In moving towards local development that is guided by the principles listed above, Latin American cities will face a series of major challenges in order to:

- alleviate poverty;
- raise the efficiency and competitive strength of the urban economy;
- improve urban environmental quality;
- develop and consolidate democratic governance;
- increase the efficiency of urban management and service delivery; and
- strengthen respect for cultural values and diversity.

Several major obstacles lie in the path, but there are also opportunities that may help us to build a new kind of city, and both the obstacles and the opportunities demand creativity in our handling of them. The obstacles include:

- the fact that neither urban planning, improvisation, nor clientelistic practices have been successful;
- shortage of financial resources in local governments, high turnover of local government officials, political and economic instability, and corruption;
- dreams of a city that we cannot build and manage (e.g. Singapore, San Francisco, Barcelona);
- property speculation spurred by liberalisation and deregulation.

The opportunities include the following:

- the democratisation process occurring in the region may help to strengthen local governments and increase community participation;
- decentralisation may deepen democracy, given the emergence of local government as an important actor;
- existing social capital in LAC societies may introduce innovative ways of dealing with urban problems;
- globalisation might favour those LAC cities with a comparative advantage in the world market.

An alternative approach to managing Latin American cities

The city is an integrated and complex system, whose management, among other things, has to deal with issues of building, development, and maintenance. How urban growth and development take place and are managed, and the availability of adequate land for residential areas and the provision of housing and services, are matters of collective social concern, and are not the monopoly of the political and intellectual élites.

People's participation in planning and in decision-making processes is indispensable to handling complex urban affairs in a democratic fashion. As we often see in Latin American cities, unilateral decisions are the basis of an inegalitarian and authoritarian society and need to be addressed head-on.

Among the greatest obstacles to be overcome are the perceptions and influence of what we might call the economic pragmatists. Particularly misguided is the view that social infrastructure and services in human settlements are 'non-productive' investments, and so should be made only if resources are remaining after 'productive' investments have been made. The simplistic use of econometric models, based on the primacy of economic growth, obscures the complex intersectoral connections in the development of human settlements. In so doing, such positions diminish the possibility of placing human settlement processes at the centre of social and economic change.

Increasing poverty is one of the LAC region's greatest problems today. Neither poverty, hunger, nor the lack of housing and services, constitutes a problem in itself. The problem arises when hunger is not followed by access to enough food; when the need for shelter is not satisfied by good-quality houses; when basic facilities are either inadequate in themselves, or in insufficient supply. The contradiction between needs and their satisfaction is seen in the poverty that is caused through the exploitation of low-income groups. It is impossible to overcome urban problems in such a situation. Key structural reforms need to be introduced to allow new initiatives to develop. These need to address: the reorientation of national priorities to resolving the problems affecting poor people; reforms to develop the democratic management of cities; mechanisms to increase popular participation in the cities; institutions, politics, and social action for processes of decentralisation to the grassroots; and establishing a just equilibrium

between participation of the state, the private sector, and civil society. These issues are discussed in greater detail below.

An urgent change in priorities: the fight against poverty

The challenge we face in the LAC region can be met only if we face it fully. This means *urgently shifting priorities* towards attending to the substantive problems and needs of Latin America's low-income groups. First and foremost, the problem is poverty. If we fail to address this, the prospects for strengthening democracy will disappear and existing social unrest will certainly rise. Confronting and resolving the problem of poverty will have to be sustained by changes in four areas, each constituting a pillar of support to a new democratic approach to improving the living conditions of the urban poor. The result of such changes will be a 'city for all', which assures egalitarian access to land, housing, and services – not just a watered-down and formalistic version of democracy.

Towards democratic city management

In Latin America, the shadow of totalitarianism is ever present. This constitutes a threat to democratic processes, which are already difficult enough to get off the ground. Totalitarian regimes are seldom concerned with solving the problems of poor people; rather, they usually reproduce a more intense and generalised form of poverty, which may be witnessed in the form of increasing social and spatial segregation in the cities. Such segregation perpetuates differential access to land, housing, and services, according to whether one lives in the legal or the illegal city. Reversing these trends requires far more than the right to elect government representatives. In Latin America, the ballot has, to date, offered little alternative to vertical governmental structures and procedures that are usually both bureaucratic and lack mechanisms for popular participation. Indeed, low-income and marginalised groups do not feel their interests are represented by national or local representatives.

