



The elaboration of public policy agendas and legislative initiatives through multi-actor dialogues is playing a fundamental role in strengthening democratic practices in Latin American countries. What are some of the key experiences in the region?

MULTI-ACTOR DIALOGUES FOR BETTER PUBLIC POLICIES: LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA



SUMMARY

During the past twenty years, multi-actor dialogues have played an important part in the consolidation of democratic processes in Latin America and in increasing the participation of organised sectors of civil society in defining and overseeing public policies. To explore how these dialogues have worked in Latin America, this Brief focuses on three emblematic multi-actor dialogues in Latin America, coming from Argentina, Peru and Mexico, that are representative of the variety of political systems present in the region. The Brief highlights the methodological and contextual factors that influenced their success and identifies best practices that have the potential to be replicated in other regions of the world.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MULTI-ACTOR DIALOGUES

During the past twenty years, multi-stakeholder dialogues have increased in importance in Latin America as part of the transition away from authoritarian rule and towards greater democratic processes. In authoritarian regimes, citizen participation was largely silenced as part of highly vertical and concentrated decision making structures; under populist regimes, citizens engaged with state institutions largely through client-patron relationships. A central impetus for democratic consolidation involved shifting the terms in which sectors of society engaged with governments to increase participation and decrease historically vertical terms of engagement. As the consolidation of democracies progressed, a new set of conditions emerged based on the social exclusion of certain sectors of society. It is in this context, marked by the need for a greater participatory role by civil society and the incorporation of those stakeholders stemming from marginalised sectors, in which multi-stakeholder dialogues become central for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Latin America.¹

¹ The UNDP's [Democratic Dialogue Project](#) hosts an online library of reports and assessments of multi-stakeholder dialogue processes, including in Latin America. See, for example, this workshop report from: UNDP Regional Project Democratic Dialogue: [Promoting Multi-stakeholder Consensus Building as a Tool for Strengthening Democratic Governance. Second Learning Workshop on Democratic Dialogue](#). Panama, December 2-4, 2002.; For an interesting assessment of the impact of these dialogues using case studies from Argentina, Colombia and Jamaica, see: Retolaza, I., Díez Pinto, E. 2007. [Evaluating Multi-stakeholder Dialogues: A Comparative Analysis](#). Background paper prepared for the 'Generative Reflection Workshop: Assessing the Impact of Democratic Dialogues'. Carter Center, Atlanta, 24-25 January 2007.



Reflecting the increasing use of multi-stakeholder dialogues in the region, a 2007 initiative of four key international institutions² undertook to systematise lessons learned in multi-stakeholder experiences in thirteen Latin American countries to pull out effective methods used and share them with other regions of the world. They adopted the term ‘democratic dialogue’, frequently used in Latin America and the Caribbean region, to highlight the role that multi-stakeholder dialogues play in strengthening democratic institutions and in promoting democratic cultural political practices across diverse sectors of society. Their definition of a multi-stakeholder dialogue is the one we use in this Brief: “inclusive processes that are open, sustained and flexible enough to adapt to changing contexts... (and) can be used to achieve consensus or prevent conflict—a complement to, not a replacement for, democratic institutions such as legislatures, political parties and government bodies.”³

These multi-actor or multi-stakeholder initiatives are often promoted by academic and non-academic research centres and include the participation of a wide array of actors with extensive knowledge in a given field.⁴ Typically, multi-actor dialogues focus on achieving one or more of the following objectives:

- Develop and define new multi-stakeholder agendas
- Elaborate legislative reforms and establish mechanisms for citizen oversight
- Shift or expand the terms through which specific issues are being debated in the public sphere by incorporating new aspects into the agenda
- Incorporate non-partisan expert knowledge on the design and implementation of public policies
- Strengthen formal mechanisms for institutional transparency and accountability

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF MULTI-ACTOR DIALOGUES IN LATIN AMERICA

Since the 1990s, multi-actor dialogues have played a key role in broader processes of democratic consolidation in Latin America, following a period of three decades marked

by military rule in many countries. As is highlighted through the case studies presented below, multi-actor dialogues respond to two objectives within democratic frameworks. The first is methodological in nature: multi-actor dialogues formalise spaces for citizen participation in the elaboration of public policy agendas, establish mechanisms for citizen oversight of governmental institutions and promote consistent practices of accountability and transparency. Second, they create a venue for incorporating knowledge produced by non-partisan experts in policymaking processes. In this sense, they strengthen democratic practices by generating public policy initiatives that emerge from the broad participation of diverse actors. This tends to provide greater legitimacy to the policy agendas set and establishes channels for more durable changes that have greater potential to transcend the limits of specific administrations.

