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Improving citizen participation in local government in Latin America through international cooperation: a case study

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Issues related to democratic restructuring and citizenship at the municipal level in Latin America have been the subject of increasing interest and debate among scholars and development practitioners in recent years. This study investigates how international cooperation may facilitate enhanced citizen participation in local-level decision making in the region by examining a specific Canadian-sponsored linking project involving the cities of Charlesbourg, Quebec (Canada) and Ovalle (Chile). The study presents a relatively optimistic account of the role that innovations transferred as a result of this project have played in enhancing citizen involvement in local government. At the same time, it suggests that any such gains may be limited and must be viewed within the larger politico-administrative context in Latin America and attendant factors restricting the establishment of a broad democratic culture at the local level.

Introduction

As democratic restructuring takes hold in Latin America, municipal governments in the region—which now number over 14,000 and account for anywhere from 5 per cent to 15 per cent of public expenditure (Nickson 1995:1)—have assumed increased autonomy and have exercised new roles within their jurisdictions. This 'rebirth' of local government in the region has been attributed both to internal factors—as national legislatures move to both meet growing citizen demands for accountability and download responsibilities to lower levels of government—and to external ones, conforming to the global trend towards decentralisation and local empowerment as a means to improve planning (Nickson 1995:1–2).

At the same time, as they assume their mantle as effective loci of local-level democracy, planning, and service delivery, Latin America's municipalities face a number of challenges. Funding, for example, has become a crucial issue, as national and state governments have largely failed to provide adequate resourcing to accompany the devolution of powers and responsibilities to their lower-tier counterparts. There is also the issue of competence. Following years of military dictatorship and central control, municipal governments in many

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parts of the region still often lack credible internal management structures to handle their mounting responsibilities. To make matters worse, an enduring culture of *caudillismo* (big boss politics) has helped to ensure a lack of administrative continuity, as key municipal officials routinely follow their political 'bosses' into exile in the wake of electoral defeats.

Ensuring effective participation in government has represented another key challenge. As authoritarian governments crumbled in the 1980s, opportunities for popular protest and input grew exponentially during the following decade. Increasingly, municipal governments have sought to channel such experiences by encouraging greater citizen participation in local-level decision making—thus strengthening local-level democracy and reducing social tensions. Such actions have not, however, always been met with success.

As part of an effort to develop the administrative and democracy-enhancing capacities of local governments in the region, a number of support programmes have been established. Some have been spearheaded nationally by associations of municipalities and/or other agencies specifically dedicated to planning. Significantly, support has also come from outside the region. Multilateral lending organisations, such as the World Bank, have recently developed initiatives specifically designed to encourage administrative capacity building (World Bank Institute 2003). At the bilateral level, many development agencies, especially in Europe and North America, have also gradually increased funding targeted towards urban issues, helping to support a variety of projects designed to increase institutional capacity and citizen involvement in local government (Shuman 1994; Schep et al. 1995).

With respect to such 'one-on-one' involvement in particular, the Canadian response to local government restructuring in Latin America provides an interesting case in point. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the federal government's main funding arm for development assistance, has since 1986 given financial support to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)—the umbrella group for local governments across the country—in its efforts to spearhead partnership programmes providing assistance for municipal restructuring in at least half a dozen Latin American nations. In effect, such programmes provide a key exchange mechanism allowing Canadian municipal administrators and technical personnel an opportunity to share expertise with their Latin American counterparts. Overall, the FCM initiative has been widely recognised as one of the most effective of its kind worldwide (Shuman 1994:27).

In general terms, the aims and scope of linking projects such as these have been examined at some length, especially with respect to service provision and administrative capacity building (Hewitt 1995; Hobbs 1994; Shuman 1994). In this article, we focus on more fundamental issues related to participation in government and the strengthening of democratic norms. Using a case-study approach involving the assessment of an FCM-sponsored exchange between Charlesbourg, Quebec (Canada) and Ovalle (Chile), we investigate how Canadian municipal administrators have assisted their Chilean counterparts in the design and construction of mechanisms to enhance public participation in local-level decision making.

At face value, the study—which is informed by a combination of archival, interview, and observational data collected in the field between 1998 and 2000—presents a relatively optimistic account of what international cooperation may offer democratic restructuring at this level. At the same time, given the limitations imposed by the broader politico-administrative culture in Chile and throughout Latin America, it is not always clear how such initiatives will translate over the longer term into more stable and effective patterns of democratic participation. Nevertheless, despite its rather limited scope, the study does suggest that international cooperation on this front may offer individual municipalities an important first step on the road towards the development of a viable democratic culture at the local level in Latin America.

