



Since the 1980s, Latin American countries have used local councils formed by citizens and public authorities as an effective mechanism to create citizen participation in designing local development policies and programmes.

## INCREASING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: LATIN AMERICA'S LOCAL CITIZEN COUNCILS

### SUMMARY

Local citizen participation has long been acknowledged as a useful tool to enhance public policies: it improves policies' responsiveness to the population's needs and quality as citizens make creative and innovative proposals to solve development challenges. In the last two decades, countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru have developed new mechanisms to foster citizen participation at the local level by creating citizen participation bodies, or what we term here, *local councils*. These are institutional spaces where citizens - represented by civil society or community-based organisations, academics and the private sector - come together with municipal authorities to discuss and make decisions about local development and governance issues. In particular, by allowing greater participation of groups that were historically left out of decision making processes, such as women, youth and indigenous populations, these local councils have made local governance more inclusive and representative. This Brief analyses the experience of local councils in Latin America, highlighting key outcomes, design features and contextual factors that enabled their implementation.



### THE CHALLENGE OF LOCAL-LEVEL CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation has long been recognised as one of the main components of good governance. This is especially true at the local level where it is assumed that increased engagement will create direct routes of accountability with local authorities, thereby improving local public service delivery and generating better local-level policies to tackle poverty. In spite of this, governance weaknesses at the local level mean citizens in developing regions often have few opportunities to participate in designing the public policies that impact their daily lives.

To generate such opportunities, countries in Latin America, as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, have created local citizen participation bodies – local councils – as a mechanism to enable citizen participation in development programmes and policies at the municipal level. However, across the three regions,

### KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Local councils have a greater chance of improving public policies' responsiveness to the population's needs when they are plural organisations, where different groups of the community or municipality are represented and where decision making is equally shared between political authorities and citizens.

These bodies' success is more likely if both local government and citizens are fully committed to strengthening citizen participation and allocate time and efforts to these mechanisms.

A comprehensive law providing a strong framework can facilitate active and influential local councils.



countries face challenges in promoting effective participation through these local bodies and in ensuring sufficient local political will to guarantee they function well. This Brief, which analyses the main design features of local councils in Latin America and the contextual elements underpinning their success, will be of use to policymakers and citizens looking to strengthen local councils in their own countries.

## LATIN AMERICAN APPROACH TO LOCAL COUNCILS

Since the 1980s, governments in Latin America have developed a new relationship with their citizens, in which they can participate more actively in the decision making process. They have achieved this, in part, by creating local citizen councils.

Although local councils take on different names and forms across the region, as Figure 1 shows, they do share common features. Generally, they gather different sectors of civil society, such as academics, civil or community-based organisations and the private sector, and join them with local political authorities in a single body, where they collaboratively make public policies or design development programmes. They also typically share a common goal of strengthening democracy and the quality and responsiveness of public policies at the local level.

This map highlights some of the most documented and well-known local council experiences in Latin America:



Figure 1: Examples of Local Councils in Latin America  
Own elaboration.

## DIVERSITY OF LOCAL COUNCILS IN LATIN AMERICA

The institutional design of these bodies differs from one country to another. Below are some of the key design features of local councils in the region, focusing on the legal framework, composition and function, and thematic focus. These design features shape how the local councils operate, and therefore their impact on the policymaking process as well.

### 1. Legal Frameworks

In some cases, the creation of local councils is mandated by the constitution or a national law, while in others, they have emerged at the initiative of local governments and citizens.

Acknowledgement of citizen participation in the constitution is a characteristic of South American countries, in particular those that have newer constitutions, like Venezuela and Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup> [Peru's Constitution](#) (Title IV, Chapter XIV on Decentralisation) goes even further, mandating local councils at the regional level – called Regional Coordination Councils (CCR) – composed of regional public officials and civil society representatives, as part of the basic structure of regional governments.

In other countries, the legal requirement to implement local councils comes from federal laws and regulations. These laws make it compulsory for local governments to promote citizen participation and create enabling contexts for the creation of local councils. Mexico offers one example; its [National Water Law](#) mandates the creation of Basin Councils.