While the experiences from Latin America suggest that multi-actor dialogues effectively expand the breadth of actors who participate in policymaking discussions and who evaluate their implementation, it is important to note that in the majority of these exercises, citizen participation is concentrated in the spheres of those denominated ‘experts’, such as members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), human rights defenders, academics and researchers. The multi-stakeholder dialogues thus have limited impact in incorporating those sectors of the population who may be directly impacted by the policies but lack such trained expertise to participate.

In addition, while the concrete experiences of successful multi-actor dialogues serve as important reference points, they are largely determined by a series of political conditions that greatly influence their ability to be easily replicated elsewhere. The experiences in Latin America demonstrate that those countries with more advanced democracies and a broader trajectory of citizen participation, such as Argentina, have been more effective in pushing forward agendas that have historically been highly polarised. In contrast, countries such as Mexico, undergoing a series of regressive measures in democratic practices, have a tendency to shift to more opaque forms of decision making and are able to advance limited agendas, which often can only focus on maintaining basic transparency and accountability initiatives.

² The four institutions were the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

³ Pruitt, B., Thomas, P. 2007. *Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners*. United Nations Development Programme, Washington, DC.

⁴ For a discussion on the key objectives behind multi-actor dialogues, see: Communication for Governance and Accountability Programme (CGAP). *Multi Stakeholder Dialogue*. The World Bank, Washington, DC.



The three cases presented in this Brief were selected because they represent the possibilities and challenges of promoting policy shifts within contexts marked by the different degrees of democratic consolidation explained above. In the case of Argentina, a strong civil society empowered by effective processes of democratic institution-building was able to shift the terms of debates on security policies – perhaps one of the most sensitive and least transparent issues for policymakers in the region. The case of Mexico was chosen in order to highlight the opportunities and challenges in contexts of weakening institutions and regressive measures. The example of the Working Groups for Transparency highlights the strategic decisions promoted by CSOs in such contexts in which it is first necessary to guarantee basic rights to information and transparency in order to advance other sets of rights. The third case, from Peru, represents a context in which democratic consolidation has not advanced to the same extent as countries like Argentina or Brazil, yet neither is it undergoing the weakening of institutions such as in Guatemala, El Salvador or Mexico. The Consortium of Economic and Social Research in Peru was also selected to show the effective role academic institutions can play in generating multi-stakeholder dialogues with policymakers to advance evidence-based reforms.

The Democratic Security Accord in Argentina

The issue

The [Democratic Security Accord](#) (*Acuerdo para la Seguridad Democrática*) is a multi-sector alliance that since December 2009 has designed and implemented a series of reforms of the Argentinean state's security apparatus. Since the end of December 2009, the [Centre for Legal and Social Studies](#) (*Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales - CELS*) and several other CSOs have promoted the dialogue along with representatives of all the major political parties, members of NGOs and experts based in the capital of Buenos Aires, as well as from the countries' provinces. The focus of the dialogue, called the Accord for Democratic Security, is a ten point agenda for enacting profound human rights-centred democratic reforms of the government security and military institutions in Argentina.⁵

Context

A particular set of political conditions present in 2009 generated a favourable climate for pushing forward a progressive security agenda that had up to that point been highly polarised and dominated by conservative sectors in Argentina. The country's left-of-centre party, in power since 2003, had actively promoted and implemented important advancements in human rights, including criminal proceedings against political actors implicated in cases of forced disappearance, torture and assassination during the period of military rule. They also implemented CSO demands to participate in defining public policies. However, these administrative priorities failed to incorporate substantial public security reforms, leaving them as a pending agenda item. At the same time, civil society had been unable to expand their participation in the debates around security beyond a guarantee framework. In a context in which a progressive human rights agenda was already in place, CSOs were effectively able to insert themselves in debates previously monopolised by right-wing and right-of-centre conservative political actors and expand the terms of discussion.

How did the multi-actor dialogue take place?

To effectively group together political actors with starkly differing perspectives on security policies and establish a common agenda, it was necessary to shift the terms of the discussions on security. To prepare the terrain and reach eventual consensus, it was of outmost importance for those participating to come to the table with assessments of the problems to be addresses and discussed, as well as evidence to substantiate their claims in ways that spoke to all the actors involved. Similarly, it proved central to clearly define who was to participate in the discussions by limiting the use of the space for personal agendas or political interests, and by trying to prevent the use of confrontational tactics rather than collaborative methods.

