



# DLP

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

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# Executive Summary

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.

## 1

## Introduction

During the 1980s, the countries of southern South America underwent a remarkable shift from authoritarian governments to democracies. In 1980, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay were all ruled by military dictators: ten years later, each country had democratically elected governments in place, with the only exception being Paraguay, where, nevertheless, the process of democratisation had started and soon led to a democratically elected national government.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of these democracies gave reason for hope that the notorious social inequality<sup>2</sup> in Latin America might be overcome through greater political participation of the poor. But despite the fact that most of the countries had earlier democratic experiences, and civil society was relatively well organised, the democracies in southern South America are still weak and inequality remains the highest in the world. Notwithstanding this, the recent experience of Brazil shows a close link between the government's success in reducing inequality and its success at the polls. Brazil, historically one of the countries in the world with very high levels of inequality, even by Latin American standards, made remarkable steps under the socialist government of Lula da Silva: The trend of ever increasing disparities was halted and turned around to produce a continuous reduction of Gini Coefficients from 0.61 in 1998 to 0.54 in 2011 [The CIA World Factbook, 2011]. This political success was probably the main reason why Lula da Silva was re-elected in 2006, and his "crown-princess", Dilma Rouseff, won the election in 2010, despite frequent allegations of corruption against Brazil's Socialist Party [The Guardian, 2010].

While these political processes are well documented by many political analysts [e.g. Heinrich W. Krumwiede and Karl-Dieter Hoffmann], less attention has been paid to the perceptions<sup>3</sup> of the poor and the ways in which they organise themselves and act "politically" in local contexts. Research on that topic generally concentrates on some outstanding cases, like the landless movement in Brazil [Miguel Carter, 2005], where poor people have created strong and internationally recognised organisations in order to defend their interests. Meanwhile, the unorganized or only sporadically organised poor rarely appear in studies about leadership and policy making.

This paper seeks to shed light on how poor people in southern South America perceive the performance of their elected representatives and whether and how they act politically. We first explain the methodology and the data set, and give a short overview over the theoretical background. The paper

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1 In the early years after Latin America's re-democratization, there has been the constant fear of an authoritarian backlash since illegitimate interventions, military coups and economic crises have been very frequent in the past. Formally, however, Latin American democracies have proven to be surprisingly stable and resilient. For many analysts democracy is, however, more than the holding of elections, and participation is traditionally weak in the region. Further, Rule of Law and Human Rights are not fully guaranteed in many Latin American countries [Krennerich, 2003: 2-4].

2 Latin America is not only the world's most unequal region, inequality has been extremely persistent: From 1970 to 2000, the average Gini coefficient in Latin America has exceeded 0.5, whereas during the same period OECD Countries and Asia have had average Gini coefficients of 0.3 and 0.4 respectively [UNDP, 2010]. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between inequality and poverty in the region. On the other hand, a country's per-capita-income seems to be less decisive. Costa Rica, for example, has a lower poverty rate than Mexico and Brazil, where both per-capita-income and income concentration is higher. In Latin America, poverty is not only a problem of retarded modernization and insufficient growth but also of unbalanced income distribution. Even a small reduction in these disparities would have significant effects on poverty [Krumwiede, 2003: 4-5].

3 Terminology will be further clarified in chapter 3.

then further explores the respective socio-economic and political contexts of the selected countries and municipalities, before presenting the key findings of the study. In sections 6-8, central aspects of the interviews are further detailed. To conclude, the paper suggests a yet to be fully specified typology of political action, and formulates concrete policy implications aimed at strengthening the capacities of the poor to self-organise and interact with political authorities and public organisations.

## 2

## Methodology

The present study of perceptions and practices of leadership among the poor in southern South America focuses exclusively on this stratum. The main objective is to give voice to those who are generally not heard, and to understand their concepts of leadership and politics, which are based on their biographies and personal experience. In order to achieve this goal, the study follows a rigorous empirical approach. It does not take definitions of leadership, politics or democracy as a starting point, but interprets the voices of the poor in a rather hermeneutic way, trying to disclose in that way the definitions and understandings used by the respondents themselves.

Between September 2009 and April 2010, an investigation was carried out by a specially formed, interdisciplinary and multinational team. The team consisted of two political scientists, a sociologist, an economist, and a geographer from Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Germany. It brought together persons working in university contexts and in development cooperation practice.

For the empirical work, one urban and one rural community in each of three countries were selected for in-depth-interviews with persons living in these areas, with a total of 44 interviews carried out; interviewees consisted of 28 men and 16 women. The couple, Rosana and José from Bariloche, were interviewed together, so the total number of interviews is 44, while the total number of individual respondents is 45.

OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEWS				
		Number of Interviews		Gender Ratio <sup>4</sup> (Male:Female)
<b>Total</b>		<b>44</b>		<b>29:16</b>
Urban		20	(46%)	11:9
Rural		24	(54%)	18:7
<b>Argentina</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>(23%)</b>	<b>5:6</b>
Urban	Lanus (Greater Buenos Aires)	5	(11.5%)	2:3
Rural	Bariloche (Barrio 10 de Diciembre)	5	(11.5%)	3:3
<b>Bolivia</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>(23%)</b>	<b>8:2</b>
Urban	La Paz (several neighbourhoods)	3	(7%)	2:1
Rural	Tiquipaya	7	(16%)	6:1
<b>Paraguay</b>		<b>24</b>	<b>(54%)</b>	<b>16:8</b>
Urban	La Chacarita (Asunción)	12	(27%)	7:5
Rural	Sapucaí	12	(27%)	9:3

The interviewees were aged between 40 and 60 years. This age group was chosen because it contains people who have lived through political changes and different experiences of local political action. The

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Rosana and José.

interviews were between 30 and 120 minutes. Prior to the interviews, a set of guiding questions were defined, which allowed an open conversation and encouraged interviewees to express their opinions freely. Accordingly, much attention was given to the transcription to ensure that the respondent's voice was captured correctly. For privacy reasons, all direct quotations have been made anonymous in the text. A separate Annex, also available on the DLP website, contains a [sample of the transcripts of these interviews in Spanish](#).

