



Citizenship and Civil Society as Key Elements for Democratic Strengthening: A New Approach to Regional Cooperation between the European Union and Latin America

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Abstract

This paper presents a new model that incorporates citizenship and civil society as key sources of the information required to expand knowledge and improve the policy formulation needed for democratic strengthening in the programme of regional cooperation between European Union (EU) and Latin America. The magnitude of the current world financial crisis presents opportunities to create new approaches to promoting democratic governance. The paper argues for the inclusion of civil society as another sphere of politics that is highly relevant for improving knowledge on democratic performance. Finally, the paper argues in favour of improving reciprocal inter-regional perceptions of democracy and the acceptance and inclusion of citizenship as a central agent of social change, democratic consolidation, social justice and sustainable human development.

Summary of Recommendations

It is time to formulate an improved model of democracy that includes more elements and embraces the meaning and importance of citizenship. More detailed and target-oriented policy formulation would optimize direct forms of citizen involvement. The state should recognize its inability to solve all the problems of society. It must realize that financial resources are limited, which increases the importance of accepting inputs and help from civil society. For their part, members of civil society have to change their behaviour, leaving behind their individualism and inertia in order to become involved in civic and democratic actions oriented towards transforming the existing social order. Future policies for democratic action should generate innovative programmes and projects that can fill the vacuum associated with previous models, increase citizen involvement in political affairs and promote integration between government officials and citizens, resulting in a new form of citizen diplomacy for state building. Concrete actions and programmes must be formulated that are oriented towards strengthening citizen involvement in democratic decision-making processes and in designing solutions to problems of public concern. This should be treated as a unique opportunity for the European Union to re-evaluate its relationships with Latin America, not only to help

governments in their efforts to restore their credibility, but also to improve reciprocal understanding and enhance the quality of the fragile democracies in the region.

1. Introduction

In the results of recent regional international public opinion surveys, such as Latinbarometer and the Latin American Public Opinion Project, democracy is valued and preferred by the majority of the population, but the performance of its public actors and institutions is severely criticized. According to Bernardo Sorj (2007: 98), ‘the clash between the expectations created by a democratic culture and the social and political-institutional reality is expressed in a loss of confidence in democracy itself as a political system.’

There is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the political discourse that frames social policies for development. The rhetoric of such discourse contradicts that of democratic governance and statesmanship as conceived in the new paradigms that emphasize ‘the use of public policy to ensure a baseline of social services to limit social exclusion and the deterioration of the most impoverished sectors’ (Sorj 2007: 101).¹ Instead of strengthening the credibility and legitimacy of political regimes and their institutions, the prevailing political discourse and the perception among citizens that the political system fails to deliver increases mistrust and curtails public involvement in public affairs. As a result, this perverse combination of disaffection and unwillingness to participate in the public realm contributes to social and political exclusion, undermining people’s involvement in politics. It also generates reasons to question optimistic considerations about the consolidation of democracy in Latin America and reinforces tendencies to search for alternative and more realistic paradigms for attaining social justice and sustainable human growth. In addition, rather than strengthening ties between the two main spheres of politics: the state and the civil society, this discourse increases the distance between them. It implies that elites will be un-checked in making decisions about the use and destiny of public goods, while the governed resolve to have nothing to do with politics or public decision-making because of the government’s perceived illegitimacy.

This ambivalence is aggravated by the negative impact of the worst global financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression. Although the optimistic tend to think that Latin America will not suffer drastically from it, the medium- to long-term consequences of this rupture will inevitably affect the channelling of resources to policies that are seen as less urgent than measures to counteract the growth of poverty, unemployment and economic recession, with all their negative consequences. Unfortunately, the allocation of resources to promote the strengthening of democratic participatory processes has not been a priority either at the national or the international level.

Most of the available resources for social development and economic progress in Latin America are managed by and channelled through governments, which implies that more attention and energy must be put into regaining governmental legitimacy. This trend goes hand in hand with the emphasis that most studies and evaluations of the quality of democracy place on identifying and implementing changes to promote social

¹ This is what in essence Bernardo Sorj underlines from the ‘Third Way model’, which Anthony Giddens presents in his renowned work *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (1994).

equilibrium in the region. There is ample evidence of an emerging state-centric tendency (Levine and Molina 2007; Murillo and Osorio 2007a).