Impact

The Accord for Democratic Security successfully shifted the terms in which security policies were being discussed and broadened the public debates to include human rights agendas and democratic reforms of the state's security institutions. This primary impact influenced a series of

⁵The ten-point agenda can be found here: [The Democratic Security Accord in Argentina](#).



concrete legal initiatives, and played a role in reforming the Secretary of Security, which in 2010 transitioned to a full Ministry. The Accord also influenced diverse mechanisms that were later implemented through the Ministry, including control measures for the police academy, reform of the disciplinary procedure codes and implementing the use of human rights indicators for ascending in rank.

Dialogue Programmes of the Consortium of Economic and Social Research in Peru

The issue

The [Consortium of Economic and Social Research](#) (*Consortio de Investigación Económica y Social* - CIES) is an association of 48 academic and non-academic research institutes in Peru. Since 1989, they have generated spaces for debate and exchange with members of civil society and the public sector on economic and social issues in order to engage with and influence the design and implementation of public policies. They have two main dialogue initiatives: the Public Sector Consulting Group (PSCG) and the Presidential Academic Dialogue Programme.

Context

In 1989, CIES was formed to strengthen the role that researchers play in the design and implementation of economic policies; ten years later, they decided to incorporate a social policy agenda. The Consortium responds to the need of policymakers to design public policies based on objective empirical evidence and to the researchers' goal of producing knowledge useful for elaborating social and economic changes in Peru. Research topics include: poverty and social policy, education, health, employment, rural development, gender, business and finance.

How did the multi-actor dialogues take place?

CIES operates under the guiding principle that social and economic policies are strengthened when the knowledge influencing these emerges through rigorous and participatory research processes coming from a prior process of agenda setting in conjunction with policymakers.

The PSCG, formed in 2008, is made up of fifteen representatives of the key government ministries and other institutions, along with members of CIES. It is a group that meets twice per year in order to define research priorities based on public policy needs by establishing a transversal research agenda for that year. The PSCG is based on the

method that knowledge produced in research centres is more effective to the extent that it is designed taking into consideration the needs and demands of public institutions. Current research projects include the poverty impacts of population dispersion, natural resource management for sustainable development, and decentralisation and state responsiveness to social demands.

The [Presidential Academic Dialogue Programme](#) is a space to generate joint analysis and elaborate key policy recommendations on topics identified as central by the current administration. It does this by organising plural and multidisciplinary dialogues made up of researchers and other experts from civil society, along with the President and key public sector officials. In contrast to the PSCG, this space is not designed to promote specific policy changes, but rather to define key routes of analysis and general recommendations. Two of these dialogues have been held so far, the first on microfinance and the second on decentralisation.

Impact

CIES has been effective in establishing strong and lasting bridges between knowledge production and public debate, situating researchers as key actors in the design and implementation of public policies in Peru, independent of the political party or the administration in power. Once the research projects sponsored by CIES culminate, there are set channels in place where these can be presented to the highest level public officials and other relevant actors. At the same time, the studies are considered by CIES as a public good which can be freely and widely distributed in electronic versions.

Studies on poverty and social programmes, which have generated more targeted policies for specific sectors of the population, have had notable impact. In 2004, for example, the development model produced by researchers in the Pacific and Catholic universities impacted the economic projections established by the Central Reserve Bank. And the Minister of Economics and Finance has worked jointly with CIES to develop training and capacity building on topics such as results-based budgeting.

Dialogues for Transparency in Mexico

The issue

Since 2008, the [Dialogues for Transparency](#) in Mexico City have grouped together representatives of eleven NGOs with representatives of key institutions in the nation's capital,



in order to advance proactive transparency mechanisms. They have focused largely on electronic platforms as part of strengthening implementation of the 2008 Transparency and the Right to Information Law in Mexico City.⁶

Context

After a brief period of transition to democracy in 2000, many would argue that Mexico is currently undergoing a series of regressive measures in terms of citizen participation, human rights, institutional transparency and accountability, a regression marked by the current administration's strategies to combat organised crime. The exception to this tendency seems to be the capital, Mexico City, that in recent years has implemented a series of innovative human rights legislation, including integrating a human rights perspective in all sectors of the city government programmes. In 2008, the City government approved the most advanced transparency law in the country, which meets the highest international standards.

Within this context, CSOs determined that the legal frameworks in place had already reached a level of maturity, so the next phase was to strengthen implementation as a basic requirement to guarantee other human rights. This assessment coincided with the opening of a new set of discussions at an international level on how to advance issues of transparency based primarily on proactive transparency models, and on the use of electronic formats with a more targeted agenda focused on the increased transparency of specific institutions.⁷ The resulting Working Groups for Transparency, formed as part of the Dialogues for Transparency in Mexico City, became an ideal space to bring together representatives of specific government institutions and of the participating CSOs.