The region's laws regulate the different features of the local councils, such as their administration, responsibilities and decision making power, though to varying degrees. On the one hand, Bolivia's [1999 Law of Municipalities](#) (Title 1, Chapter 1, Article 5) and its [2009 Constitution](#) (Title VI, Article 241), for example, only mention the need for local governments to promote citizen participation in the design and implementation of public policy and development plans. On the other, [Peru's Organic Law of Municipal Government](#) includes a quite detailed description of the local councils – called Local Coordination Councils (CCLs) – and their powers, and of the Concerted Municipal Development Plan (discussed further below) which is mandatory for all local governments to create, and in which the CCL plays an active role.

<sup>1</sup> Dagnino, E., Olvera, A., Panfichi, A. 2008. [Democratic Innovation in Latin America: A First Look at the Democratic Participatory Project](#). In: Raventos, C. (ed). 2008. *Democratic Innovation in the South: Participation and Representation in Asia, Africa and Latin America*. CLACSO, Buenos Aires.



Finally, in some cases, the initiative to create local councils has come from local actors. Their success gave the councils so much publicity that they ultimately become the basis for a national law. One example is Colombia, where the government of Medellín's Youth Municipal Councils, first established in 1995, served as a model for the national law that was adopted in 1997; by 2010, 425 Youth Municipal Councils had been created in Colombia.<sup>2</sup>

In Peru, a variety of local experiences formed the basis of the future national law that was passed. Prior to the law, some local governments - the municipality of Ilo being perhaps the most representative experience - created local councils called Cooperation Roundtables for Local Development. In Santa Rosa, Puno, the local government created a Local Auto-Government Council, where civil society was represented up to 93%, participating in decision making and in the administration of the government's financial resources.<sup>3</sup> In other Peruvian communities, civil society organisations (CSOs) pushed for local councils, in agreement with municipal governments, such as in the Provinces of Huanta and Churcampa.<sup>4</sup> It was only some years later that the national government passed the law mandating the creation of Provincial and District Local Coordination Councils (CCL) in all local governments nationwide.

## 2. Composition and Function

In general, local councils in Latin America are formed by elected representatives of various social, political, and sometimes economic sectors. It is worth noting that local councils in Latin America only have the legal mandate to design development plans and policies. In the majority of cases, execution and implementation of the plans and policies depends on the initiative of the municipality. Political will of municipal authorities is then important to ensure that the plans and policies resulting from the participatory process are actually implemented.

Evidence from Latin America illustrates the importance of the capacity and will of the actors involved in the councils, especially the local governments' open attitude

towards citizen participation. In Bolivia, for example, one study demonstrates a link between the capacity of local governments in elaborating plans and policies, and the involvement of citizens in the decision making process. The study also found that the governments with less capacity were the ones that maintained confrontational relationships with their citizens.<sup>5</sup>

### Spotlight on Successful Local Councils

San Ignacio de Velasco and La Guardia are two Bolivian towns chosen by the CSO [Centre for Participation and Sustainable Human Development](#) (*Centro para la Participación y el Desarrollo Humano Sostenible* - CEPAD) as good local administration practices for their impact on boosting local development. A key part of that recognition comes from the priority the municipalities give to citizen participation in their version of a local council, called the Local Economic Development Commission (CODEL). The CODEL have contributed to important progress at the local level. For example, they have pushed through successful economic development projects under the umbrella of their Local Economic Development Plan, through which La Guardia increased the number of its companies by 20% in the past three years. This also enabled the municipality to obtain resources necessary for implementing social programmes, becoming able to provide 100% of the budget for programmes within its borders that originally relied on funding from the central government. For example, the municipality became completely in charge of the originally-national Service to Children Programme (*Programa de Atención a los Niños y Niñas* - PAN), and established 21 Children Centres by 2011. The municipality also implemented activities to promote local identity and protect local culture and reforms to transform the municipal organisation. Given these successes, CEPAD is promoting these experiences as models for other Bolivian municipalities. San Ignacio and La Guardia's good practices even convinced two municipalities from El Salvador, who in 2008 joined the two Bolivian municipalities in a twin cities partnership.