An alternative view that has gained prominence is that democracy does not result only from the actions and decisions of official actors and institutions. This view stresses the importance of how the governed behave in relation to what is public. In recent years, categories and variables that stem from civic action have been added. This has expanded the horizon of analysis for measuring and evaluating the quality of democratic performance, that is, what is implemented in the political arena, against the perceptions of the government and the governed.

2. Citizenship as one Aspect of Democracy

It would be useful for policy-makers to formulate an extended model of democracy that includes more elements beyond state-centrism and that embraces to a larger extent the meaning and importance of *citizenship*. Such a model would open the door to evaluating the limitations of liberal individualism, which emphasizes personal needs and actions to attain freedom, and to a move towards a more communitarian and republican perspective. Many Latin American countries are in fact seeing a growing acceptance of the citizen as a new political actor. Instead of limiting their political and transformative potential to gaining respect for personal interests and to human rights obligations, citizens are also becoming aware that the social order to which they belong can be transformed, and that a commitment is required to realize this transformation for the general benefit of the public good.

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The implications of this tacit interdependence between state and citizens indicate that the agents for social change in these two political spheres are experiencing a need to modify their ways of interacting in order to jointly confront the problems that affect them. This transformation requires new behaviour from actors and institutions from both spheres. The state should recognize its inability to solve all the problems of society. It must realize that financial resources are limited, which increases the importance of accepting inputs and help from civil society. This is particularly important in moments of economic crisis such as we are currently experiencing.

For their part, citizens and the civil society have to change their behaviour, leaving behind individualism and inertia in order to become involved in civic and democratic actions oriented towards transforming the existing social order. Such a change in posture and behaviour by these actors and institutions cannot happen in isolation. Both sides must increase their awareness of the social meaning of their involvement – and of public policy in general, including international cooperation and aid – and actively participate in promoting citizen empowerment and democracy in Latin America.

To achieve these goals, concrete actions and programmes must be formulated that are oriented towards strengthening citizen involvement in the democratic decision-making processes. This should be treated as an opportunity for the European Union (EU) to re-evaluate its relationships with Latin America, not only to help governments in their efforts to restore their credibility, but also to support enhanced quality of the fragile democracies in the region.

3. The European Union and the Promotion of Democracy

Evidence of the EU's institutional interest in the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights is abundant and can be found in countless sources. It would be impossible to include all this information in a short paper such as this. Nevertheless, in order to convey an idea of the essence of this process, it is sufficient to note that over the past 15 years, it started with the inclusion of a standard clause (article) by the Council of the European Union in the Treaty, formalizing the EU's commitment to democracy promotion. The European Parliament backed this goal with the establishment of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (Klaus 2007). Subsequent regional development cooperation programming and presidential summits between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean (at Guadalajara in 2004 and Vienna in 2006) have been important elements in the definition of a partnership between the two regions. For the period 2007 to 2013, three areas of regional activity have been established: social cohesion, which includes reducing poverty, inequality and exclusion; regional integration and economic cooperation; and human resources and mutual understanding.

The EU's commitment to promotion of the essential elements of democratic progression will have a decisive impact on the processes of strengthening Latin America's democratic systems and enhancing its institutional legitimacy.

The EU should take this opportunity to pause and rethink the opportunities for implementing a paradigm shift in democracy support to include to a higher extent the role of citizens. The multiple obstacles and enemies of multilateral cooperation for development, such as environmental deterioration, natural disasters, narcotraffic, violence and poverty, reflect structural problems which require solutions that offer new prospects for involving civil society. Today, there are numerous reports and expert opinions on these issues. However, although civil society involvement is mentioned frequently, detailed considerations of or even allusions to tangible forms of citizen participation and empowerment remain absent in programming.

Regional programmes for development cooperation that promote partnerships between the EU and Latin America and specifically address civil society (i.e. ALFA, URB-AL, ALBAN and @lis.EUROsocial) offer excellent opportunities to develop additional and more specific policies and procedures to institutionalize new forms of enhancing citizen participation. Since the beginning of the 21st century, most of the beneficiaries of these programmes have belonged to the civil society sphere. More detailed and target-oriented policy formulation would optimize direct forms of citizen involvement and promotion of citizen participation at both the formulation and the implementation stage.

4. More Dimensions for an Extended Model of Democracy

To this end, a series of questions are presented that could advance policy formulation in the promotion of democracy with a more clear incorporation of citizen perceptions and citizen involvement in politics for the quality of democracy. Five dimensions can be defined (see for example Levine and Molina 2007).

1. **Citizen Electoral Decisions:** Are there sufficient guarantees to honour the freedom of choice?

2. **Participation:** What forms for citizen participation in politics are constitutionally valid? Are they used by citizens?
3. **Responsibility:** Are citizens' aware of their right and obligations to become involved in politics? What can be done to extend information?
4. **Responsiveness and Accountability:** Are citizens satisfied with the government's performance? Are they satisfied with elected officials and the way in which they manage institutions? Are they aware of available means to demand accountability?
5. **Sovereignty:** Is there recognition of the government's ability to implement its own initiatives and policy priorities once they have been validated through the use of legal mechanisms for public consultation?²

5. Democracy Promotion by the EU: Proposals for an Alternative Incremental Programme of Work

A new approach to the promotion of democratic strengthening as a key component of multilateral cooperation for development should enable the new policies for promoting democracy to be rooted in comprehensive knowledge of the performance of political actors and institutions in the two principal spheres of politics: the state and civil society. Departing from this, future policies for democratic action should generate innovative programmes and new projects that can fill the vacuum associated with previous models. They should increase genuine citizen involvement in political affairs and promote integration between government officials and citizens, resulting in a new form of citizen diplomacy for state building. The EU could play a part in such a process.

- The EU should sponsor and facilitate research projects to promote and refine the conceptual knowledge on the quality of democracy in a broader perspective, taking into account the role of citizenship.
- A pilot project could be implemented to test the measurement of democracy in accordance with the broader definition model adopted. This could be accomplished on a comparative basis in various countries in different political, economic and social situations, subject to the availability of funds.
- This stage could serve as a bridge between presentation of this innovative work and the identification of an inter-institutional international strategy that should result in the formulation of new policies and recommendations, in which civil society and the citizen would be central as both beneficiaries and agents of democratic strengthening.
- The EU should create specific projects aimed at the promotion of civic education in the formal and non-formal sectors. This process should train community leaders to act as multipliers in order to include more segments of the citizenships. The role of the mass media will also be important. In addition, new encounters and space

² These and other questions related to the five variables included were formulated in my presentation to the conference 'Learning Democracy by Doing' in Toronto, Canada, in October 2008. They form part of a project proposal on deliberative methodology and its role in democratic learning.

will have to be organized to increase focus and awareness on the role of the citizens, with political leaders, government officials, experts, scholars, representatives of multilateral cooperation agencies, NGOs, interest groups, public opinion formers and leaders in mass communication.

Taking this new approach to democratic strengthening would enable the EU to strengthen its role in the field of international cooperation in two principal ways:

- First, by the creation of a new institutional space in which, using a new common language, it will be possible to integrate efforts to build an inclusive model where the citizens of Europe and Latin America can become true agents of social and democratic change.
- Second, it will provide a timely answer to and a window of opportunity for the use of a powerful and uncontested human resource for the confrontation of the world financial crisis, which cannot be countered using only economic or technical means, but will require an empowered citizenship based on democratic values and a commitment to democracy.

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Gabriel Murillo Castano is a Colombian Political Scientist from the University of Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia. He has an MA degree in Political Science from the University of New York at Buffalo and is also a SPURS-Fellow from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, in Cambridge; he is a retired Professor from the Department of Political Science at the University of Los Andes, where he was chairman during 12 years. He has authored and edited numerous published books and articles on democracy, governability, political parties, electoral systems, social movements and organizations, citizenship, participation, deliberation and public space, among other topics. He has been visiting professor and lecturer in several universities in the United States, Spain, Italy, Mexico and many other Latin American countries. Also he has been consultant for various international and multilateral organizations on electoral issues, modernization of the state, governance, civil society, consensus-building and civic education for democracy. Presently he combines his international consulting work with research, teaching and promoting training pilot programs for community leaders and educators on the implementation of deliberative methodologies and dialogue for the creation of civic projects and public problem solving and collective action at the local level.