How did the multi-actor dialogue take place?

In this case, an autonomous institute with close ties to government agencies, the [Institute of Access to Public Information and Protection of Personal Data in Mexico City's Federal District](#) (*Instituto de Acceso a la Información*

Pública y Protección de Datos Personales del Distrito Federal - InfoDF) played a pivotal intermediary role to ensure that policymakers' occasional distrust of CSOs did not impede a productive dialogue taking place. *InfoDF*, as an actor with a high level of legitimacy amongst participants, was able to ensure that a common terrain and set of conditions for collaborative discussions could be set.

The participants identified the strategic issues needed to move forward a transparency agenda and identified which governmental institution was responsible for generating and distributing public information on topics such as the environment, water services, programmes and services for the 16 districts of Mexico City, and social policies.

It proved central to maintain a simple operating procedure, headed by a coordinating body, in order to differentiate responsibilities and to identify the main categories of public information necessary to be included and organised in the government agencies' electronic portals. Similarly, the experience demonstrated that all agreements needed to be made in writing, with as much specific detail as possible, such as dates, entity responsible, criteria to evaluate progress and ways of dealing with lack of progress.

Impact

The Dialogues for Transparency in Mexico City have consolidated a space for formal discussions and agreements to be made between NGOs and public officials of the participating institutions. In terms of the impact of establishing proactive transparency agendas, the Dialogue's working groups were effectively able to push forward the reforms to improve the internet portals of various institutions, making it possible to have easy access to the data necessary for CSOs to evaluate the impact of particular policies. The challenge remains, however, to make the space more inclusive by incorporating a broader range of organisations committed to promoting the transparency of governmental institutions and thus expand the potential influence of the Dialogue.

⁶ For additional examples of transparency coalitions, see: Berthin, G. *et al.* 2005. [Anti-Corruption and Transparency Coalitions: Lessons from Peru, Paraguay, El Salvador and Bolivia](#). USAID. Washington, DC.

⁷ For more on these issues, see: Darbshire, H. 2010. [Transparency: The Future of the Right to Information?](#) World Bank Institute Governance Practices. Washington, DC.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

ENABLING THE SUCCESS OF MULTI-ACTOR DIALOGUES



As the Argentinean case illustrates, sensitive political issues like security policies are more effectively tackled when there is a solid trajectory of citizen participation and advanced levels of democratic institutional consolidation. The Democratic Security Accord in Argentina highlights the importance of this contextual factor as it allowed actors from diverse and often polarised positions to sit at the same table. Similarly, the weight of strong CSOs generated sufficient leverage to shift the terms in which the social issues were framed in public debates, thus opening the possibility for transcending previous points of disagreement.

The cases of Mexico and Argentina demonstrate that a well-defined diagnosis of the political and social conditions in a particular historical moment facilitates the possibilities of advancing agendas in a given period. In the case of Mexico, the political climate favoured advancing basic rights, such as

the right to information and transparency, but not sensitive issues such as public security, while in the case of Argentina, more polarised issues could be effectively placed at the centre of debates.

In terms of countries with medium-level democratic consolidation, the case of Peru illustrates that strong institutional support for research and an effective network of academics can effectively place their concerns in a space of dialogue with high-level government officials, in this case with the executive branch. A long trajectory of solid research findings on social and economic issues legitimised the knowledge generated by academic actors, paving the way for the executive branch to agree to opening spaces for dialogue, in order to consult these members of civil society on key policy decisions. This in essence expands the role that civil society plays in the elaboration and definition of social policy priorities.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Prior to setting a multi-actor dialogue, it is key to establish clear terms of collaboration with actors who have the political will to negotiate, discuss and jointly elaborate new agendas.
- 2 Those core actors promoting multi-actor dialogues must include a wide range of stakeholders and have gained a strong sense of legitimacy from all participants, as this is indispensable for creating an environment of open communication and collaboration.
- 3 Of utmost relevance is a clearly and carefully analysed political context to determine which issues are feasible to push forward.
- 4 The role of intermediary actors that have high political capital legitimised by all participants increases the potential for substantive decisions and effective medium-term implementation.
- 5 The formulation of national policies on complex topics, such as security, requires working through coalitions that are effectively able to redefine key questions, shift the terms of debate and establish new common points of convergence to transcend previously polarised discussions.
- 6 In order for the participating actors to commit themselves to the dialogue in place, the agenda set must be able to influence formal decision making processes. To have lasting effects, it must be able to link the results or outcomes of the dialogue to concrete results.

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