

Between Hope and Resignation: Perceptions and practices of politics and leadership among the poor in southern South America

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How do the poor perceive politics and the performance of their 'leaders' in the context of consolidating democracies in Latin America? And how, if at all, do they engage in the public affairs that affect their lives?

Against the background of persistent patterns of poverty and inequality, this small study set out to begin to answer these questions. More than 40 open-ended and in-depth interviews were carried out between September 2009 and April 2010 in selected urban and rural municipalities or neighbourhoods (*barrios*) in Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. The main findings were as follows:

- In southern South America there remains a sharp separation between the daily life of the poor and the world of politics.
- The understanding of democracy and politics is influenced by personal/group experiences rather than by theoretical discourses.
- The relations between poor people, officials and elected political representatives are often characterised by (unrealistically) high expectations, conflict and mutual mistrust.
- Generally, the idea of democracy is given a positive evaluation, but nonetheless some respondents believe that democracy is not the appropriate political order for their society.
- Many respondents separate the private and the political sphere and perceive politics and democracy to be beyond their influence.
- Many respondents do not approve of either the political order or the performance of political leaders.
- In turn, many respondents adopt pragmatic and instrumental (if not opportunistic) attitudes towards state institutions and political organizations and officials, and try to maximize personal benefit from their interactions with them.
- There is the diffuse hope that a "new leader" will be able to overcome the dysfunctional political order.
- At the local level there is a variety of community organisations and forms of participation that are not conceived of as 'politics' or as being 'political'.
- These activities reveal a high degree of self-organisation, mobilisation, dynamism and pragmatism. Whether intentionally or not, many of these organisations put the principles of (grassroots) democracy into practice.
- There is room for change through the emergence of new and more responsive leaderships and the enhancement of the bargaining power of the poor and their organizations.

A variety of policy messages have emerged from this study, including the following:

Policy messages for representatives of poverty groups:

- Develop better understandings of the mechanisms and constraints in the world of politics.
- Recognise the political dimension of local action, self-help and solidarity.
- Do not build up single leaders, but look for groups of leaders, networks and coalitions.
- Understand better the function of institutions and how they can be accessed and used by organizations and representatives of the poor.

Policy messages for political authorities:

- Recognise local associations without exploiting them for party interests.
- Where decentralisation is not suitable, create mechanisms for the flow of information and coordination between central and the local levels.
- Connect with the existing local associations.
- Do not simply create new laws but improve the conditions for their implementation.
- Create programmes for non-ideological political learning and promotion of self-esteem and responsibility.

Policy messages for external supporters:

- Develop detailed and nuanced political analyses of the situation of the people.
- Identify the active people and encourage greater involvement of others.
- Promote both *political understanding* and *political capacity building*.
- Encourage *formal or informal coalitions* or collaboration between local associations.
- Create neutral spaces for political debate.
- Create cases of coordinated local action with the participation and support of the state and highlight them as examples for policy making.
- Mainstream local participation dimensions within all policy sectors.
- Recognise that you have to adopt a political role within the partner country but refrain from taking sides and maintain a neutral position.

Download the full paper:

[Iván Égido, Friedhelm Guttandin, Gustavo López, Jana Leutner, Ulrich Müller & Lena Lázaro \(2012\) *Between Hope and Resignation: Perceptions and practices of politics and leadership among the poor in southern South America.*](#)

Download the Annex (selection of interviews in the original Spanish):

[Iván Égido, Friedhelm Guttandin, Gustavo López, Jana Leutner, Ulrich Müller & Lena Lázaro \(2012\) *Annex of Between Hope and Resignation: Selected Interviews.*](#)

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