Sources: [CEPAD](#) and [Deutsche Gesellschaft Für Internationale Zusammenarbeit \(GIZ\)](#) websites.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see this [website](#) of the department where Medellín is located, Antioquia, which provides more information about the Youth Municipal Councils.

<sup>3</sup>Ciudadanos al Día (CAD). 2009. [Consejo de Coordinación Local](#). Boletín No. 76. CAD, Lima.

<sup>4</sup>Panfichi, A., Pineda, L. 2004. [De la Confrontación a la Concertación en Provincias Indígenas del Perú. Comparando las Mesas de Concertación para el Desarrollo Local de Huanta \(Ayacucho\), y Churcampa \(Huancavelica\)](#) (From Confrontation to Agreement in Indigenous Provinces of Peru). In: Isunza, E., Olvera, A. 2006. *Democratización, Rendición de Cuentas y Sociedad Civil, Participación Ciudadana y Control Social*. CIESAS, Mexico City.

<sup>5</sup>Guevara Avila, J.P. 2002. [Descentralización, Participación y Ciudadanía en Bolivia: Evaluación y Balance de lo Logrado \(Decentralisation, Participation and Citizenship in Bolivia: Evaluation and Advances Achieved\)](#). GRIAL Conference, Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain.



### 3. Thematic Area

Local councils in Latin America follow two basic models in terms of the variety of thematic areas they tackle. On the one hand, local councils can debate and decide on comprehensive development plans that therefore cut across many sector-specific concerns. One key example are the Peruvian CCLs, local councils that come together to elaborate the Participatory Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Concertado) for their Provincial or District Municipality. These plans cover issues related to social, economic and urban development, as well as public investment. The CCL also coordinates the Provincial and District-level Participatory Budget that is meant to feed into the plans.<sup>6</sup>

Thematic Focus of Key Local Councils in Latin America

Country	Local Council	Thematic Focus
Bolivia	Local Economic Development Commission (CODEL)	Wide range of development issues – Economic Development, Social Development, Urban, Public Safety, Health, Municipal Logistics, Human Development, Environment
Brazil	Local Health Management Councils	Social – Health
Colombia	Youth Municipal Councils	Social – Youth
Mexico	Basin Councils	Environment – Water Administration
Paraguay	Local Health Management Councils	Social – Health
Peru	Local Coordination Councils (CCL) Local Auto-government Council	Wide range of development issues Wide range of development issues

Own Elaboration.

In other countries, local councils are created to deal with specific thematic areas, such as social policy, environmental preservation, urban governance or public service provision. This is the case in Mexico, where local councils focus on environmental issues. Mexican Basin Councils, for example, formulate and carry out programmes to improve water management, develop

infrastructure and services, and contribute to the integral conservation and restoration of the basins.<sup>7</sup> Brazil’s active local councils develop action plans for specific social policies, such as the ones related to health or youth.<sup>8</sup>

### LATIN AMERICA’S ONGOING CHALLENGES

Despite clear successes in establishing local councils, most Latin American countries still face real challenges in making them work effectively.

For some countries, the lack of a federal or national law that sets common fundamental principles and criteria for local councils throughout the country poses a particular challenge. In Mexico, for example, establishing an enabling legal framework is left up to the will of the provincial governments, leading to differences in implementation across the country, with some citizens not being offered the opportunity of a local council. In the Mexico case, the lack of a national regulatory framework is often explained as coming from a lack of political will from the different political parties.<sup>9</sup>

Yet even countries that do enjoy a national law still face challenges coming from the way it was designed. Some laws do not provide enough detailed information about the creation, administration and responsibilities of local councils. This can result in vaguely defined councils that lack legitimacy in their origin, functioning, mandate and scope. In some cases, the local council law contradicts other legislation making it nearly impossible to create active local councils. The Citizen Committees and Councils of the 2004 Citizen Participation Law of the Federal District of Mexico are illustrative examples of local councils that suffer from lack of definition in terms of their functions and spheres of authority.<sup>10</sup>

As several Latin American experiences show, sometimes local governments create local councils to comply with the law, but do not give them real decision making power. This

<sup>6</sup> See the [Organic Law of Municipal Government of Peru](#).

