



A New Thematic Emphasis for the EU's Contributions to the Development of Democracy in Latin America

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Abstract

EU strategies for democracy building in Latin America have encouraged the emergence of civil society by promoting bottom-up initiatives. Nonetheless, the scope of these interventions remains limited, partly because the nexus between the political sphere and civil society has not been clearly established. This paper proposes that acknowledging the paradox in Latin America between democratic stability and low levels of attachment to democracy is crucial to an understanding of democracy promotion and generating a new emphasis for initiatives of the European Union (EU) in the region. It proposes that the EU's contribution to democracy promotion should be focused on protecting, revitalizing and legitimizing the political sphere in Latin America. These initiatives should enhance and revise the concept of social cohesion in its political dimension. Together with this, the EU could contribute to the development of relations between governments, grassroots organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a possible approach to increasing the influence of citizens in political matters. This paper critically assesses the work of the EU in the development of democracy in Latin America. It presents an overview of the Latin American democratic panorama and makes thematic proposals for EU promotion strategies that are tailored to the region's reality and its specificities.

Summary of Recommendations

Latin American democracies need to develop mechanisms for transparency, social accountability and participation and at the same time to include citizens as vital actors in these processes.

EU strategies should create spaces where local governments and authorities can come together with civil society groups to contribute to expanding a culture of democratic values. The strategy suggested in this paper combines bottom-up approaches with the participation of local authorities and local governments to develop effective protection of and for social, cultural and economic rights. It is at the local level where civil society can distinguish clear demands and citizens can organize towards specific goals.

It is preferable for political parties to act as mediation mechanisms between citizens and public institutions, and for members of parliament to generate initiatives with the consent of citizens. However, the low level of confidence in political parties and national Congresses means that popular legislative initiatives should be considered. In countries where popular initiatives do not exist, the EU could promote constitutional reforms that explicitly ensure the rights of citizens. It is also important to generate laws that regulate this right.

Experience suggests that without support it is difficult for fundamental rights, even if they are stipulated in law, to materialize for citizens. The EU could help governments, NGOs and grassroots organizations to mobilize resources for these initiatives.

At the participatory level, the EU could promote mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, in which citizens participate directly in prioritizing the spending of local resources. The EU could support deliberative surveys by funding local government.

Because they were developed and implemented in Europe, the EU could also bring its expertise to such surveys.

EU strategies should continue to promote civil society, but with a new focus on the creation of networks between NGOs and between NGOs and political institutions. The EU should also strengthen its commitment to support NGOs and grassroots organizations that work in topic areas such as civil society-building, strengthening civil rights and promoting democratic values.

Strong historical, cultural and economic ties as well as a growing convergence in basic values and principles link relations between the EU and Latin America – particularly since Latin America’s democratic transition. At the cornerstone of this relationship are the strong cultural and political affinities that Latin America shares with Europe.

1. European Union Democracy Promotion Strategies in Latin America

The European Union (EU) has made a significant contribution to political stability and the democratization process in the world. Among regional and international institutions, the EU is unique in developing the most diverse and advanced set of legal and institutional strategies to promote democracy in Third World countries. This approach has focused on intervention in Third World countries as a ‘civilian power’ rather than a military power, promoting democratic stability through trade and economic development, and promoting good governance and the rule of law. Since the 1990s the main instruments for promoting democracy in the Third World have been based on rewards and assistance rather than punishment. The EU’s strategy for democracy building is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human rights and consensus.

The EU’s democracy promotion initiatives in Latin American have gained significant attention in the region. These initiatives focus mainly on the development of democratic values. The EU’s motivation for implementing such strategies could be seen as an intention to present itself as an alternative source of investment and international political cooperation to counterbalance the power of United States in the region. Latin America offers the EU an opportunity to stretch its influence beyond its territorial neighbours and thus establish a global presence.

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basic values and principles link relations between the EU and Latin America – particularly since Latin America’s democratic transition. The EU is the region’s largest donor of development aid and its main partner in political dialogue (Gratius 2006). At the cornerstone of this relationship are the strong cultural and political affinities that Latin America shares with Europe.

