



Grassroots Movements, Political Activism and Social Development in Latin America:

A Comparison of Chile and Brazil

UNRISD Civil Society and Social Movements Programme Paper Number 4

Joe Foweraker

This paper examines the evolution of grassroots political activity in Chile and Brazil, and assesses its impact on social development. It scrutinizes transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, and focuses on the response of grassroots organizations to democracy and the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s.

Today, the social movement activity of the authoritarian period is giving way to negotiation rather than mobilization, and to increasing interaction with the state. NGOs multiply and become more visible, but where they interact with the state they can be subordinated to state policy, and where they fail to interact they can be ineffective. Grassroots organizations have achieved some impact on social development, but the impact was on policy implementation rather than policy making, and more likely to be partial and patchy than comprehensive or fundamental.

The paper finds that closer involvement with state agencies inevitably left grassroots organizations exposed to clientelist controls and political bossism. It finds that "grassroots organizations across Latin America cannot survive now without state funding. The price is often a loss of their capacity to maintain a critical stance or promote alternative development projects. With

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or without the state, they are increasingly preoccupied with their own financial survival, often to the detriment of the constituencies they are meant to serve. Many organizations disappear, and grassroots leaders leave to work elsewhere”.

This analysis does not suggest that grassroots political activity in the 1990s is unimportant, or entirely ineffective. But a realistic view must recognize that its influence on social policy is piecemeal, and that its role is more in social service delivery than in shaping social policy itself.

The present paper shows that these tendencies have been partly compensated by the proliferation of NGOs with external sources of support. But the NGOs themselves have suffered with the decline or constricted agendas of external funding.

In this context, the UNRISD paper calls on international agencies to seek to identify and support grassroots organizations that can take on the distinct task of criticism and advocacy, and so promote possible alternative futures for social development.

The agencies, for their part, should be less selective in their funding agendas and more selective about the specific organizations they fund. The relevant criteria should become organizational authenticity, legitimacy and voice: are NGOs an authentic response to community needs rather than a spurious response to international funding fashions? Are they the legitimate representative of indigent people or threatened nature rather than the narrow representatives of their own professional and pecuniary interests? And do they give voice to those who would otherwise be condemned to the "political silence" created by the combination of neoliberal policy and exclusionary democracy?

Joe Foweraker is a Professor of Government at the University of Essex and the Executive Director of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR).

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For Immediate Release

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Decentralization Policies and Practices under Structural Adjustment and Democratization in Africa

UNRISD Democracy, Governance and Human Rights Programme Paper 4

Dele Olowu

For historical, political and economic reasons, the governments of developing countries are generally more centralized than those of industrialized countries. In the 1990s, however, a number of factors led to renewed interest by national governments and international development agencies in the local government level of developing countries. These factors included globalization, economic crisis and structural adjustment, and democratization, as well as local and domestic forces such as rapid urbanization, strengthened ethnic identities, etc.

This paper focuses on African countries. While the relationship between adjustment and democratization, and the institutionalization of local government in Latin America and Eastern Europe has been the subject of systematic research and analysis, decentralization policies have remained poorly analysed and developed in African countries.

Decentralization in Africa has often been designed on the basis of ideological arguments (which extol the supremacy of party, state or market) rather than on analysis of what exists on the ground. Hence evaluations of decentralization programmes in African countries have generally produced negative findings.

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The author finds that even though there are fundamentally new orientations in decentralization policies, these experiments give cause for concern. These are:

- few countries have allowed multipartism and democratic decentralization at the same time;
- uneven and unequal development of infrastructural and institutional capacities between regions and communities has made decentralization asymmetric, causing further inequalities;
- decentralization policies tend to emphasize vertical transfers of authority and resources from central to local governments at a time when central governments are experiencing severe resource shortages. Furthermore, in some cases, large infusions of resources to regional and local governments may undermine incentives for the development of local revenue sources, and
- the need remains to strengthen classical accountability mechanisms of representation with additional participatory forms such as recall, referendum, local ombudsmen, service delivery surveys and participatory budgeting.

This paper shows that democratic decentralization should be approached as a process, not as an event. Also, African states need to move beyond the confines of the institutional resources that are currently being mobilized to include NGOs and CBOs, which are at present sidelined in the process of democratic decentralization and could become critical players.

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10 September 2001, Geneva

The Development Divide in a Digital Age

UNRISD Technology, Business and Society Programme Paper Number 4

Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara

This paper considers the role that information and communications technologies (ICTs) can realistically play in improving the life of millions. It focuses on low-income countries, where most development assistance efforts concentrate and where the challenge of utilizing ICTs is greatest.

The digital divide is symptomatic of the broader and more intractable development divide. The likelihood that people in low-income countries can improve their life chances is limited not only by their lack of access to modern means of communication and sources of information, but also by poverty and injustice and the structure and dynamics of the global economic system.

This paper argues that, when designing ICT programmes in developing countries, these broader constraints must be explicitly taken into account. Thus, at the international level, discussion of possibilities to use the Internet for improving trade and employment opportunities in low-income countries must be accompanied by a frank evaluation of impediments associated with the current global financial and trade regime. If the surrounding context for proposed innovation is not sufficiently analysed, and economic problems addressed, well-meaning efforts will have minimal impact. Hence, “even the most apparently local initiative—like the provision of access to the Internet in a Third World school or clinic—is likely to fail if that country’s debt burden makes it virtually impossible for the government to maintain adequate programmes of public education and health”, the paper explains.

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Better co-ordination between international ICT initiatives and broader debates on finance for development is essential. If the new technologies are to be used well in the struggle against disadvantage, there must also be improved co-ordination between those who work on ICT programmes in development ministries and agencies, on the one hand, and colleagues who follow the sometimes arcane debates on telecommunications and information policies within international organizations like the ITU, WIPO and the WTO, on the other. A development focus is lacking in most of these technical debates, yet their outcomes directly affect conditions of access to, and use of, information technologies across the globe.

This paper also demonstrates that the most successful efforts to incorporate modern technologies in national economies have occurred in countries with strong and efficient states, as well as a firm commitment to invest in education.

Low-income countries depend heavily on foreign institutions and actors to create both an adequate telecommunications infrastructure and a regulatory framework that is progressive and fair. Development assistance is crucial in this regard. The effort is likely to be more effective if it takes place within the context of national ICT strategies, which make explicit the need to adapt available technical and economic options to the needs of specific countries. These strategies should also provide a framework for better national co-ordination of many disparate efforts, by NGOs and others, to use ICTs to improve public administration and social services, and to support democracy in Third World countries.

Specific programmes for local improvement should only be financed in conjunction with careful attention to broader issues that determine whether an "enabling environment" can be created for development. In this context, it is argued, research becomes a vital factor for success.

Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara is Deputy Director of UNRISD and Co-ordinator of the Institute's research project on Information Technologies and Social Development.

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