Afterwards, the significance of the interviews was reconstructed and key messages on the following issues were extracted in systematised charts for each community:

- Biography of the interviewees
- History and current problems of the community
- Forms of local political action
- Motivation for and personal evaluations of local political action
- Interaction with authorities
- Perception of authorities
- Concepts of politics, leadership and democracy

This work was, in each case, carried out by two members of the investigation team.

In a second step, when processing the material, the whole investigation team held a two-day workshop in Frankfurt. On that occasion the main findings were regrouped again under the following headlines:

- Politics and democracy seen as 'external' to the world of daily life amongst the poor
- Daily practice and use of opportunities – experiences of local (political) action
- The power cycle – relation with authorities

In the workshop, the value and richness of the raw empirical material was also highlighted. The present study only focuses on the most significant issues reflected in the interviews. However, to give an insight into the multifaceted realities of poor people in Latin America, a selection of 15 interviews (in the original Spanish) is [provided in the separate annex](#).



## 3

## Conceptual Background

As outlined above, our approach has been hermeneutic. Accordingly, we did not construct a theoretical framework with which to interpret the interviews, nor do we pretend to theorise our findings or to develop a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon observed. Nevertheless, we want to present here the understanding of the central categories from the beginning of the process (poverty, leadership, perception, political action). The relevant sociological, philosophical, and anthropological literature is exhaustive, and since it is not our objective to give a general overview of the different schools, we focus exclusively on our specific view.

### POVERTY

Poverty is a relational concept. Historically and culturally, definitions may vary widely and we do not only observe differences in the understanding of what poverty *is* but also what poverty *signifies*. These cultural variables determine how the actors deal with situations of poverty. Our understanding is close to the UNDP concept of Multidimensional Poverty and Human Development: “[...] *poverty is more than insufficient income or the deprivation of material resources. It also encompasses the lack of opportunity to access an education, basic healthcare, clean drinking water or to influence political processes and other factors that matter to people* [UNDP Development Dictionary].” Interviewees were selected according to this definition.

In southern South America, poor people are structurally marginalised and often de facto excluded from political decision-making, while at the same time constituting large segments of society. In Bolivia and Paraguay, for example, more than 50% of the population live below the national poverty line, and even in Argentina - a country with very high human development indicators - the poverty rate still exceeds 10% [CEPAL, 2010: 50]. As such, there exists in these countries a proper “culture of poverty” – even though characteristics may differ widely from country to country, and within countries between urban and rural areas [Guttandin, 2007: 19]. So, since poverty is not marginal, poor people’s perceptions and attitudes towards political life aren’t either.

### PERCEPTION

Blumer’s symbolic interactionism highlights the fact that a person’s behaviour is not simply stimulated by “things”, but by its attributed significance [Blumer, 1973]. So, the perception of reality is highly subjective and there are two ways to approach the perspectives and representations of individuals. We can refer to their subjective theories to explain and interpret the world or we can examine autobiographic narratives, which allow for adopting the perspective of the actors involved when analysing a determined era and/or a specific local context.

Ethno-methodologists, on the other hand, focus on routine behaviour of groups and explore how these routines are socially “constructed” [Garfinkel, 1967]. This approach investigates the mechanics of social practices, such as communication and interaction within a community as well as (accidental) deviations and irregularities of these routines.

Finally, structuralist and psychoanalytical positions [D'Andrade, 1987; Oevermann et al., 1979; Belgrad et al., 1987] explore the subconscious of both individuals and collectives. This approach refers to the structures of cultural significances, which constitute a framework for the perception and construction of subjective and social realities. The analysis of the subjectivity of individual perceptions contributes to uncovering the underlying "objective" structures at a "non-cognitive" level beyond individual comprehension.

From these important theories, we deduce that any specific phenomenon has to be understood and analysed from within, from the perspective of the actors concerned. The starting point is always the individual case, which leads to comparisons and generalisations through which we interpret and reconstruct reality. With a view to the relational dimension of leadership (see below), perception is a crucial category. Based on individual perceptions, followers assess the leader's performance so that the feedback relation keeps running. But, as philosophy and sociology have pointed out, perception is an intricate phenomenon, and cognition cannot be understood as an impartial authority. Perceptions are not reflections of reality; rather, they are generated through a process of interpretation. The act of perceiving is thus purely subjective and is the result of people's individual socialisation which is, however, strongly influenced by society and, therefore, by culture and specific sub-cultures with their respective beliefs, values and traditions [Morel et al, 2007: 67].

## LEADERSHIP

The concept of leadership has been extensively discussed in earlier papers in this series, [Leftwich & Hogg, 2007; Lyne de Ver: 2009] and the following section draws on these: Leaders are people "*in formal or informal positions of authority and power who take or influence key economic, political, social and administrative decisions [...] and who are largely responsible for determining the nature of institutions and policies* [Leftwich & Hogg, 2007: 4]". Thus, leadership is required at all levels of social interaction. Leadership is a relational category since the leader's position depends on the acknowledgement of, and interaction with, the group members: "*There is a difference in the extent to which individuals affect the group. There is no single leader who influences all equally, without a feedback relation* [Lyne de Ver, 2009: 5]." The way of exercising leadership, however, can differ widely from coercion to persuasion and inspiration [Lyne de Ver, 2009: 5] but we can assume, and argue, that legitimate and developmentally effective leadership can only emerge if the leader is responsive to her or his followers' needs and if channels of communication are multi-directional.

## POLITICAL ACTION

This paper is based on a broad understanding of "acting politically", ranging from total disinterest or explicit abstention, to different forms of direct participation and civic self-organisation and engagement. Democratic citizenship is not just about voting it is also about participating and actively intervening in public affairs: "*[...] Civic engagement contributes to social capital and to development efforts through the channel of voice, representation and accountability. This link between civic engagement and development can be organized in a variety of ways, both formal and informal. [...] However, it is still worth noting that civic engagement is a more specific term than participation, with an emphasis on civic objections and concerns* [Malik & Waglé: 3]."