Since 1990 the most distinctive feature of EU funding for democracy support in Latin America has been its orientation towards the development of a strong civil society. The EU launched a series of initiatives intended to promote a positive and consensual adherence to democratic norms. The aim of the EU was to sustain a profound democratization process that went beyond a democratic facade. After the mid-1990s the budget of the European Commission was used increasingly to finance the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a result, over half the political aid budget was spent on narrowly defined human rights issues, as opposed to broader political-institutional reform.

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The EU has not significantly explored the connection between civil society and political institutions. While recognizing the need to build a strong civil society, EU initiatives have left NGOs to interact in their own spheres, and not developed a clear diagnosis of the relationship and articulation of demands between organized civil society and the political arena.

Box 1. European Commission funding 2000

In 2000 about 70 per cent (USD 11 million of USD 15 million) of the Commission’s spending on democracy and human rights went to a project funding local, principally human-rights-oriented NGOs in Central America. Less than USD 1 million of

the Commission’s budget went to programmes related to legislatures between 1996 and 1999 and there was no significant work on civil-military relations (Youngs, 2002).

A Critical Assessment of EU Democracy Promotion Strategies

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The emphasis given to civil society organizations has not been matched by support to political institutions or the political arena, so the scope for civil society action remains limited. NGOs and grassroots institutions remain separated from the decision-making process and do not have access to pressure for reform. The link between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches has not been established, and therefore neither can foster the conditions for political change.

If NGOs do not have access to the political system, the potential of NGOs as actors for democratic transformation is limited. Bottom-up initiatives cannot influence political reform. An autonomous civil society is needed to generate real democracy. The extent to which democracy support initiatives should balance bottom-up projects from civil

society with top-down political society work, focused on political parties, legislatures and local governments, remains open to question.

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In Latin America, the political elites have not proved capable of recognizing and including the demands of the people. This creates dissatisfaction with political institutions and reduces their credibility, leading to apathy towards political discussion. Instead of listening to the concerns of the people and incorporating them into their political discourse, politicians, political parties, legislatures and governments are trapped by their own discourse. The political discussion they have created forms its own centre of gravity which further isolates civil society from the political decision-making process.

A New Strategy: Social Cohesion

Acknowledging this imbalance, the new strategic programme of the EU proposes a move towards encouraging social cohesion. After Cumbre de Guadalajara in 2004 social cohesion became part of the discussion and a crucial strategic objective of the Lima Conference (2008). This concept has been identified as one of the three areas of regional activity for 2007–2013. The European Commission states that the challenge for the region regarding social cohesion is, ‘to consolidate the social fabric by inter alia reducing poverty, inequality and exclusion, and cooperation in the fight against drugs’ (EC, 2007).

Although social cohesion as a strategy includes the connection between civil society and the political sphere, the concept remains ambiguous. Its loose definitions generate fear of the scope of this proposal among policymakers.

EU support for the promotion of social cohesion in Latin America is present in four initiatives. At the regional level, the *EUROsocial* programme¹ facilitates the exchange of experience in public administration in areas such as health,

education and the judiciary, which are all platforms for presenting examples of social cohesion. Nonetheless, there are doubts about the effectiveness of these initiatives in contributing to social cohesion. ‘The amplitude and vagueness of the concept and the diversity of activities that the EC considers could be implemented in the name of developing social cohesion leave much to be desired’ (ALOP, 2007). Although social cohesion as a strategy includes the connection between civil society and the political sphere, the concept remains ambiguous. Its loose definitions generate fear of the scope of this proposal among policymakers.

2. The Consolidation of Electoral Democracy in Latin America

In the past two decades democratic transitions and increased stability are the most significant political changes that have occurred in Latin America. Never before has the region contained electoral regimes as durable and democratic as those that exist at the beginning of the 21st century. Today, 18 countries in Latin America have all the

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/latin-america/regional-cooperation/eurosocial/index_en.htm

fundamental requisites of a democratic regime, which contrasts heavily with the fact that only three of them had democracy 25 years ago. The principal improvement in the region is considered to be the advancement of what the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) calls electoral democracy. Electoral democracy manifests itself in the right to vote in free and fair elections and by the practice of using electoral means to access public positions. Latin America has significantly advanced in these aspects over the past two decades.