<sup>7</sup> To learn more, visit the [website of Mexico’s National Water Authority](#).

<sup>8</sup> Almeida, C. 2006. El Marco Discursivo de la “Participación Solidaria” y la Nueva Agenda de Formulación e Implementación de las Acciones Sociales en Brasil (Discourse of “Solidary Participation” and the New Agenda of Formulation and Implementation of Social Actions in Brazil). In: Dagnino, E. Olvera, A.J., Panfichi, A. *La Disputa por la Construcción Democrática en América Latina (The Dispute for Decmoraactic Constructions in Latin America)*. FCE, CIESAS, Universidad Veracruzana, Veracruz.

<sup>9</sup> Olvera, A.J. 2009. *Las Leyes de Participación Ciudadana en México: Proyectos Políticos, Estrategias Legislativas y Retos Estratégicos en la Democratización Futura (Citizen Participation Laws in Mexico: Political Projects, Legislative Strategies and Strategic Challenges in Future Democratization)*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



comes from lack of local government's political will to create participation bodies that function actively and have a real impact on decision making.

Whether enjoying a legal framework or not, engendering true participation in the local councils remains a significant challenge in the region. The first challenge is ensuring the representativeness of citizens in these local bodies. Peru is a good example, since the law only allows for civil society representatives to number 40% of the total amount of municipal authorities that are part of the CCL. Moreover, the accreditation mechanisms mandated in the Peruvian law are quite exclusive; the requirement that organisations be legally recognised entities, registered in the Public Registry and in existence for at least three years makes it impossible for many CSOs to participate.<sup>11</sup> The other challenge is dealing with the constraints individual participants face, such as not being sufficiently informed or not having the time required. Some individuals cannot prioritise the time needed to attend and participate in the local council because of their economic situation.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the accountability of the participation bodies and its members to citizens needs to be strengthened. Transparency has been a challenge, which has prevented citizens from accessing information about the municipality's decisions, leading to distrust towards the councils and creating a space where corruption could easily emerge.<sup>13</sup>

## KEY OUTCOMES OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Although local councils are still evolving and face certain challenges, some outcomes from Latin America are visible,

highlighting the potential of local councils to create important impacts on governance and development.

One of the most notable of the councils' outcomes is that they allow marginalised and vulnerable groups to become involved in public policies that concern them. Indigenous people, women and even children have gained direct access to decision making processes for the first time.

Local citizen participation has perhaps its most elaborate expression in Brazil, where 99% of municipalities have tripartite councils, which many argue have been successful in giving citizens a voice in decision making in their municipality.<sup>14</sup> Colombia is another example where children have their own council. Also, in Peru, in 2009, in the municipality of Jesus Nazareno, Ayacucho, 50 children were included in the CCL.<sup>15</sup>

Evaluations of local councils have also shown they can lead to direct improvements in terms of service delivery and local development outcomes.<sup>16</sup> The first Peruvian experience of the Concerted Council for the Development of the Ilo Province, which preceded the national law mandating local councils, led to environmental improvements, better supply of basic urban services and increased implementation of sustainable development projects. In Santa Rosa, Puno, Peru, in 2007, the Local Self-government Council, composed by 93% of civil society representatives, participated in the implementation of a capacity development plan that led to the creation of the Decent Housing Programme, which benefited 25,000 families and created 15 virtual classrooms.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Pening Gaviria, J.P. 2003. [Evaluación del Proceso de Descentralización en Colombia \(Evaluation of the Decentralisation Process in Colombia\)](#). *Economía y Desarrollo* 2(1) 123-149.