The responsibility for democratising society overall, and the management of cities in particular, ultimately lies with popular organisations, provided that their autonomy and dynamics are respected by government. However, democratic management at the local level also requires some complementarity on the part of national institutions. Municipal governments, with popular support, will need appropriate levers and instruments for demanding that central governments assure them the means to secure resources for public

works, service provision, and effective popular participation in regional and national structures of governance.

Other aspects of complementary democratisation will be needed in relationships between majorities and minorities; between local governments and people's organisations; among mayors, officers, and councillors; and between the executive body of local government and its legislative structure. If it is not possible to converse and debate openly with all local actors then the advance of democracy will be an uphill struggle.

Popular participation

Strong social organisation is indispensable to the democratic management of cities. This often begins with low-income groups organising around efforts to improve their material conditions. But processes such as these can and often do promote broader democratisation within society. The chances of this happening are better when local authorities and popular organisations develop a mutual appreciation and respect for the other's field of action. This can be promoted best by establishing a legal framework for promoting and protecting the existence and functioning of local civil society organisations, developing the political will within local authorities to work with them, and making it possible for CSOs to access the resources they need to participate more fully in decision-making processes. An indicator of success in democratising local governance would be CSO participation in defining urban policy priorities after municipal elections. Finally, democratisation is a process of building up social dynamics, starting from the base of society – the community – and ascending to the national level. But local-level democracy cannot be established without it first existing at the national level.

Decentralisation from a popular perspective

Popular participation must operate within a properly decentralised state if it is to contribute to democratic urban management. The common argument that the decentralisation of the state will, in and of itself, enhance democratic urban management and people's participation is based on a myth. Recent experiences in Latin America show that local societies and cities often remain in the power of traditional local élites and national authorities even after some forms of decentralisation have been implemented.

From a community perspective, it is imperative that different local groups (neighbourhood or community associations, local planning groups, etc.) are capable of expressing their demands and defining alternative approaches to their own problems. Local governments play a central role in this, given that they are the nearest form of power with which community groups will have contact. But, in order for them to channel popular participation, their structures must be adapted to allow and promote such participation and to be sensitive to the demands emerging from it. Above all, the kind of decentralisation process we need is one that distributes power, decisions, and allocation of resources democratically and on a long-term basis.

Democratic decentralisation means, for example, rethinking external debt, especially debt contracted by local and national governments to provide housing and services. If new loans are needed because of a lack of local financial resources, these should be made according to local and national priorities and under terms that do not cause social dislocation to the majority low-income population (see the article by Kundu in this volume).

Decentralisation has the potential to fragment the initiatives either of the people or of the local authorities. For example, the creation of too many local authorities or agencies could lead to ineffective planning and a lack of co-ordination regarding broader regional or national problems. Thus, what is needed is a dual perspective in which local problems and actions are approached with an understanding of macro-level context. Decentralisation should be based on the recognition that some problems cannot be resolved at the local level alone but have national or global ramifications: for instance, inflation, technological change, mass media, external debt, and international co-operation.

A new equilibrium between state, private sector, and community-based actors

Whether poor people can acquire assured access to land, housing, and basic urban services, and attain better living conditions, depends on achieving a more equitable equilibrium among three interdependent sets of social actors: the state, the private, and the popular (community) sectors.

In highly simplified and idealised terms, the three sectors concern themselves with the following functions. The state is society's regulatory agent, so it has to be strong enough to manage the economy and international relations, guarantee social peace, and provide basic

services while allowing broad participation of all social groups in state structures and operations. Among its regulatory functions, the most important is to strengthen democracy. The private sector's major concern is to earn profits and its importance to the national economy cannot be underestimated. However, in recent decades its forms of operation have tended to undermine the capacity of the state to mitigate the unequal distribution of wealth. The community sector, which until now has been marginalised from decision making, has demonstrated an increasing dynamism and capacity to offer solutions to society's problems. From its position of economic and social disadvantage, this sector presses for democratic development processes.