Emerging trends in local government in Latin America

A trend towards the entrenchment of neo-liberal economic structures and a lessening of state control over key industries and economic processes has been in evidence in Latin America since the early 1980s. More recently, coinciding with the restoration of democratic rule, this move towards economic decentralisation has been accompanied in a large number of countries by efforts to reduce central control over politico-administrative mechanisms. Changes within the municipal sphere have been particularly noteworthy. Indeed, beginning in the 1990s, as part of a broader commitment to state reform and democratic restructuring that has been well examined in the literature (Linz and Stepan 1996; Mainwaring et al. 1992; O'Donnell 1999), central governments throughout Latin America have moved increasingly to develop means to improve long-neglected municipal governance structures and enhance public input into local-level decision making. According to one UN assessment of the urban condition in the region (UNCHS 1996), such efforts have been directed primarily towards (a) enhanced decentralisation and the devolution of powers and responsibilities from higher to lower levels of government; and (b) democratisation of local government to meet citizen demands for enhanced participation in decision making and improved public services.

Reforms targeted at both these areas have been daunting, to say the least, and have produced mixed results. First of all, decentralisation has been undertaken within a context of centralised authority structures which pre-date independence in most countries. Such structures were reinforced during the second half of the twentieth century by authoritarian regimes seeking to remove or control the threat of competing power bases. With the democratic 'opening-up' which occurred across Latin America towards the end of the century, municipalities in Latin America have found themselves in crisis—facing a range of challenges accruing from large-scale urbanisation[1] and a lack the necessary tools to deal with the associated popular demands for services, infrastructure, and accountability (Nickson 1995:7–18).

Recent moves on the part of national governments in Latin America to devolve authority to the local arena have moved some distance towards addressing this crunch. Unfortunately, however, the transfer of powers to local government has frequently not been associated with the concomitant allocation of funding necessary to assume the responsibilities newly mandated by the centre; or alternatively with new mechanisms to allow municipalities greater discretion over the collection and application of local fees and taxes. Thus, strengthening municipal 'autonomy' has not always been associated with the critical resources required to make it truly effective.[2]

Efforts to encourage greater levels of democratic participation at the local level have similarly achieved mixed results. Initiatives on this front have been seen by governments at all levels as a way to 'channel' the popular mobilisation occurring in the post-authoritarian period and thus reduce social tensions. Further, it was hoped that by encouraging public participation in decision making, the tendency towards 'arrogant' techno-bureaucratic planning which ignored the needs of citizens could be abated (Nickson 1995:85–86).

Some successes have been scored on both fronts. A primary example is the now much-touted *orçamento participativo* (participatory budgeting model) now in place in several Brazilian cities. Despite recent studies pointing to some unevenness in terms of application and result (Souza 2001), virtually all observers agree that the model—which allows for direct public consultation and decision making in municipal budgeting matters—holds considerable promise (Abers 2000; Coelho 1996). Indeed, Souza has argued that there is potential for 'spill-over effects' into other key areas of decision making, citing Belo Horizonte's *Forum da Cidade* (City Forum), which was established to encourage public input into the development of that city's master plan (Souza 2001).

In most respects, however, progress in enhancing local-level participation has been limited, and examples of effective citizen involvement in key decision-making bodies remain a rarity (UNCHS 1996:189; Rodrigues and Winchester 1996:28; World Bank 2000:153). Part of the problem may be attributed to the slow pace of constitutional change in many countries, and to resistance on the part of vested interests in the region whose traditional bases of power may be threatened (Rodrigues and Winchester 1996:31). In addition, there is the 'knowledge' factor. Put simply, citizens throughout the region often remain politically ill-informed, and are thus less than fully prepared to participate in community-based initiatives.

In dealing with the myriad challenges of both decentralisation and participatory reform, Latin American municipal governments have, however, received limited support from a variety of new players in recent years. Independent planning bodies, for example—such as the Instituto Brasileiro de Administração Municipal (IBAM—Brazilian Institute of Municipal Administration)—have arisen to fill the gap between knowledge and practice. Funded by membership fees, IBAM offers one-on-one counselling to municipal clients, regularly publishes books and articles on municipal governance topics, and operates a school offering short-term training courses to politicians and administrators throughout Brazil. In a number of other countries, newly energised associations of municipalities have emerged to perform similar functions, although the range and quality of expertise and assistance offered tends to vary greatly.

