

# CHALLENGES OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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Within the framework of the Seventh Inter-American Conference of Mayors and Local Authorities, carried out in Miami, Florida, from 26 to 28 June, a space was opened to reflect on the relationship between local government and civil society.

The central theme on this occasion was 'Local governments in the Americas: Political, financial and organizational challenges', and there were panels and plenary sessions where concrete experiences and reflections of mayors, academics and representatives of civil organizations and networks of various American countries participated. The participation of Elio Villaseñor from Equipo Pueblo focused on the issue of 'The relationship between local governments, civil society and the private sector', and we feel that it is important to revisit the last part of the presentation, focussing on civil society's role in the processes of transition in Latin America and the challenges that local governments face.

## Emergence of civil society

Authoritarianism has gradually given way to a democratizing wave that swept away the most diverse and broad regimes along the length and breadth of Latin America, in the majority of occasions through an electoral process.

Without doubt one of the causes of the displacement of authoritarianism has been the emergence of a civil society that is radically different, due to the autonomy it has achieved as a result of its process of social or armed struggle against a monolithic State. Organized civil society formed part of the opposition block against authoritarianism, which is why, now that democracy is beginning to be the norm, the citizenry is learning to be a true civil society.

However, despite this major advance, some critics still point out that this process has not been enough to resolve the structural problems that behest our peoples. They point out that the societies have been transformed to the point of changing their governments, but not enough so

that they themselves change in a radical way, as the remnants of the old political culture linger.

It would seem that the citizenry, from the electoral point of view, has come of age. But, paradoxically, there are still profound gaps, wide areas of the population that do not believe in the government, nor in the authority nor in the law, much less in the need for their active and co-responsible participation. And so, to continue to advance, it is important to accept that this lack is the result of the discrediting of governments and institutions being discredited due to a lack of legitimacy over several years because of the level of discretion used in decision-taking.

For this reason, the task in hand is the struggle against varied social problems, which should be a collective and public task that we all need to face together. It is of strategic importance that a culture of common effort and joint responsibility be fostered.

## Challenges for local government

In this sense, the construction of trust between government and civil society is of fundamental importance in order to continue advancing. This is the moment to re-weave the social fabric, and we must start with local government. In order to do so there are several challenges: Ensure financial autonomy in order that the local government can directly resolve community demands. It is vital that the municipalities increase their fiscal revenue, and that fair and equitable transfer of resources from the federal government is guaranteed. It is vital to establish mechanisms and instruments of social accountability that allow for more efficient and better quality local public policies, as well as recuperating the confidence of the citizenry through gaining knowledge of how the resources that taxes go towards are used.

The construction of bridges of confidence between civil society and government, making government actions transparency, with periodic account giving, in order to create a culture of

joint responsibility's. Governments need to take on the role of facilitators and servers, and it is equally important that the citizenry take on its role as collaborator, of monitor, and that it be willing to participate in joint activities to transform the surroundings.

The discussion and lobby for the creation of a legal framework to encourage the participation of citizens in the planning of actions and projects, and in the design of the municipal budget. Civil monitoring mechanisms must be established around decision-taking, the public agenda, compliance with commitments and concrete goals. To find the way to strengthen new institutions and democratic practices, so the they can be consolidated and pass the test of time, of political conflict and the diverse crisis.

Today it becomes vital that, together, society and government face the challenge that globalisation represents, that seems to be understood by some as the displacement of the local. For that reason an important task will be to strengthen cultural roots and consolidate group experiences; improve life in the communities, not destroy them.

The local must have a global vision, be sustainable and have a human face. y Give the rule of law a basis of enough trust to be able to achieve a dignified and jointly responsible environment for public and private life in our community.

I am convinced that the nature and quality of democracy in Mexico will depend, in large part, on what happens to our local governments. Many of the experiences described in this conference are the result of a particular moment in time, where the transition from a regime that has not ended to one that is beginning to be constructed stands out. The facts presented are just one moment in a process of change and of configuration of a new type of local government that is underway, that no one can stop and that by itself might even accelerate the changes towards the democratic transition.

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eration of the Mexican government in the war against drugs to control insurgent groups and the traffic of drugs.

The United States is facing its worse energy crisis in decades (most severely felt in California) and the acquisition of energy has become the maximum priority for both US domestic and foreign policy. Despite Mexico's own needs, Fox recently signed an energy integration agreement with the United States and Canada, which has been criticised for not being prudent and being short-term. Many experts in Mexico have predicted that in the next few years energy production will be insufficient to cover the needs of a growing economy and population.

Chiapas, a state that produces 64% of the electrical energy that comes from hydroelectric plants, has survived due to the construction of plants, many of which are established in the conflict zone. The energy potential of and the significant oil reserves that are found in Chiapas make it a strategically important state for the United States.

The increase in the price of oil and the North American crisis have meant that the link between the United States and Mexico become a point of pressure to increase oil production. If Mexico increases its oil production by excavating its reserves (many of which are in the conflict zone), the price of oil would fall and the products in the United

States as well, boosting the United States economy.

Considering these facts, it would not be an advantage for the US government for the use and benefits of oil and the hydroelectric sources to be in the hands of indigenous peoples (as was the spirit of the true COCOPA Law). Moreover, increasing exports to Mexico and other trade partners could give the US economy a boost to expand and pull itself out of recession. Increasing trade has been one of the most important issues of discussion between Fox and Bush in their recent meetings. Fox's proposal, the Plan Puebla Panama, would open investment to the US corporations and others in the areas of bio prospecting in the wide biological diversity of southeast Mexico. The construction of more than 80 maquilas (assembly plants), shrimp farms and fishing companies, the production of energy (hydroelectric and oil), as well as the extraction of other natural resources. A resurgence of the armed movement in Chiapas could affect the Mexican economy and weaken political stability, threatening the entrance of the US to the Mexican market, to energy and to natural resources.

The United States has sought cooperation with the Mexican government in the fight against drugs since the early 1990s. It also paid special attention to militarisation in Mexico. Moreover, new Mexican inter-

ests guaranteed through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) turned Mexico into a strategic ally and stability in the southeast became much more important to the US. Soon after the Zapatista eruption in 1994, the training of the Mexican army and police under the pretext of the war against drugs increased, paving the way to protect the economic goals of the US, and safeguarding its investments in the region, maintaining stability in Mexico and neighbouring Guatemala.

### Keeping it demagogic in line: US support for the Mexican army

Between 1995 and 1997, while the Mexican government was implementing its counter-insurgency low-intensity war in Chiapas, as in Guerrero and Oaxaca, military aid to Mexico reached unprecedented levels. In 1996 the total US aid for military and police support was close to seven million dollars, while in 1997 this reached close to 82 million dollars, almost a twelve-fold increase.

In 1997 and 1998, the Clinton administration assigned about 95 million for "Emergency" attractions and sections 1004 and 1031 funds for Mexico. The transference of equipment (arms, planes and helicopters) as well as education and training of Mexican soldiers constituted a large part of the

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