<sup>13</sup> Ciudadanos al Día. 2009, above n3.

<sup>14</sup> Selee, A. 2004. [Exploring the Link Between Decentralization and Democratic Governance](#). In: Tulchin, J.S., Selee, A. 2004. *Decentralization and Democratic Governance in America Latina*. Woodrow Wilson Center Report on the Americas #12. Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC.

<sup>15</sup> Ciudadanos al Día. 2009, above n3, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Panfichi and Pineda. 2004, above n4.

<sup>17</sup> Ciudadanos al Día. 2009, above n3, 14, 16.

# CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

# ENABLING SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS



Since the 1980s, historical and political processes in Latin America have shaped the creation and development of local councils in various countries of the region. First, as a response to heavy indebtedness and unsustainable macroeconomic management, Latin American countries – leveraged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – implemented Structural Adjustments Programmes to liberalise the economy and reduce state spending and fiscal imbalances. These policies led to fiscal austerity and the state’s withdrawal from public services, which led to declines in living standards. As a result, citizen pressure on the state grew, with demands for increased social services and programmes and a greater voice in public affairs. Second, decentralisation transferred greater responsibilities and financial resources to local governments, giving them a larger decision making role. Finally, after decades of authoritarian regimes rife with political violence, many countries began a democratic transition. These new democratic regimes increasingly incorporated citizen participation in the policymaking process, with greater recognition of citizens’ right to participate in decision making. It was within this context – of democratisation, rising citizen demand and local governments’ increased importance thanks to decentralisation – that national and municipal governments

in Latin America started to develop a new relationship with their citizens, allowing them to become more actively involved in the local decision making process.<sup>18</sup> One of the democratic innovations at the municipal government level was the creation of local councils.

The existence of favourable legal frameworks mandating the creation of local councils has been a fundamental mechanism for developing and strengthening local participation. Although in many cases legal frameworks are the foundation for the creation of local councils, their outcomes have depended on the design of the law, on the one hand, and on local governments’ good will, on the other.

The case of the first Peruvian experiences implemented prior to the national law, however, show that, in some cases, a favourable legal framework was not necessary to boost the creation of local councils and ensure success. What was most important is a solid, well-organized and heterogeneous group of citizens able to represent the population and with the will to get involved in the decision making process.

Finally, the initiative of local CSOs has played an important role in the development of several local councils. These CSO were willing to commit time to push for the creation and strengthening of the councils and to participate actively in them, ensuring their success.

<sup>18</sup> Selee, 2004, above n15.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 As the Latin American experience shows, local governments that are fully committed to promoting citizen participation play a decisive role in the creation of active citizen councils, and in their significant impact on public policies. Fully committed and involved citizens are also essential to generate creative and innovative proposals.
- 2 Latin American countries demonstrate how a good relationship between citizens and their local government is essential for the success of the local councils. A fair sharing of the decision making process between the local government and civil society representatives is also crucial, strengthening local democracy overall and contributing to improving public policies’ responsiveness to citizens’ needs.
- 3 The more heterogeneous the citizen council is, the more consistent with the population’s needs the plan or programme designed by the council will be.
- 4 Local councils and their members must keep citizens informed about their actions and decisions, thereby enhancing accountability.
- 5 In most countries, a comprehensive law providing a strong framework for the councils, in terms of their creation, administration and responsibilities, facilitates active and influential local councils. At the same time, however, it must be noted that some Latin American countries that lack the legal framework still enjoy active local councils, though these tend to rely on the will of individual local governments and citizen groups.

### CONTACT [FUNDAR](#)

To learn more about local councils in Latin America, contact Marine Perron, ELLA Researcher, at [marine@fundar.org.mx](mailto:marine@fundar.org.mx).



### FIND OUT MORE FROM [ELLA](#)

To learn more about citizen participation in Latin America, read the [ELLA Guide](#), which has a full list of the knowledge materials on this theme. To learn more about other ELLA development issues, browse other [ELLA Themes](#).

ELLA is supported by:

