



Challenges for Democratic Governance July-September 1997

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In recent years, the Americas have undergone intense political, economic, and social changes, among them the renewed and firm commitment to strengthen and consolidate democracy as a political system for achieving economic and social progress. At the hemispheric level, this commitment is enshrined in the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS). This hemispheric instrument was amended in 1985, with the objective, among others, of establishing consolidation of democracy as a fundamental purpose of the OAS. This aim has been reaffirmed in successive declarations of the General Assembly, and at the 1994 Summit of the Americas, when the promotion and strengthening of democracy was ratified as the central political priority of the Americas.

The strengthening of democracy is one of the main purposes of the political reforms and state modernization undertaken in recent years. Within the state, the central government has traditionally played a leading role in implementing development policies and supplying social services. Developments in the political, economic, and social areas are transforming the traditional role of the central government, as well as the very perception of this role by the social actors, both governmental and nongovernmental, fostering the growing tendency to recognize decentralization and local government as instruments of economic and social development.

At the same time, new relations are being created between the organs of the state and the citizenry, on the basis of the recognition that the sustainability of democracy depends not only on a climate of peace and security, the rule of law, observance of human rights, and government institutions capable of responding to expectations of social progress, but also on a well-informed citizenry, prepared to play an active role in the development process. The participation of civil society in policy formulation and public administration, whether at the national, state, provincial, or local government levels, contributes to strengthening representative democracy, creating additional and more direct links between government and people. Participation reduces public apathy, as it provides the opportunity to influence the process of decision making in areas that most directly affect citizens' lives. Similarly, participation promotes transparency, hence greater confidence in government affairs.

Political, economic, and administrative decentralization, as well as the creation of mechanisms and modalities, formal and informal, to increase citizen participation are creating new spaces in which citizens are better placed to contribute to the development

of policies to improve the quality of life, especially in those sectors and regions that have often been marginalized. The former recipients of state policy can now become co-formulators of this policy. Citizen participation in local government is especially important, given that this level is generally easily accessible to all, and hence represents an important opportunity for closing the gap between state and citizen.

In addition, there are many organizations in civil society-grass-roots organizations, community associations, and social movements-that form a solid basis for this participation. These organizations must be incorporated into the process of decision making on a more systematic basis, to be accepted as instruments of change, ensuring coordination between them and local and central government in the formulation and implementation of policy. Similarly, it is essential to strengthen those organizations functioning for philanthropic purposes.

Across the hemisphere, the process of reform, proceeding at different rhythms and according to different models, gives rise to many challenges. There is the challenge of how to achieve, in the new development schemes, an appropriate division of labor in public-sector management, including central, state, provincial, or municipal government, and the citizenry. There is the challenge of ensuring adequate policy coordination between institutions. How should traditional government functions be organized for more efficient public management? There is the issue of collection and distribution of national resources. Who is to administer these resources and for which priorities? Questions arise as to the relative merits of a 'top down" or "bottom up" approach to reform. Which policies could most feasibly promote local government-civil society partnerships in support of realistic and effective solutions to social and economic problems? Which levels of government can most appropriately and efficiently supply social services? The debate continues on development models and the role that privatization should play.

At the center of these considerations is the citizen, for whose benefit it is necessary to seek mechanisms and formulas, both formal and informal, to ensure participation in economic and social development, and in decision making in public policy. How can citizen participation, particularly that of women, indigenous peoples, and youth, be increased?

Another challenge lies in empowering both public administration and citizens to fulfil their roles effectively. It is essential that public employees be trained in issues of citizen participation and be sensitized to these goals; it is also necessary to create support services for decentralization and citizen participation, including data banks and appropriate information technology. Research, creation, and dissemination of information and knowledge of the processes of decentralization and citizen participation are all important tools, as is the permanent use of instruments to evaluate the process.

Among the main objectives of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) is that of providing the General Secretariat with the means to offer a program of support in democratic development, in specific areas defined by member states. The work plans offered by the UPD include support to modernization and strengthening of democratic institutions and to academic institutions working in these areas.

In the general area of strengthening democratic institutions, the work plan of the UPD includes, among other priority areas, support to the promotion of local governments as well as citizen participation in public life. The proposal to work in these areas is based on requests for support received from the member states, as well as on the collaboration of the UPD in regional and interinstitutional cooperation efforts such as the organization of the three interAmerican Mayors' Conferences held to date.

On December 7, 1996, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, the government of Bolivia and the OAS General Secretariat signed a "Cooperation Agreement to Promote the Strengthening of Processes of Decentralization and Citizen Participation." Through this cooperation instrument, the General Secretariat will collaborate with the Bolivian government to support the exchange of experiences and the dissemination of information on decentralization and citizen participation.

As a hemispheric political forum, the OAS has a role in providing support to the search for solutions to the challenges confronting its member states. As Secretary General Cesar Gaviria stated on signing the agreement, "The solution to these challenges can be facilitated by an increased flow of information and knowledge which would take into account experiences, challenges, and achievements of countries in their different paths toward democracy, and to fulfilling the aspirations of their peoples."

The secretary general affirmed that through this kind of exchange, the Organization will continue to support member states in their efforts to consolidate democracy, and to achieve greater well-being for the citizens of the Americas.

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