To understand the apparently unpredictable and spontaneous emergence of popular protest, we have to understand the circumstances in which individuals decide to associate with others and defend a common interest. Obviously, the starting point has to be discontent with the actual political output. As 'Deprivation Theory' suggests, social movements occur when people feel deprived of goods and/or resources, and this is certainly a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for popular protest to arise. According to 'Resource Mobilization Theory', "*social movements emerge when people with grievances*

*are able to mobilize sufficient resources to take action [Cragun et al, 2008: 232].” Resources are to be understood as indispensable requirements such as time, knowledge, money, external support, solidarity, and legitimacy. In our context, income is crucial: “Other things being equal the most deprived seem unable to sustain more than a momentary insurgency. This also holds true for local politics. Neighbourhoods of higher socio-economic status are much better than poorer neighbourhoods at getting concessions and services from local government [Dobson, 2001: 2].”*

The ‘Political Process Theory’ takes up both approaches and combines three vital elements at both the micro and macro levels:

- Insurgent consciousness (feeling of deprivation/grievances)
- Organisational strength (efficient leadership and sufficient resources)
- Political opportunities

The term “political opportunities” refers to specific constellations within the political system, which determine its receptivity or vulnerability to challenges [Cragun et al., 2008: 233-234], e.g. the degree of representation or access to political institutions. In Latin America, participation and pluralism are formally guaranteed. However, in many countries, small elites have monopolised power and large segments of the population are de facto excluded from decision making [Rugenstein, 2010].

Comparing the cases of Chile and Brazil, Foweraker describes a boom of grassroots mobilisation in the era of authoritarian rule in the 1980s. In the subsequent transition to democracy, most grassroots organisations were replaced by parties and professionalised NGOs. In the recent processes of decentralisation, social movements are re-gaining importance since the state is seeking allies to deliver public services and to broaden participation. Indeed, this also implies a higher risk for co-optation and instrumentalisation of social movements by the state [Foweraker, 2001].

## 4

## Socio-economic and political context of the selected countries and communities

**ARGENTINA**

Within the sample, Argentina is the country with the highest development indicators [UNDP, 2011: 134] and remains a highly attractive destination for migrants from Bolivia and Paraguay [INDEC, 2001]. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the country has been through a series of crises and has remained, for almost a hundred years, at the threshold of entering the group of developed or industrialised nations without ever going beyond that point [Végazonès & Winograd, 1997: 21-43]. After the economic breakdown in 2001/2002, Argentina recovered surprisingly quickly and achieved very high economic growth rates [INDEC, 2011]. In the same period, inequality has been reduced and real income has risen. However, over the last few years Argentina has had one of the highest inflation rates in the Western hemisphere and - with a view to the current “commodity boom” - it remains to be seen whether the country has achieved a self-sustained internal growth dynamic [Weisbrot et al., 2011: 5-9].

The continued crises have led to a dimension of frustration, especially among poor people, that does not correspond with the socio-economic figures which place Argentina among the G20 countries [Escudé, 2002: 41]. Political history of the last 150 years is characterised by a period of elite based democracy in the late 19th and early 20th century, a period of opening for underprivileged society groups in the middle of the 20th century, especially during the first government of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), and a period of subsequent crises and stabilisation efforts that continue to this day. Important elements within this period have been the political violence exercised by several authoritarian governments between 1955 and 1983, on the one hand, and the unbroken power and dominance of the internally strongly divided and fractioned Justicialist Party that continues the Peronist heritage, on the other hand [Végazonès & Winograd, 1997: 21-40].

The area of **Lanús** belongs to the Province of Buenos Aires and has its own municipal government. It is one of the traditional working class zones in the greater metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Lanús was strongly industrialised in the 1940s and suffered from de-industrialisation after abandoning the import substitution strategy and imposing neoliberal reforms that were partly introduced in Argentina at the end of the 1970s and completed in the 1990s [Müller, 2002: 13-14]. As a consequence, Lanús has high unemployment rates, large numbers of people supported by social policy programmes and high levels of insecurity (among the highest in the country) [Mertins/Müller, 2008: 52].

In the case of Lanús, the interviews were carried out in a queue of people waiting for a social programme, a fact that could partly explain the rather pessimistic point of view expressed in the responses. Lanús is a traditional stronghold of workers' unions, which have lost much of their power in recent decades. The most important political party in that zone is the Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party). One of its leading political figures, still admired in Lanús, is Eduardo Duhalde, Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires from 1991 - 1999 and interim President of Argentina from 2002 - 2003. Lanús was also one of the centres of the so-called “*piqueteros* movement”, a platform of radicalised non-party affiliated protesters

during the economic crisis of 2000-2003 [The Economist, 2003].

**Bariloche** is a medium-sized city in north-western Patagonia, at the foot of the Andes lying at the southern shore of a big glacier lake. In the late 19th century, the Argentine Government accelerated the reclamation of large and unexploited areas in the south, with a military campaign against the indigenous population ("Conquest of the Desert"). Before the arrival of the first colonists/settlers, around 1895, the area was inhabited by a sparse and scattered itinerant indigenous population, deprived of its land rights by the creation of very large sheep raising farms [Liss, 1979: 217]. Later, Bariloche became one of the most renowned tourist locations in Argentina [Müller, 1998: 186].

Interviews were carried out in one of the oldest parts of Bariloche, in Barrio 10 de Diciembre, where the pace of life still reflects rural characteristics, with a population composed of landless poor and a relatively high percentage of indigenous people. The two blocks of the barrio are packed with poor wooden houses that were only recently connected to drinking water and sewers. The area is undergoing substantial change, particularly since the introduction of a self-help housing project. A young local leader living in the barrio accompanied almost all interviewees.

## BOLIVIA

Over the last decades, Bolivia has remained the poorest country in South America [UNDP, 2010a: 163]. The majority of the population (62%) belong to indigenous groups, whose dominance is strongest in the Andean Highland Areas [UNDP, 2010b: 130]. The indigenous population has long been excluded from political decision making, and until the introduction of universal suffrage in 1952, only 25% of Bolivians enjoyed the status of citizen entitled to vote<sup>5</sup>. In the elections of 1951, no more than 120,000 people (4% of the total population) cast a ballot [Malloy, 1970: 151-152]. On the other hand, Bolivia has a well-developed civil society sector, with many civil society organisations, including traditional indigenous organisations (e.g. Ayllu, Capitanía) and farmers' and mineworkers' unions (strengthened and often newly created after the revolution of 1952), as well as NGOs, professional associations etc. [Bird, Busse & Mendizabal, 2007: 37]. Local government elections were introduced as late as 1994, in a reform that, at the same time, recognised local civil society groupings as basic territorial organisations (OTB) with a specific role in the control of local government. This legislation, together with a package of neoliberal reforms, converted Bolivia into a donor darling and made it one of the first countries to qualify for the international poverty reduction and public debt relief schemes [Booth & Piron, 2004: 17]. Pressure for greater inclusion by the upcoming indigenous upper lower and middle classes led, in the first decade of the 21st century, to many - often violent - conflicts. In 2005 Evo Morales was elected as the first indigenous president of Bolivia.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the governors of the 9 Regions (*departamentos*) of Bolivia have also been directly elected. The Constitution of 2009<sup>7</sup> declared Bolivia a pluri-national state and gave room for the establishment of autonomous authority in the *departamentos* and indigenous territories [UNDP, 2010b: 68-70].

**La Paz**, seat of the national government<sup>8</sup> and, together with El Alto, the biggest urban area of Bolivia, displays relatively favourable socio-economic data. Nevertheless, there are many parts of the city, especially on the steep slopes that connect the valley of La Paz with the flat highland plain (*Altiplano*), where infrastructure, job opportunities, and living conditions are very poor. In many places the only possibility

5 According to the constitution then in force, the right to vote (and other civic rights) was reserved for those Bolivians who were "able to read and write, to own real estate or to have an income of two hundred Bolivianos, provided that this amount does not represent wages received for work as a domestic [Cited in: Malloy, 1970: 34]."

6 For a very good overview of the indigenous "Aymara ethnic affirmation process" and the "indigenisation" of Bolivian politics, see: Galindo, 2010.

7 Constitución Política del Estado, 2009, online resource available at: <http://bolivia.infoleyes.com/shownorm.php?id=469>.

8 The capital of Bolivia is Sucre.

for access is by foot, through steep gradients. Thus, these neighbourhoods (*barrios*) form worlds apart in the heart of the city, though at little distance from the commercial and political centres of the country [UNDP, 2000: Fig. 2.7/70]. Interviews have been carried out with leaders of neighbourhood associations in these parts of the city.

**Tiquipaya** is a municipality situated in the department of Cochabamba, which lies in the region of the valleys that connect the Andean highland (*Altiplano*) with the tropical lowlands. Landscape is characterised by steep slopes and access is generally very difficult. Cities are found in intra-mountain basins, where irrigation agriculture is often practised. The municipality of Tiquipaya extends from the outskirts of the city of Cochabamba (the country's third largest urban area) to the very remote and sparsely populated mountain areas, with altitudes above 4000m, and the slopes towards the tropical lowlands in the north [Ledo, 1-3]. Among those interviewed were people from different parts of the municipality, reflecting the variety of living conditions, traditions and perceptions among them.

## PARAGUAY

Paraguay has a notorious tradition of dictatorial governments. Before the 1990s there was only one election with more than one candidate.<sup>9</sup> In 1989, after 35 years of Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorial government, transition was initiated and, in 1992, a new democratic constitution came into force [Brunn, 2011: 331-351]. Nevertheless, patronage, corruption, and the persistent dominance of the Colorado Party, led to weak democracy in Paraguay during the following decade [Fischer-Bollin, 2008a: 1]. In 2008 Fernando Lugo, candidate of a broad centre-left alliance (*Tekokoja*) and former bishop in the poor rural area of San Pedro, won the presidential election and is now leading a coalition with the Liberal Party and other smaller parties [Potthast, 2008: 7]. Paraguay has a *mestizo* population, which conserved the Guaraní language and many cultural specialities of this mainly subtropical lowland country [Potthast, 2008: 1 and Fischer-Bollin, 2008b: 1].

**La Chacarita** is probably the oldest and most traditional poor neighbourhood in Paraguay's capital city, Asunción. The *barrio* is situated on temporarily inundated slopes between the city centre and the Paraguay River. The neighbourhood consists of very small and precarious buildings constructed along small, labyrinth-like earthen paths, which only in the higher areas are partly paved [Rivarola, 2007]. La Chacarita has very bad public security indicators and its inhabitants are generally held responsible for any violent crime that occurs in the centre of Asunción. Interviews suggest that the inhabitants of La Chacarita traditionally sympathise with the Colorado Party, although benefits provided by that long-ruling party have always been very limited.

**Sapucaí** is a rural municipality about 90 kilometres east of Asunción, on the railway line that once connected the capital of Paraguay with the provincial city of Villarrica, which is currently out of service. Since the end of 2010 Sapucaí has had a paved road connection to Asunción. The main village of Sapucaí is famous for its still-existing, but mostly inoperative, workshop for the repair of wood-fired steam locomotives [FEPASA, 2011]. The village itself has about 1800 inhabitants, with about 4600 people living in the surrounding rural area. The area around Sapucaí is part of a zone with a long agricultural tradition that leads back to Guaraní times. As such, soils are severely degraded and agriculture barely provides for the livelihoods of the families, resulting in continuous outward-migration to the towns. Since 1972, the population of the district of Sapucaí reduced by some 20-30% [DGEEC, 2004: 132].

The people interviewed resided in the hilly area north of Sapucaí that is still remote and mainly shaped by small, scattered farms. Family names of the interviewees suggest that the farms have been divided several times among sons, grandsons and daughters.

<sup>9</sup> In 1928, the liberal José P. Gugguari won the election against the republican Eduardo Fleytas. This was the only presidential election in the country with two candidates [Chaves, 1998: 259].