Internationally, lending agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) have recently launched specialised educational and lending programmes related to urban development. Some of these programmes have been targeted specifically at enhancing citizen participation in governance. For example, the World Bank Institute's Urban and City Management Program provides courses for planners, policy makers, and managers in developing means to engage civil society in day-to-day decision making within municipalities (World Bank Institute 2003). The IDB maintains a special focus in the area of social inclusion/exclusion, and has worked to enhance citizen participation through the development of awareness-raising programmes, both within and outside the Bank, targeted projects and operations destined to benefit marginalised groups, and basic research. Further, it has convened a series of 'social policy dialogues' throughout Latin America. Open to all groups in the community, the aim of these seminars has been to help bring stakeholder groups together to build effective consensus-based decision-making models at the municipal level. The IDB has also funded a large number of technical cooperation workshops, training sessions, and publications with a specific focus on civil society participation (IDB 2003).

Perhaps the most significant global efforts on this front have been undertaken by the UN through the Urban Management Program (UMP). A partnership of the UNDP, Habitat, and the World Bank, the UMP has worked since 1986 to strengthen the capacity of local administrations throughout the world. Now in its fourth phase, and supported by a number of regional offices worldwide, its primary foci include poverty alleviation, AIDS, urban environmental sustainability, and participatory governance (UNUMP 2003).

In Latin America, the UMP has made a number of contributions in these areas through several mechanisms, including educational courses and training programmes, literature and promotional materials, and the development of a universally accessible database known as 'Urbanet' (PGU-ALC 2003). With respect to enhancing citizen participation, one of the most effective devices has been the 'urban consultation'. Led by municipal officials but bringing together social actors from various sectors—from NGOs, to representatives from universities, citizen groups, and the private sector—these sessions have allowed stakeholders to discuss, analyse, and find solutions to the most pressing problems facing their communities. From these discussions emerge concrete 'action plans', which not only lay out the path to resolution but

also apportion responsibility for carrying out specific elements of the plan to each of the participants.

To date, over 30 consultations have been held in 26 cities in 15 countries. In Maracaibo (Venezuela) and Belém (Brazil), the consultation process has assisted local municipalities in developing a microcredit programme which has helped enterprising small businesses to thrive and the urban poor to make improvements to slum area housing. In the province of Manabi (Ecuador), the consultation process generated a grassroots proposal for the amalgamation of five struggling municipalities, which is likely to result in recognition of the region by the national government as a 'development pole'. And finally, in Barra Mansa (Brazil), the process saw the establishment of Latin America's first 'Juvenile Municipal Council'. Through the city's participatory budgeting process, the Council was allocated approximately US$75,000 from the municipal budget to manage programmes of benefit to the young people of Barra Mansa.

To help ensure that the lessons of the consultations receive a board forum for discussion and are disseminated widely, the UMP's regional office has also established an array of 'working groups' involving municipal officials and others with experience in the consultations, and experts working in the field. Some of these are organised thematically, e.g. for the creation of 'juvenile councils', while others are mandated to deal with a range of problems affecting areas with similar characteristics (e.g. tourist cities, indigenous communities) (PGU-ALC 2003).

In addition to these broad international programmes, bilateral development programmes have also recently 'discovered' local government, with many aid agencies in developed countries now sponsoring programmes designed to facilitate the strengthening of municipal governance, infrastructure, and services (Shuman 1994; Schep 1995). A good example of this trend is provided by Canada's FCM, which since 1986 has sought through its International Office (FCMIO) to develop linkages between Canadian cities and their counterparts in the developing world in order to effect the transfer of practices designed to improve local living standards and enhance accountability. A key component of the linkage programme is gender equity, and participating municipalities are exhorted to 'analyse the obstacles to women's participation, take specific action to reduce these obstacles, and encourage women to take part' (FCMIO 1994:A3). Primary funding for the programme has come from CIDA, in the amount of approximately US$3 million per year (FCMIO 1999).