The Paradox of Democratic Stability and Low Levels of Attachment to Democracy

The advances in electoral democracy in Latin America have been significant, but democracy cannot be reduced to an electoral act or to a matter of procedure – democracy also means transparent institutions, acceptance of diversity and equal opportunity and access to power. This is the greatest challenge for the region – to advance from an electoral democracy to a democracy of citizens, which means translating democratic values into common practice and installing institutions that guarantee social rights to the people.

Interestingly, Latin America presents a paradox that is at the centre of these discussions. Although democratic stability has been installed in the region, support for democracy is significantly low. According to the Latinbarometer 2008, support for democracy decreased by four points, from 58% in 2006 to 54% in 2007. The evidence suggests that a large proportion of Latin Americans would withdraw support for democratic government if it proved incapable of resolving economic problems. Latin Americans value economic development above democracy. Between 2002 and 2008, the percentage of people who agreed with the statement ‘I would not mind a non-democratic government if it were to resolve my economic problems’ has not varied significantly – it was 51 percent in 2001, 53 percent in 2008 and peaked at 55 percent in 2004. This highlights the importance of dealing with the long-standing problems of inequality and poverty in the region.

This data also suggest that the region is going through what could be considered a crisis in the capacity of politics to create new options and advances towards guaranteeing the rights of people. This disaffection demonstrates disillusionment with a system that has proved incapable of responding to the demands of today’s population. For people in Latin America, democracy represents an organizational system rather than an articulated set of values that respect human rights.

The question arising from this argument is: why is there disaffection with democracy in a context of sustained democracy in the region? This paradox is a result of the democratic deficiencies in Latin America, and more specifically the unfulfilled commitment to tackle inequality, as well as the weakness in the democratic culture, in the institutions and in the political culture of civil society.

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Democracy has not been able to legitimize itself as the best form of government. Democratic governments and institutions have not proved capable of translating democratic values into practice, and this creates the perception that democracy exclusively represents the interests of an elite.

The Unfulfilled Promise: The Maintenance of Social Inequality

In Latin America, there is growing frustration at the lack of opportunities and high levels of inequality, poverty and exclusion. Latin American societies are the most unequal in the world, according to the UNDP. (UNDP 2004). This frustration has led to dissatisfaction and a loss of confidence in political systems. Poverty and inequality prevent individuals from expressing themselves as citizens with rights, and from gaining equal access to public decision-making.

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The persistence of social inequality is a problem with no structural answer. Levels of inequality are notorious in for example Brazil, Guatemala and Chile. There have been advances in the eradication of poverty, but inequality has been maintained or even increased in some areas. Inequality is expressed in the region's unemployment rates, as work is a key mechanism for ensuring social inclusion. Latin America has experienced growing levels of unemployment since the 1990s.

Another problematic aspect is the relationship between the people and the judicial system, an area where many Latin Americans feel unprotected. Only 30 per cent of the population believes that there is equality before the law, and this percentage has not changed since 2002 (Latinbarometer 2008: 97).

Institutional Weakness: A Lack of Democratic Culture

In Latin America the consolidation of democratic institutions capable of making effective the rights of citizens is still an ongoing process. Functional institutions allow the operation of electoral democracy, but there is a need for institutions to strengthen democracy not just as a system of government, but as the exercise of democratic culture.

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In Latin America, the emergence of the institutions of a functioning democracy is almost complete. This is evidenced by the fact that recent institutional crises have been resolved without the need for revolution. Nevertheless, democracy still has certain frailties, which originate from the low prestige of political parties, a lack of transparency, extreme presidentialism and corruption. These weaknesses have led to a gap between the problems that citizens need to have resolved and the capacity of the authorities to resolve these problems.

To a certain extent, the deficiencies in the democratic culture of political institutions are behind these problems. Values such as transparency, equality, pluralism and participation have not been instilled and reside only in the discursive sphere. Although people recognize that political parties are essential to the functioning of democracy, there is certain scepticism towards them and the willingness to become involved in a

political party seems to have decreased (UNDP 2004). Only 24 per cent of the citizens trust their national Congress, and, at 14 per cent, political parties are the institutions that register the lowest levels of confidence. Democratic values need to be the pillar of institutions and political parties as well as of social relations. The lack of institutional instruments to ensure strong democratic values endangers not only the democratic culture, but also electoral democracy.