## 5

## Key Findings

The essential messages from the interpretation of the empirical material can be summarised as follows:

- Respondents understand democracy and politics based on their personal and group experience, and do not refer to theoretical ideas and definitions. This results in rather diffuse and heterogeneous concepts.
- Generally, the idea of democracy is given a positive evaluation<sup>10</sup> and correlates strongly with the notion of personal freedom and individual rights. Some respondents believe that democracy is not the appropriate political order for their society, or blame democracy for social deficits like insecurity and crime.
- Respondents generally separate the private and the political sphere. On the other hand, they give many examples of how politics interferes in their lives. They define politics as something outside of their ordinary life and beyond the influence of common people.
- Many respondents do not agree with the actual political order and express a very low opinion of their leaders, as politicians often do not keep their promises.
- In turn, many interviewees adopt a pragmatic and rather opportunistic attitude towards public institutions and try to maximise personal benefit. Thus, voting and the interaction between representatives and electorate are often marked by mistrust, manipulation and corruption.
- There is the diffuse hope that a “new leader” will be able to overcome the dysfunctional political order and establish “real” democracy where participation and personal freedom no longer exist, except on paper.
- At the local level, there is a large variety of political organisations and participation. Many respondents engage in ad hoc initiatives, small cooperatives, or neighbourhood associations. Paradoxically, personal commitment is not conceived as “making politics”, but as a form of self-help and solidarity with a peer group.
- These activities reveal a high degree of self-organisation, mobilisation, dynamism and pragmatism. Intended or not, many of these organisations put the principles of (grassroot) democracy into practice.

These findings tend to confirm the results of Dietz’s long-term survey of marginalised neighbourhoods in Lima, Peru [Dietz, 1998], and Mesa-Lago’s study on pressure groups and inequality [Mesa-Lago, 1978].

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<sup>10</sup> According to *Latinobarómetro*, large segments of the Latin American population approve of democracy as a form of government (60%). Compared internationally, however, approval is low. Traditionally, Latin Americans generally expressed discontent and even disappointment vis-à-vis national governments (see the fourth key finding). Surprisingly, in times of the recent crisis, their performance was much better rated than in the past [Latinobarómetro, 2009].

The observed distinction between daily life and politics correlates with Peter Ekeh's work on "the two publics" in postcolonial West Africa [Ekeh, 1975]. And, as Abby McLeod shows, the so called 'Big Man Syndrome' in the Pacific is similar to the high expectations to which people hold new leaders in southern South America [McLeod, 2008].

In the following sections, these general ideas will be further developed according to the broad thematic findings (above) made by the investigators.



## 6

## The world of politics and democracy as external to the lived world

Perceptions of politics and democracy can be deduced from personal experiences recounted during interviews. In some cases, when the flow of communication in the interviews allowed it, they were directly asked for their understanding of these terms. Respondents showed a lot of uncertainty about the meaning of politics and democracy. Answers and opinions varied greatly not only between different respondents in different places, but sometimes also within the same interview. Some interviewees even mentioned this uncertainty directly. When asked what people think when they hear the word “democracy”, Blanca from Sapucaí answers: *“They will not know if it is something to eat or to wear. [...] No, it doesn't have a definition [...] some time ago people from GTZ [Authors' note: German Technical Cooperation, since 2011 merged into GIZ] came to me to make an interview with me about the municipal government. They also did not know what it was ...”*

The term democracy is apparently too abstract to be incorporated into respondents' normal communication. There is a distinction between a personal sphere formed by the family and the neighbourhood, and a political sphere, which generally lies outside of the reach of their influence.

*“Well, we don't have a lobby, as is said, to be over there in the television, in the newspapers, so that the people will vote for us. We do not enter in the packages [Authors' note: election lists] they have and that are sold to you like a pig in a poke ... (Jesús, Chacarita).”* The way the respondents express themselves suggests that they do not feel part of the (democratic) political system, but rather see politics as something outside of their world, a world apart, with which they only have occasional contact.

In some cases, this contact with the world of politics has a purely formal character; when voting is referred to as a procedural act without content, a duty without the prospect of influencing policies: *“the old thing, the historic, ja, ja, citizenship, go and vote ... (Omar, Lanús).”* Or as Katia, also from Lanús says: *“Yes, I have to do it, because it is necessary. It has to be done. It has to be done.”*

One concept that is frequently linked closely with democracy is liberty. Some interviewees connect this with their experience of restrained freedom during the time of authoritarian governments. When she is asked about democracy, Rosana from Bariloche hesitates to answer. The interviewer then insinuates the link between democracy and liberty. This is taken up immediately by her: *“...to be allowed to express myself, to be allowed to say what I think ... to be allowed to go and see the politicians, undisturbed, listen to the music I like, dress the way I like, without problems.”*

But the connection between liberty and democracy is not always positively perceived. For many respondents, democracy includes a permissiveness that leads to unsupportable levels of insecurity. Thus, Marcelo from Chacarita said: *“As I tell you, there is no democracy, eh, there is but too much democracy.”* Marcelo himself was arrested during the time of the dictator, Stroessner, for a crime he committed. He speaks about how much he suffered in jail, but at the same time he has the strong belief that bad acts need to be punished. Under the democratic government he sees this principle perverted.

And Jesús from Chacarita has observed that, “... *in former times only the cohorts of the dictator stole and today it is generalised*”. Finally, Blanca from Sapucaí even concludes that “*Paraguay is not for being democratic*”. She remembers, “*that we did not live well in the times of Stroessner, true, but it seems that we got accustomed to being told what to do...*”

The connection between democracy and liberty thus entails hopes and fears at the same time; hopes for a more just society, and fears of permissiveness, abuse, and a responsibility that the respondents themselves do not feel able to meet. Both – these hopes and fears - are based on relatively similar experiences, but whether they draw positive or negative conclusions from these experiences depends on the personal vision of each person and their overall estimation of the current situation. Hence, Pilar from La Paz urged that “*the persons need to change, be different, and look forward and not backward.*” In her cautious optimism “*democracy is still in swaddling clothes.*”

## 7

## Daily practice and use of opportunities – experiences of local (political) action

Despite the fact that respondents considered politics, leadership, and democracy to be things beyond their personal world, almost all made reference to local political practices in which they participate(d), more or less, actively. In all the communities, there is a wide scope for engagement in local affairs and a large majority of respondents are committed. But in accordance with their vision of two clearly separated worlds – the political and the private – the interviewees did not always conceive of these forms of democratic participation as “making politics”, but rather as acts of self-help and solidarity with the respective peer group.