A main objective of the FCMIO has been 'capacity building' of local administrations (FCMIO 1999). Activity on this front is targeted towards strengthening the ability of municipalities to deal with infrastructural and service-delivery needs of their populations. In Latin America in particular, where the FCMIO sponsors at least a dozen linkages, the organisation has scored a number of successes. For example, technicians from the city of Lethbridge, Alberta, have assisted their counterparts in Ica (Peru) with the development of a water chlorination project; administrators from Kitimat, British Columbia have helped to install a computerised purchasing system in Riobamba (Ecuador); and municipal employees from Magog, Quebec, have assisted their colleagues in Villarrica (Chile) to design and construct a community recreation complex.

A related, but equally important, objective of the FCMIO has been to enhance public participation in local-level decision making within the context of changes in municipal governance described above: decentralisation, lack of resources, and popular pressure for democratisation and equality. Examples of concrete engagement on this front are rarer, however, than is the case for administrative capacity building. For the most part, efforts related to participation have been tied to administrative reform generally, and/or limited to advice on technical matters. A good example of this tendency involves the city of Toronto, Ontario, which between 1991 and 1993 assisted the Brazilian Municipality of São Paulo in a project

designed to decentralise municipal administration. The reform programme saw the creation of 27 Administrative Regions (ARs), based in part on a model of decentralisation already in place in Toronto. Although the project has clearly opened up additional channels for citizen communication with local government, the responsibilities delegated to the ARs have remained somewhat circumscribed (to areas such as land use, street cleaning and maintenance, and parks and leisure) (PMSP 1998).

Of all the Latin American partnerships sponsored by the FCMIO, perhaps the only example of a project designed directly to promote participation in local government on a more comprehensive scale is provided by an exchange involving two smaller centres—the cities of Charlesbourg, Quebec, and Ovalle (Chile). Here, attempts to bring ordinary citizens into the local decision-making process have been made on at least three fronts: the reform and activation of neighbourhood community centres; the facilitation of public input with respect to the development of the city's master plan; and the formulation of a strategic plan to improve government–citizen communications. The nature of these initiatives, their benefits and their shortcomings are discussed in detail below.

The Charlesbourg–Ovalle accord

Background

Established in 1993, the Charlesbourg–Ovalle accord has been managed since its inception by the director general (city administrator) from the city of Charlesbourg, and the chief of staff/head of communications within the mayor's office in Ovalle. Over the years, well over a dozen site visits have taken place, with administrators and technicians from the two cities working directly on a number of projects, from transportation and urban planning, to welfare programmes and administrative procedures. The total cost of this exercise—as is the case with other FCMIO-sponsored partnerships of this type—has been restricted to the travel and accommodation expenses of the participants involved.

With a population of approximately 71,000 in an area of 68 km^2, the city of Charlesbourg is a suburban municipality located within the Quebec City metropolitan region. Approximately 400 workers are employed by the city, primarily in the public works, protective services, and administrative areas. Ovalle is situated approximately four hours north of the Chilean capital of Santiago. With an urban population of approximately 85,000, the municipality includes both an urban and an extensive rural zone of about 3800 km^2. Ovalle employs some 1600 individuals, approximately two thirds of whom work in the educational and health-related sectors (both provincial responsibilities in Canada).

In many ways, Charlesbourg is a typical suburban Canadian municipality, with a per capita income slightly above the national figure of $US16,300 (Ville de Charlesbourg 1995a). Its administrative processes and democratic practices, including public consultation mechanisms, are established in provincial law and well entrenched. Decision-making power lies with the municipal council, with the mayor (under the British model) serving as council chair, facilitator, and main spokesperson for the city. A number of administrative departments/divisions are in place with responsibility for the various areas under municipal control, from policing to recreation, finance, and economic development. Within the city, administrative and political functions are strictly delimited, with the municipal 'civil service' under the supervision of the director general.

Ovalle is a study in contrast. Even adjusted for purchasing power, per capita income is approximately half the Canadian figure (World Bank 2000:230), and well over one third of the local population lives in poverty. In addition, the city has grown rapidly in past decades,

leading to a plethora of challenges on a number of fronts—from public housing, to transportation, health care delivery, and education (Ville de Charlesbourg 1995a:21). In political/administrative terms, like other municipalities in Chile, Ovalle follows the French or Spanish models. Political power is divided between the local elected council and the mayor (who, de facto, is the councillor who receives the most votes). The mayor—who is both political and administrative head of the local government structure—delegates authority for day-to-day decision making to his/her 'cabinet' members (secretaries), each of whom exercises responsibility for a particular service area (e.g. education, public works, finance, and so forth). Unlike the Canadian situation, the counterpart of the director general in Ovalle has limited budgetary and supervisory control, and, as often as not, limited experience in administrative matters (Ville de Charlesbourg 1994:5, 23–25).

In recent years, like other municipalities in Latin America, Ovalle has seen the implementation of a number of changes designed to improve local institutional capacity and generate public participation in government. Not all, however, have met with success.

Under the military government of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1989), municipalities in Chile were allowed only a limited degree of local autonomy, operating exclusively under the control of appointed mayors and councillors. Since the military's retreat in 1989, however, the situation has changed markedly. Following the election of the Aylwyn government, legal autonomy and electoral democracy were restored to local governments in 1991. The first municipal elections in 20 years were held the following year. Also in 1992, a new Municipal Code was promulgated, providing administrative stability by offering municipal personnel job security, mandating the establishment of the position of 'municipal administrator', and restricting the ability of mayors to make 'confidence' appointments to areas such as planning, legal advice, and community development. One key reform initiative also involved efforts to increase public participation in local government. To this end, after 1992, the central government strengthened the role of community organisations by mandating that municipal governments establish Economic and Social Community Councils (CESCs). Composed of representatives from neighbourhood associations (40 per cent), special interest groups (30 per cent), and business associations (30 per cent), the CESCs were designed to give voice to citizens in day-to-day municipal decision making (Nickson 1995:143).

As a strategy, however, the CESC model has met with serious difficulty. According to Rosenfeld (1996), because of a lack of interest or encouragement on the part of local authorities, the CESCs are not sufficiently well organised nor do they meet frequently enough to provide meaningful input to council. Unfortunately as well, other means designed to direct community participation in local decision making still suffer from a number of legal restrictions. For example, national legislation still limits the ability of autonomously formed neighbourhood associations to raise funds and to deal directly with local community problems. The effect of public input in decision making is also limited more generically by continued public mistrust of local officials, the power of vested interests to block a further devolution of powers to the local level, and the weak resource base of local government (Nickson 1995:143). Overall, claims Rosenfeld, the 'weakness in public participation' at the local level in Chile remains 'a serious concern for the government and the political parties' (Rosenfeld 1996:303). At the level of government, the commitment to act is clearly present, he states. What is lacking is the experience and the development of viable models to emulate.

Programmes and goals

In good measure, Charlesbourg's involvement with the city of Ovalle has been directed towards providing some of these 'missing ingredients', in effect, by demonstrating which

models for stimulating public participation are most effective in the municipal context.[3] Indeed, from the date when the first 'plan of action' was signed in 1994, participation and the improvement of communications between local government, civic employees, and citizens were established as priorities. Concrete activity in this area has focused on three separate initiatives, each of which has been undertaken with varying degrees of intensity and success. The first of these involved a proposed project to directly stimulate citizen involvement through activity at the grassroots level; the others involved direct collaboration with the municipality to improve mechanisms of communication and public consultation, on key issues related to planning, and also more generally.

Community group activation This project area received initial impetus in 1995, following a visit to Ovalle by Charlesbourg's director of Recreation and Leisure. In a subsequent report offering her assessment of the state of social services in the city, the director noted not only a serious problem associated with social inequality but also with what she conceptualised as the 'poverty' of public participation designed to redress pressing service-related issues (Ville de Charlesbourg 1995b:19).

In some respects, as the director noted, independent, institutional mechanisms designed to facilitate citizen involvement (along Canadian lines) are in place in Ovalle. These are resident in the approximately 140 community centres currently in operation in the city, each of which possesses its own advisory council, president, and treasurer. The primary function of these centres may vary, from promoting social activities, to fundraising, education and courses, or youth sports. As foci for citizen involvement in local-level decision making (and especially for women, who tend to participate disproportionately in such ventures), and in assisting the delivery and monitoring of municipal services, they clearly possess considerable potential.

Unlike the situation in Canada, however, the centres operate largely independently, and are not owned by the municipality. While personnel from Ovalle's Department of Community Organisations visit each community centre and occasionally assist in organising events, most suffer under severe financial constraints which limit their effectiveness as agencies for community input and action.

As a first step towards strengthening the functionality and participation-enhancing role of the organisations, the director offered two key recommendations in her final report. Her first recommendation was that the cities of Charlesbourg and Ovalle work together to help recruit volunteers from local neighbourhoods to work at the centres; her second, that personnel be offered training in fundraising techniques to help establish the centres as viable enterprises with a secure financial footing (to the extent allowed by Chilean law) (Ville de Charlesbourg 1995b:22).

Whether due to the arm's-length nature of the centres from the partner municipality, or perhaps to the scope of the resources likely to have been required to effect change, neither suggestion was followed up by concrete action through the accord. Consequently, a key opportunity for promoting grassroots, and particularly women's, democratic participation in governance appears to have been lost. By contrast, two other projects, both spearheaded by and through municipal personnel using existing administrative channels, received considerable attention, and as a result scored some significant successes.

Public consultation on the master plan During the first year of the accord, Charlesbourg planners agreed to assist their counterparts in Ovalle with revisions to the Chilean city's *plano regulador* (master plan). The idea for renewing the plan had first come from Ovalle's city council, and some work had been started on the project before the Canadians had arrived. In

the old plan, there were few zoning guidelines established, leading to a very *laissez-faire* system of urban growth. The new plan envisioned a more rigorous set of structures established within the confines of four zones or areas: urban, urban extension, restricted, and special. In addition, some 12 new sub-zones were to be created for housing, industry, parkland, and so forth—in effect, mirroring standard North American planning practice.[4]

In an initial report regarding potential cooperation between the two cities in this area, the director of Charlesbourg's Planning Division commented especially on the absence of effective communications mechanisms designed to facilitate public input into the planning process. What was required, she suggested, was a strategy to allow all interested parties (even within the municipal administration) to provide meaningful input into the new master plan. This strategy, she suggested, should be elaborated during subsequent planned visits of Ovalle delegations to Charlesbourg, and vice versa (Ville de Charlesbourg 1994:7–18).

The first steps in this direction were taken in the spring of 1995. While on a 'familiarisation' trip to Charlesbourg, Ovalle's chief planner was able to investigate the role and relationship of different parties on the urban development and planning process in Quebec—paying particular attention to the interplay between developers, professionals, business, administrators, and local regional-level politicians.[5] This initial observation was followed up by collaborative work undertaken on site in Ovalle.

On the technical side, Ovalle's planning department had hired a consulting firm to assist with the realisation of the project. Planners counted on the delegation from Charlesbourg, however, to provide input on how to fully engage the public in the *process* of plan development. 'We know how to develop the plan, no question', affirmed Ovalle's chief planner; 'we have much confidence in our abilities'. 'The problem in planning for future change', he added, however, 'is that [while] we know the theory, we haven't really seen the practice.'[6] According to the chief planner, the team from Charlesbourg provided critical input in this regard. '[Through the director of the Planning Division], Charlesbourg really helped with the communications side.' The director's role, he explained, 'involved getting the public involved in the process'. For planners in Ovalle this was a novel process, as such forms of public participation in planning were severely limited during the years of the military government.

Ovalle's chief planner is quick to point out that the Canadians did not introduce the idea of public consultation per se. 'This is part of a global trend', he affirmed. Nevertheless, the Canadians brought with them the experience required to implement the project effectively. Specifically, he claimed, with the help of Charlesbourg's Planning Division, Ovalle's planning department:

> *. . . met regularly with members of the public to review the progress of the plan. Notices were placed in the newspaper, and we met with representatives of the community associations. We met also with senior students in the high schools.*[7]

As a direct result of the consultation that took place, Ovalle's chief planner claimed, the planning department was able to prepare a very complete package for the city council, which took full account of public sensibilities and concerns. As an added bonus, with the public consultation process complete and a report appended, the necessary legislation passed very quickly into law, he reported.

Strategies for citizen communication Coinciding with the development of consultation mechanisms for revising the city's master plan, attempts to improve local government–citizen communications more generally began as early as 1995. The rationale for the development of a clear communications strategy for Ovalle was based on the principle that informed citizens

would be in a better position to participate effectively in local government decision making. This, in turn, would help ensure enhanced government accountability and improvements in both infrastructure and service delivery.

The first step in this process involved an investigation, undertaken by Ovalle's director of communications, into how local government in Charlesbourg promoted municipal activities and programmes, how public advisory boards were established (e.g. in the area of recreation), the nature of chambers of commerce, and role of neighbourhood associations in the city.[8]

Following further consultation involving public relations personnel from both cities in Ovalle, a multi-pronged plan of action for improving government–citizen communications was developed. On one front, beginning in the spring of 1996, a delegation of public relations personnel from Charlesbourg worked with their counterparts from Ovalle to improve internal communications at city hall, with an eye to reinforcing the role of city employees as 'message-carriers' to the community. To reach this goal, a series of employee seminars were set up, with personnel from Charlesbourg leading the discussion. In all, about 50 employees from Ovalle participated in the sessions, which were conducted in small groups over a period of several days (Ville de Charlesbourg 1996a:15–16, 1996b).

Published evaluation reports clearly suggested that a majority of the participants in this programme were impressed with the quality of training they received, and felt that the communications mechanisms they were learning about were not only applicable but desperately needed in Ovalle. Of 25 respondents to a questionnaire distributed following the seminars, 23 replied that the practices they were exposed to by the communications personnel from Charlesbourg were highly relevant to Ovalle and should be implemented. 'The suggestions are good and would benefit us greatly if adapted to our reality', commented one observer. 'The system in Canada is very good', suggested another; 'it would be good to use it 100 per cent in Ovalle' (Ville de Charlesbourg 1996b).

Thanks to these sessions, claimed Ovalle's head of public relations, communications in general between the administration and employees, and between the city and the public, have been revolutionised. 'In the area of public relations', he relates, 'the work of the two cities [Ovalle and Charlesbourg] is very similar now.' 'Like Charlesbourg', he explained, 'Ovalle now uses a frequently published *boletín informativo* [information pamphlet], so that all employees know what the city is doing. Employees now know what type of projects the city is involved in.'[9] Better-informed employees, in turn, serve as main information conduit to the local citizenry. This method of direct information passing, according to the public relations chief:

> *. . . is a real advantage. For example, in the past if a city employee were asked by a taxi driver what was being done some place in the city, the employee would not likely know. Now, the employee can say 'That's the new this or that'. This is a tremendous advantage over the past.*[10]

Interestingly, one of the first lines of communication opened between city hall employees and citizens in Ovalle concerned the accord itself. Accord organisers have been careful to orchestrate public events to which ordinary citizens are invited to attend, including receptions and other meetings at which delegates from Charlesbourg are present. As a result of such interaction, Ovalle Mayor Gallardo Flores contends that 'The public has shown a very strong interest . . . and is very aware of everything that goes on with the accord.'[11] Such sentiment was confirmed by a social worker with the city. When asked whether she encountered difficulties in seeking volunteers to assist during visits by the Canadians, she replied that preparation was easy because everyone knew about the agreement and they did not need to be brought up to speed.[12]

Aside from such informal mechanisms, the city also has developed a variety of direct means for informing the public about local government activities and planned undertakings. Information dissemination of this type has been undertaken using an array of devices well familiar to Canadian citizens but largely absent in the Chilean context to date. These have included direct-distribution flyers, pamphlets, and advertising in the local newspaper. The city of Charlesbourg has facilitated this process directly, moreover, through the donation of computer hardware for word processing and printing purposes.

As a result of these initiatives, claims the head of public relations, the communications 'gap' between city hall and citizens has been narrowed considerably. 'Each week', he relates, 'we can tell the public about what will happen [in the days ahead]—road closures, construction, and so forth. This was not done in the past. As a result', he proclaimed, 'our relationship to citizens is much closer.'[13]

There has also been a direct political consequence to such a campaign. '[T]he outward relations [with citizens]', claimed a city councillor, '. . . have changed dramatically.' As was suggested above in the case of the new master plan, this new relationship has had a direct impact on the functioning of the local council. The councillor claimed that previously there existed

> *lots of fighting and debate about local issues and improvements. Now, we execute a more thorough public information campaign. By the time [the issue] comes to council, a lot of the debate has already occurred. [As a result], the legislation passes through more easily.*[14]

In the eyes of Ovalle's politicians and administrators, the potential contribution of a more open communications strategy to democratic participation and improved service provision is thus clear: politicians propose, the public is consulted, legislation is passed (often with far less than customary acrimony), and the public is able to monitor the results more effectively.

Conclusion

Between 1993 and 1996, considerable time and energy were devoted by the partner cities towards improving citizen knowledge of, and participation in, local government in Ovalle. Such intervention has been extremely timely, given the fact that Chile has only recently emerged from a 16-year military dictatorship in which public participation was limited and the norms of democratic governance all but lacking.

Whether or not intervention on the part of Charlesbourg will ultimately lead to the development of Canadian-style democracy at the local level is less clear. Certainly, in failing to follow up on Charlesbourg's suggestions to strengthen local community centres, a key opportunity for directly facilitating citizen activation, especially among women, was lost. In this regard, the Canadians appear to have pursued a somewhat less challenging, more politically expedient route, shifting their attention away from more intensive activity at the grassroots level, and focusing more on top-down strategies developed in concert with civic authorities. In the end, this may speak directly to the nature of international municipal cooperation, which by design and practice has typically involved 'official' interchange at the expense of direct contact with ordinary citizens.

Aside from such potential 'failings', the archival and interview data presented here do certainly indicate that successes were scored as a result of joint attempts to put theory into practice with respect to information dissemination, public consultation, and citizen participation. At a more informal level, observation while in the field also revealed an emerging 'culture of information' largely lacking in many other Latin American municipal-

ities. The local newspaper does contain notices of municipal activities and planned projects; a public information kiosk has been placed outside city hall and the information is changed routinely. Beneficiaries of infrastructure projects developed through the accord mechanism (e.g. in the areas of parks and public housing) also appear to be aware of the origins and the specific mechanisms for the development of such projects. And yes, taxi drivers are able to explain the reasons for street closings and detours.

Within the Chilean context, Ovalle's citizens—both female and male—appear, then, to have been afforded considerable advantage as compared to their counterparts in sister municipalities as a result of the accord with Charlesbourg. Benefits to Charlesbourg of this exchange with respect to citizen participation are also evident, if somewhat less salient. Through opportunities to attend key events involving visitors from Ovalle, and displays at the local library, Charlesbourg's citizens have certainly obtained a better grasp of developing-world problems. Moreover, as described at length elsewhere, administrators and technicians taking part in the exchange process have led to a better understanding of administrative processes outside Canada, and their work abroad has contributed to a sense of personal reward, enhanced job satisfaction and productivity (Hewitt 2001).

Given its rather limited scope, it would be all too easy, however, to overstate the impact of this type of cooperation on democratic development more broadly conceived. In Chile, as in other parts of Latin America, inherent restrictions on the activities of citizen groups and their fundraising abilities, as well as those affecting the ability of local governments themselves to secure funds necessary to act on citizen demands, will in all likelihood temper democratic gains made at the local level. Continued problems of corruption, as well as the ability of powerful interest groups to restrict a further transfer of rights and powers to the local level, will likely have a similar effect.

These constraints notwithstanding, the study would appear tentatively to confirm that—in spite of its inherent limitations—international cooperation at the local level can provide a vital service in providing developing-world municipalities with the tools and the confidence to take initial steps towards increasing public participation in governance. Certainly, however, more research, on a comparative basis, would need to be conducted in order to affirm the effectiveness and universal applicability of the mechanisms discussed here for promoting participation on a broader scale. Such studies would also need to take into account the links between local initiatives in this regard and efforts to enhance democratic participation and accountability at the regional and national levels. While changes in the local democratic culture may be seen as a significant first step, the fate of local initiatives may be directly tied to progress occurring on this front beyond municipal borders.

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Notes

1 With approximately 74 per cent of the population living in urban areas, Latin America is one of the most urbanised regions on the planet. See UNDP (1999:200).

2 In the case of Chile, for example, the sub-national share of total public expenditure remains very low at 8.5 per cent, as compared to 49 per cent for Canada. See World Bank (2000:210). For a more general assessment of the situation in Latin America, see Nickson (1995:19, 57) and Rodrigues and Winchester (1996:26–27).

3 The cities of Charlesbourg and Ovalle have cooperated in a number of other areas unrelated to democratic restructuring. These have involved exchange of information in areas such as transit, parks and leisure, and administrative procedures. See Hewitt (2000).
4 Interview with Glenn Flores, 10 December 1999.
5 Interview with Glenn Flores, 10 December 1999.
6 Interview with Glenn Flores, 10 December 1999.
7 Interview with Glenn Flores, 10 December 1999.
8 Interview with Leopoldo Pizarro, 7 December 1999.
9 Interview with Juan Mundaca, 8 December 1999.
10 Interview with Juan Mundaca, 8 December 1999.
11 Interview with Alberto Gallardo Flores, 7 December 1999.
12 Interview with Ana Araya, 8 December 1999.
13 Interview with Juan Mundaca, 8 December 1999.
14 Interview with Gerardo Peñafiel, 9 December 1999.

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