With the state increasingly adopting the private sector's orientation towards profitability as a criterion for public investment, the possibility of providing social services to the broad majority is diminishing daily. Thus, housing and urban facilities for poor people continue to deteriorate at an alarming rate. So, too, do the prospects for integrating those who live and work in the informal economy into a comprehensive programme of social development.

Overcoming this persistent injustice is the collective responsibility of the state, civil society, and the private sector. But this must begin with the state's reassertion of its central role in planning national and local development. Without this there is no way to attain a healthy balance among different social groups and their interests. Harnessing the market for social development does not require transforming market relations. But it does require overcoming the market's incapacity to distribute wealth equitably enough to allow low-income groups to earn sufficient to pay for the services and facilities to which, as citizens, they have rights.

Civil society, and especially organisations of low-income groups, must also be given a role in planning and decision making. At present, the conditions for their effective participation in such activities are often weak. Meeting their own survival needs absorbs most of the time and energy of poor people. Both improvements in living conditions and the establishment of more direct channels of participation in decision making are precursors to achieving a better equilibrium among the state, civil society, and the market.

Criteria for popular participation in community development and management programmes

When designing and implementing elements of popular participation in community development and management programmes some basic criteria need to be followed:

- *Sense of totality*: Consider the city as well as the social group as a whole. Initiatives that are conceived and developed as isolated actions reproduce individualism at the community level and a dislocation between policies and actions more generally.
- *Political sense*: Consider the general political scenario. Programmes or projects that are conceived and designed without a careful analysis of the political context might fail because of unanticipated external constraints.
- *Sense of autonomy*: Support efforts of the community to acquire capacities and establish conditions for making autonomous and critical decisions about what matters to them. Support training processes that transfer knowledge, which is a step towards gaining power.
- *Sense of reality*: Avoid paternalistic and artificial conditions when conceiving and developing programmes or projects. The likelihood that a popular housing process will succeed lies precisely in the degree of long-term self-sufficiency that can be developed by the group involved.
- *Sense of continuity*: Understand that the housing processes of poor people are 'endless' and changeable. Interventions should be based on an understanding of the notion of process that is embodied in the development of popular neighbourhoods.
- *Sense of respect*: Be extremely respectful of people's commitments and behaviour. External agents, including progressive NGOs, are involved only temporarily; the people living in the community are permanent. If external agents are to work in a community they should respect the nature and the dynamics of the people, their organisations, and their leaders.

Conclusion

As the urban habitat deteriorates, so too does the quality of life for its residents. The poor majority are most severely affected by the quality of their habitat so, if we wish to improve their situation, we need an integrated approach to improving their habitat. This requires nothing less than building and maintaining an equitable and democratic city, a city that makes healthy living conditions equally accessible to everyone through effective participatory decision making.

To realise this 'utopian city for all' that offers access to land, housing, and urban services on an egalitarian basis, depends on there being genuine democracy throughout society – as a whole and in the management of urban issues. In the third millennium, most human beings will live in cities and towns; thus we must learn to live and let live. Twenty-first-century human society will require democratic and governable peoples who are prosperous and efficient, who express solidarity and justice, who are healthy and who support life, who feel safe and respect the rights of others, who share collective identities and a creative culture. Society has a historic responsibility to construct cities and towns that meet these conditions. Creating the social and political will to enable everyone to join in efforts to achieve these ideals is the task ahead.

Note

- 1 'Governance' is used to refer to the way in which power is exercised in a society. The concept of governance recognises not only that authorities govern society, rather that they are part of a complex network of interactions between institutions and groups. Governance is that network of interactions. The citizenry is established when people are incorporated into and actively influence this network (Rodríguez and Winchester 1996).

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