Jaime from Chacarita gave a lively description of these activities: *“We from Chacarita we show a lot of solidarity with the people. For instance, if somebody falls ill ... they ask for collaboration with the megaphone and give their collaboration, their 1000, their 500 [Authors’ note: Guaraníes – national currency in Paraguay], as they can. And in matters of improvements of streets we form neighbourhood associations. We are doing barbecues, raffles, any type of help. Or we knock on the politician’s door...”*

Solidarity among neighbours is especially strong at times of natural disasters like floods or tragic incidents like the collapse of a bridge. Thus, Ángela from Chacarita related how the community reacted to the problem of a badly bridged excavation pit: *“And it is a big danger. Thousands of children already have fallen into the pit. That is why we establish the commission: To resolve it by ourselves and to asphalt the road again.”*

Javier from Sapucaí draws a similar picture: *“We are at first with the family. First with the family and we are then with our piece of land, our house ... And perhaps with our neighbours we are organised as well to improve our community, our school, our road, our church [...]. And we clean the creek, we protect the environment, we plant trees. A little bit of everything. And if someone is in need, there are eleven houses, eleven families... and if someone is in need... the remaining ten families go there to assist. That is how we live, it doesn’t take much.”*

Javier’s quotation shows that family bonds are strong and important in rural areas where the family still constitutes a production unit in which home and work are not separated. But even more important is the broader family that acts as a unit in its contact with politicians. Ignacio from Sapucaí gives a broad view of his family: Half of the 13 children that grew up on a small farm in the zone stayed in Sapucaí. The rest went to other places and became professionals in medicine, law and administration. In the defence of their political interests the family group still stands together and uses the contacts that derive from their different professions. *“We are numerous,”* Ignacio says. *“And ... have you seen that we are here in the community [...] and always we try to speak with people from the government, be it the Mayor or the [Authors’ note: regional] Governor...”*

Generally, the issues that motivate local (political) action are immediate needs for infrastructure (drinking water, roads) and services (education, health). Additionally, in all communities public insecurity is perceived

as a rising problem that requires urgent action. Since many of these needs cannot be satisfied autonomously, communities look for support from public agencies: *“Now we will have a meeting with the ... police. Now we go there and we see how the commander can give us cooperation. If we want to make workshops on that theme [public security] and need logistic help, they have material; they have personnel and can help you. [...] I started the initiative because I came to know that they [the police] are doing workshops. It is mere coincidence that the police post is in our office”* [Authors’ note: of the neighbourhood association] (Pilar, La Paz).

Communities can also mobilise political pressure when public agencies do not meet their responsibilities: *“We decided to organize a protest march to the Prefectura [Authors’ note: regional government] and to claim for asphalt roads. We also called for changes in the road network because otherwise the asphalt will burst. So we launched another march to the Alcaldía [Authors’ note: City Hall]. Finally, they accepted and assured us that the road network will be replaced before they start asphaltting”* (Umberto, Tiquipaya).

Apparently, there is a close relationship between the urgency of needs and local commitment: *“We can say that the marginalized and remote barrios in the mountains are more committed. In San Pedro or Sopocachi [Authors’ note: well attended neighbourhoods in La Paz] people are less active because everything has already been finished. The mountains participate because there is no asphaltting. There are no nursery schools, no sports grounds”* (Lucas, La Paz).

In contrast to these many accounts of local cooperation and joint action, there are also references to the lack of solidarity. This is especially the case in some urban areas, e.g. Omar from Lanús complains: *“... it is as if nobody respects anything. Let’s say, why should I be head of a group that defends the neighbours if nobody cares for nothing here. Here one lives in almost total incertitude.”* Or as Reina from Chacarita states: *“No, cooperation and such things do not exist among neighbours.”* In this context, it is noteworthy that in the same place, one respondent spoke of local solidarity while another complains about its total absence.

Obviously, in statements of this kind, personal attitudes and experiences play an important role, attitudes that can also be found in the countryside: *“No, no, I neither like commissions nor associations. These are places to steal money. I don’t participate in the committees, hence in nothing. I’m bad. I want the people to care about themselves as I did...”* (Yoli, Sapucaí).

Often local (political) action only exists as long as the immediate problems are attended and later dissolves. It’s a creeping process. More and more work is left to some leaders, attendance at meetings reduces, and finally, only a meaningless structure remains. *“The committees don’t work. It’s difficult [...] I’m standing in front since four years and it’s tiresome. Often you’re discouraged. Often the group lets you do all the work for them ... in all organisations there is one who always conducts and others that are waiting and often what is achieved is not used well, isn’t it? I now will work alone and leave the group. This is what mostly happens. So, for example, I am in the bakery instead of following the group. I make myself independent. I say: well, I will make my own bread and I will sell alone. This is what happens in all groups”* (Blanca, Sapucaí).

But there are also more stable forms of association and representation. Some of these are cooperatives; others are neighbourhood associations, whose legal status varies from country to country in accordance with the national legislation on decentralisation and local participation. In Bolivia, for instance, this is based on the respective laws of 1994. *“The Junta Vecinal [Authors’ note: neighbourhood council] is like the small version of a government. We have our church, our police – a security guard – and we are like government in this small area. We support and coordinate all these bodies to ensure a good management”* (Pilar, La Paz).

Independent from the specific forms and stability of the organisations, there is a high degree of self-

organisation, dynamism and pragmatism. Respondents rarely refer to ideological aspects when explaining their motivation. Normally, local commitment is voluntary: *“The Dirigente Vecinal [Authors’ note: neighbourhood representative] has to be a volunteer. Once, I announced my candidature and I presented myself in a reunion. The neighbours encouraged me and I got the support of the people”* (Emiliano, La Paz). Many associations suffer from high rates of fluctuation and instability. There is a continuous struggle to assure affiliation, but in some cases, sanction mechanisms exist: *“We can have recourse to sanctions. In our statute, our regulations it is written that people who do not cooperate have to be sanctioned. Economic sanctions are difficult, so we cut the water. That’s the only way we can apply pressure”* (Edward, Tiquipaya).