The Weakness of Political Culture in Civil Society and Citizenship

Lastly, the paradox between the consolidation of democracy and the level of satisfaction can be explained by the weak political culture in civil society. Throughout the political crisis, there has been an emergence of organizations in civil society that deal with the unmet demands of the citizens. These organizations have consolidated the realm of organized citizenship, but civil society has not been able to translate its demands into political actions because of the lack of mechanisms for popular participation and citizens' control. The inability to turn popular initiatives into law is one example of this trend. This deficiency is a product of the disconnect between civil society and the political arena. The connections between both realms have not been adequately strengthened, resulting in ineffective bottom-up approaches to political change.

Many states in Latin America have civil societies that are unable to create alliances, making it difficult to confront broader themes. Many NGOs focus on highly particular ends and have demonstrable problems with coordinating and communicating with other organizations. Civil society needs a broader vision that is capable of integrating interests from diverse organizations. As a whole, it could profit from the diversity of civil society interests, giving it a greater capacity for action and control.

The Political Dimension of Social Cohesion

The EU strategy on social cohesion is based on the permanent needs of Latin American societies. Social exclusion and inequality are the region's principal challenges. Social cohesion implies that the EU strategy progress from the incorporation of democracy as a form of government to promoting democracy as a guiding set of principles and the protection of social, economic and cultural rights. How can the EU collaborate through a strategy of social cohesion and democracy, considering the new characteristics of Latin American societies? This paper does not suggest that the concept of social cohesion is inadequate. Such a strategy is a reflection of the principal deficiencies of the region. However, the programmes and strategies proposed by the EU do not adequately recognize the democratic deficiencies of the region. The strategy of social cohesion does not sufficiently take account of the low level of attachment to the political sphere in general and to democracy in particular.

In revising the existing EU concept of social cohesion with reference to social rights, social cohesion becomes equivalent to social integration by guarantying public access to the different functions and resources of the state. Today it is not only the state that

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Building democracy is a task that is never completed. Part of the democratic experience is to reflect on what has not been achieved – the limits, tensions and troubles of democracies.

Contributing to the strengthening of civil society should continue to be a priority for the EU, but this strengthening will also need to promote strong relations between civil society and the political sphere, specifically local governments. Local governments are the key to increasing social influence in the political decision-making process because it is easier to implement a system of social or political dialogue with them.

provides this cohesion. The market, families, civil society and private sector enterprises are all actors that facilitate social cohesion, which makes the concept multidimensional.

In the search for social cohesion in Latin America, it is important to recognize that there is a political dimension to this component, given its relation to a culture of social rights and democratizing reforms. The greatest challenge in Latin America is to legitimize politics as a space that can contribute to improvements in the life of the citizens. Social cohesion in this sense means that citizens are included as voters and as participants in the decision-making process, in the systems of popular control over public management and as possessors of fundamental rights.

The political dimension of social cohesion forces us to regard civil society as a key actor in promoting integration. Contributing to the strengthening of civil society should continue to be a priority for the EU, but this strengthening will also need to promote strong relations between civil society and the political sphere, specifically local governments. Local governments are the key to increasing social influence in the political decision-making process because it is easier to implement a system of social or political dialogue at the local level. Civil society groups also tend to be community-oriented and can facilitate participation in political dialogue. In this way, the EU strategies would, promote interest and participation in the democratic process by promoting the participation of citizens in local government.

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The perception among regional NGOs is that social cohesion goes beyond economic integration and inequality. Social cohesion is about instilling in political parties and other institutions the capacity to integrate citizen participation and citizens' demands. This connection needs to be made first at the lower levels of government, where there is a strong nexus between bottom-up and top-down approaches.

3. New Challenges for Democracy Promotion in Latin America: How to move forward?

In addition to their search for liberty and justice, Latin Americans need to have a better understanding of their own rights, and of the objectives of democracy. Building democracy is a task that is never completed. Part of the democratic experience is to reflect on what has not been achieved – the limits, tensions and troubles of democracies. After three decades of democratic stability, Latin America faces these questions. Pierre Rosanvallon notes that: 'Democracy poses a question that remains permanently open. It seems that it has never been possible to provide a completely satisfactory answer (Rosanvallon 2002, cited in UNDP 2004).

But the lack of public satisfaction does not mean that democracy cannot be improved. Democracy generates expectations and hopes. Today the demands on democracy are about how to consider people not as voters but as citizens. Citizenship means to be holders of rights.

Latin American countries can both learn from the experiences of the EU member states and share their own experiences of democracy building with the EU. This exchange needs to be based on a commitment to move democratic principles from discourse to guiding principles and practices in the institutional and social spheres. In this way, democracy support initiatives will become a long-term strategy intended to enhance the democratic culture.

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The paradox between the recent record of stability and the low levels of attachment to democracy in the region means that there is a need to ensure effective rights for the people and mechanisms to satisfy the hopes that Latin Americans place on their representatives.

Installing democratic values as a guiding principle in Latin America will mean participation in decision-making at multiple levels as well as equal treatment and equal opportunities for the public. Latin American democracy also needs systems of popular control over public decision-making to guarantee transparency in public actions. The EU should promote discussion in the form of investigations, forums, seminars and scholarly exchanges across the political and civic map.

A relevant and related issue in the promotion of democratic values is the capacity of civil society to connect with the political systems (political parties, parliament and the authorities). Strengthening this nexus can be done in an informal way, using personal contacts, and by creating institutional alliances, for example, between NGOs and governmental institution. However, in order to ensure citizen participation in decision-making processes it will be necessary to encourage mechanisms for institutional reforms such as the capacity of citizens to propose law initiatives, citizens' juries, and participation by citizens in budget decisions. These measures highlight the connection between local governing bodies and citizens' organizations.

A New Thematic Emphasis: Specific EU Initiatives at the Local Government Level

Latin American democracies need to develop mechanisms of transparency, social accountability and participation and at the same time to include citizens as vital actors in these processes.

EU strategies should create spaces where local governments and authorities can come together with civil society groups to contribute to expanding a culture of democratic values. The strategy suggested in this paper combines bottom-up approaches with the participation of local authorities and local governments to develop effective protection of and for social, cultural and economic rights.

Democracies in Latin America still lack systems of popular control over public decision-making. The incorporation of citizens' participation in public affairs should be promoted through strategies for clearer access to information, participation in the execution of programmes and citizen consultations. Today the power to deliberate with binding consequences is almost exclusively in the hands of authorities, technicians and 'invisible powers', which neglects citizen expression.

EU strategies should create spaces where local governments and authorities can come together with civil society groups to contribute to expanding a culture of democratic values.

In Latin America democratic transition, economic reform and the crisis of representation have driven political reform processes. The majority of Latin American constitutions include a mechanism of direct democracy, such as popular consultation or referendums, revocation of mandates and popular law initiatives.

Popular Legislative initiatives give rights to citizens to present projects intended to reform laws and even the constitution through the gathering of signatures. Although this is a legal norm in 11 countries in Latin America, it has been used sparingly. It is preferable for political parties to act as mediation mechanisms between citizens and public institutions, and for members of parliament to generate initiatives with citizens' consent. However, the low level of confidence in political parties and national Congresses means that popular legislative initiatives should be considered an option for restoring the credibility of politics. The presence of such mechanisms is a potential stimulus for improving the quality of the parliamentary process and developing citizen control over government institutions.

In countries like Chile, El Salvador, Panama, Honduras, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, where popular initiatives do not exist, the EU could promote constitutional reforms that explicitly ensure the rights of citizens. It is also important to generate laws that regulate this right. In Bolivia and El Salvador such regulation has not taken place so this right is not effective. It is also essential that such regulation is precise in relation

to the obligations of the state – both the legislative and the executive branches of power – in terms of economic support, publicity, education and advice. Experience suggests that without support it is difficult for fundamental rights, even if they are stipulated in law, to materialize for citizens. The EU could help not only governments but also NGOs and grassroots organization to mobilize resources for these initiatives.

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At the participatory level, the EU could promote mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, in which citizens participate directly in prioritizing the spending of local resources. There are few examples of participatory budgets in Latin America – Porto Alegre and Montevideo. The principal aspect of these initiatives is that citizens have the capacity to choose between priorities and to decide on the spending priorities

of local government. Participatory budgeting is presented as an alternative to the traditional management models of cities and is intended to articulate an organized citizen interest in state affairs, as well as to improve the conditions of local governance.

Citizens' juries, which draw on the symbolism and some of the practices of a legal trial, are among the most innovative mechanisms of citizen deliberation. A representative group of people is chosen and given information about a certain topic, such as housing, drug trafficking, youth services. The whole process is supervised by an oversight or advisory panel composed of a range of people with relevant knowledge and a possible interest in the outcome. The objective is for the people in charge of taking decisions to have access to the opinions of informed citizens.

The EU should foster the development of accountability. Citizens should be able to not only participate in the decision-making process but also exert a level of control.

The EU should foster the development of accountability. Citizens should be able to not only participate in the decision-making process but also exert a level of control. Accountability constrains the extent to which elected representatives and other office holders can wilfully deviate from their responsibilities, thus reducing corruption. Examples of this accountability include the Colombian *veedurias* and the law of popular participation in Bolivia. These types of social control are predominately carried out by NGOs.

Another mechanism for democratic participation that can be used at the local level is deliberative surveys, which were developed by James Fishkin. Usually, around 300 people who are representative of the population are asked about a concrete policy. In order to form an opinion, the participants receive information for and against the specific topic. After this the participants are brought together and spend some days discussing the issue. The EU could support this initiative by funding local governments to elaborate deliberative surveys. Because they were developed and implemented in Europe, the EU could also bring its expertise to such surveys.

These reforms and initiatives highlight the fact that politics is a space that needs to be defended in Latin America. The EU's contribution to democracy promotion should focus on protecting, revitalizing and legitimizing the political sphere in Latin America, by making institutions and civil society more aware of a political culture embedded in democratic values and strengthening citizens' capacity to participate in the political sphere, including setting priorities and making the necessary compromises.

The EU's contribution to democracy promotion should focus on protecting, revitalizing and legitimizing the political sphere in Latin America, by making institutions and civil society more aware of a political culture embedded in democratic values.

We believe that the EU has still more to contribute to the political aspect in Latin America, specifically in pushing for reforms at the institutional level in their work with governmental agencies and political parties. Latin American civil society has benefited significantly from democracy promotion initiatives. EU strategies should continue to promote civil society, but with a new focus on the creation of networks between NGOs and between NGOs and political institutions. The EU should also strengthen its commitment to support NGOs and grassroots organizations that work in topic areas such as civil society-building, strengthening civil rights and promoting democratic values.

4. Conclusions

Latin America is moving away from the problems that have affected the region for so long. Military interventions are seen as a dark and distant past that contrasts with a promising future of democratic governance. Nonetheless, this future is currently undermined by the new dangers of the low level of attachment to democracy and the declining credibility of political parties.

In Latin America, sustained democracy is accompanied by a low level of attachment. This paradox reveals that democracy has not been able to fulfil its promises and is trapped by its perception as a form of government rather than a set of values that defend human rights. The paradox also implies that the next step for Latin American democracy is to construct societies that are more equal and present opportunities for the entire population.

The European contribution to the region has a long-standing history of civil society support promoting a consensual approach to democracy and developing a sustainable democratization process. The emphasis must now be on the inclusion of civil society groups in the political sphere – more specifically, fostering relations between governments, political institutions, NGOs, and organizations and political parties with grass roots support. Becoming involved in political matters also involves proposing institutional reform to increase participation and popular control over public decision making, specifically at the local level. It is in the local space that citizens seek to resolve their problems and to mobilize to meet their needs. NGOs have a greater capacity to identify the specific nature of citizens' needs and interests at the local level. At the same time, local political initiatives have a more defined scope and can be implemented more effectively.

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