All these examples show that local political action involves a number of elements that are generally associated with (grassroots) democracy. First of all, decisions are made by vote, and leaders are controlled by the people; everybody is free to participate and engagement is entirely voluntary. Additionally, meetings are held with a bottom-up approach, with issues discussed systematically and verified through a follow-up mechanism: *“We meet once a week in the Cooperative - it’s compulsory. Apart from the weekly meetings and once a month we have a joint session with all the Cooperative committees”* (Jesús, Chacarita).

Similarly, Pilar from La Paz related that *“in the assembly, all the neighbours come together. First, they present the agenda of the day, then what has been done ‘till now. Then we propose and they decide.”*

Local leaders may be more likely to be respectful and attentive, as the following statement suggests: *“Yes, we organize assemblies. We ask them... always upon approval by our neighbours. [...] We always ask them, they are the protagonist of the whole process. Our commission would never interfere in anything, to be too invasive of people”* (Rosana and José, Bariloche).

## 8

## The power cycle – relation with authorities

Regarding the relations between poor people and the local, regional, and national governments, many of the respondents expressed disillusion with the current situation. Amalia from Lanús relates: *“Look, I have worked a lot for the political party. I worked a lot, but what happened? When they resolved all, when they got what they wanted and had the post, they promised you the moon. Now that I’m old, I’m not useful any more. Now people that did not work, that have not been with them, have got their job and who was there from the beginning to the end supporting the politicians with everything for the votes, received a foot kick ...”*. Reina from Chacarita had similar experiences: *“You’ve been voting but nothing happens. They don’t give you anything. They told you that they would give you work but they won’t. They prioritize their followers.”* Jesús who lived in Chacarita did not trust politicians anyway *“because they only think about themselves, they don’t think about their community... they just try to fill their pockets.”* And Diego from Sapucaí affirms that *“here, all the political parties are lying.”*

Apparently, elected representatives easily forget their earlier promises and only seek personal benefit. In addition, patronage and corruption seem to be common practices, as the following report attests: *“Señor Darío Monges [Authors’ note: a local leader] is from our valley but he didn’t employ my daughter who is a teacher just because she had joined the Colorado Party. They don’t help us. She got her job through another mechanism. Every time we went to see him, we brought a chicken, some cheese or chipa [Authors’ note: traditional pastry]. We never came empty-handed. Finally, he told my daughter that she has to go to the capital, because in our department, there are no vacancies. [...] That is why I don’t care about politicians anymore...”* (Yoli, Sapucaí).

Many respondents stated that they expect reciprocity when they invest time and goods in relations with politicians. This attitude can be easily converted into corrupt power structures that remain as long as voters wait for material rewards from the candidates: *“People here do not vote for a good project. If a politician initiates a good project, we won’t get a single vote. But if he offers money, he will be rewarded. It’s just we are all so needy”* (Jaime, Chacarita).

Marcelo from Chacarita even blames himself for cheating: *“I am a betrayer. If a candidate of the Colorado Party is around, I am cheering for him, I accept his beer and his barbecue but finally I vote for the liberal candidate. I’m a member of the Colorado and the UNACE Party. I’m even thinking of joining the Communist Party. ...”*

In the end, the system of giving electoral presents acts to prevent the less affluent candidates from competing, as Jesús from Chacarita explains: *“In my barrio [Authors’ note: neighbourhood] for example, I can’t present myself as a candidate because people got used to claiming for money. Imagine I was candidate, many people would ask for support, for money, for many things actually. And I wouldn’t be able to satisfy the demands. Imagine Wasmosy<sup>11</sup> was my supporter: ‘Jesús, spread some 30 million a week.’ Then, it would be*

11 Juan Carlos Wasmosy, an entrepreneur who accumulated wealth as head of the Paraguayan Consortium, working on the Itaipu Dam, a member of the Colorado Party and first civilian President of Paraguay from 1993-1998 [Potthast, 2008: 6].

*possible but I can't pay it out of my own pocket. I can't stop feeding my family and buying votes. People are very receptive for this kind of votes."*

There is a vicious circle between necessity, promises, short-term opportunism and the lack of medium- and long-term political projects. People become accustomed to politicians not keeping their promises, and politicians get accustomed to people that only give their vote for immediate benefits. This paradox is not easily resolved, as both the candidates and the voters contribute to the perpetuation of a system that can be described as a mechanism of informal and asymmetric redistribution.

One possible solution to this dilemma, presented by many respondents, is the emergence of a strong and powerful new leader: *"It's the people who are reigning, but we need to know far more. We are just beginning to walk, but there is a lot of fraud, a lot of bad habits in the sense of the politicians we had before. There is a need for a leader"* (Pilar, La Paz). It is noteworthy how strongly the solution is personalised by the respondents. To resolve the existing problems, there was no indication of a quest for new institutional channels, government programmes or development approaches that generally dominate the debate in development organisations. Instead, a diffuse hope is placed on the personality of some theoretical new leader: *"Yes, they are necessary because someone has to guide us politically. Someone has to lift the masses out of poverty"* (Omar, Lanús).

When the expected new leader emerges, there is a moment of congruence, and support among the poor is strong. This situation can be seen today in Bolivia; Gustavo from Tiquipaya, referring to the current president Evo Morales and his political party, stated that *"all the highlands, all the mountains are in favour of the 'Movimiento Al Socialismo' [Authors' note: MAS, President Morales electoral alliance] [...] we will always support Evo."* And there are also local leaders who inspire the same kind of approval: *"Alberto [care member of the City Council] was a good politician ... he was a politician, we can say ... honest ... he belonged to no party, neither radical nor Peronist [Authors' note: leading political parties in Argentina], he stood up...for the South<sup>12</sup>... for the neighbourhood. He gave 100 per cent support"* (Rosana from Bariloche).

Nevertheless the moment of congruence, in many cases, falls back to the vicious circle of continuously repeated frustrations. This happens when leaders disconnect, lose their identity, and become alienated from the local communities: *"When our compañeros [Authors' note: fellows], our brothers, the farmers from the Highlands, get a position they are not always up to the task: They have to assume a lot of responsibility and to manage staff and institutions in a continuously changing environment. They can't bear it and they start to treat their equals from above. They feel superior. Some of them even abandoned traditional clothing. Many start to put on tie and shoes. They substituted their ponchos, aguayo trousers and tocoyo [Authors' note: traditional clothing]. [...] They even changed the chulo [Authors' note: traditional hat] for a cowboy hat. They think that they are at a higher level and they start camouflaging among the established. They start losing identity; these are the main deficiencies"* (Beto, Tiquipaya).<sup>13</sup>

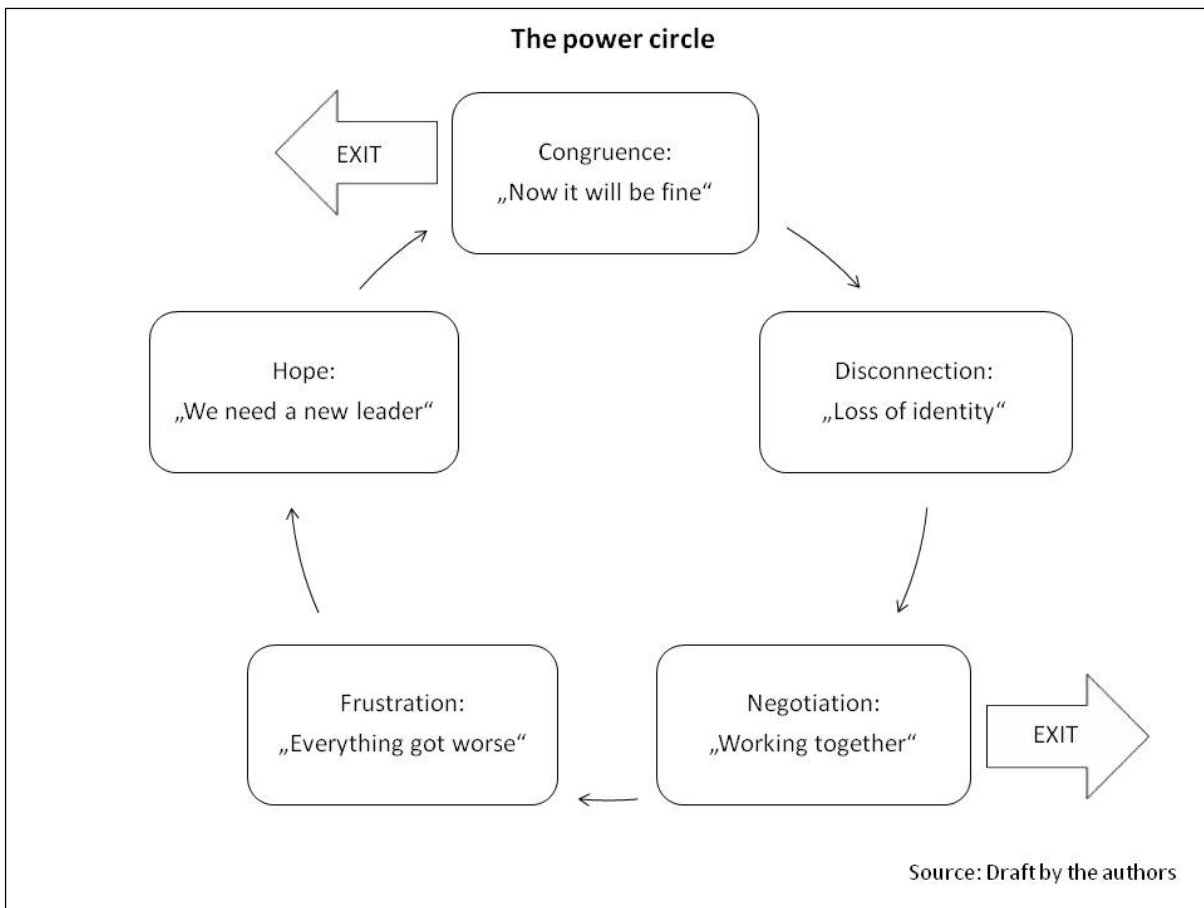
Another experience of disconnection was described by Egidio from Chacarita regarding the current President of Paraguay, Fernando Lugo: *"When Lugo went up, at least I reckoned, in his declarations he said he would not come to solve problems but that he would come to bring the house in order ... And ... an illusion in that moment, but up to now ... the only thing that characterises him is that he makes a fool of himself more and more."*

Another possible exit from the vicious circle of hopes and frustrations is seen in the strengthening of the negotiation power of local associations of the poor. When representation systems fail because leaders

<sup>12</sup> Bariloche is in the south of Argentina.

<sup>13</sup> Historically, social (and therefore racial) stratifications and hierarchies within the Bolivian population were expressed by clothing [UNDP, 2010: 55].

are co-opted more attention is given to the group and people develop strategies for strengthening its position without again entering the trap of disconnected representatives. Within their associations, the members analyse their failures and try to find a way out in a more or less systematic and institutionalised manner. Thus, Luis from Bariloche related: *“The president of the neighbourhood, fine, they take him and co-opt him. OK, that’s it. With all the commissions that existed before the same happened. So there were precedents. So we said: ‘No president of the neighbourhood, no, there is the commission.’”*



Similarly Anselmo from Sapucaí gave an account of how the farmers in his community tried to channel benefits, given in the tradition of patronage practices, towards more systematic, collaborative solutions: *“It is difficult to escape politics. In election times, we farmers identify our needs in order to ask from the politicians the help we need; because we have to ask for something when they look for our support. And we, no, we can’t deny it, we have to work together. This is what we have to understand.”*

Beto, from Tiquipaya, gives a good example of the power of groups. He cited one of the leaders of his zone, who pressurised the local government in the following manner: *“From every community 30 persons participate and in one day, we mobilize more than 4000 people in less than an hour. And we all pay taxes, so please: What is your decision?”*

Finally, Jesús from Chacarita even dreamed of challenging the political parties and bringing some people from the cooperative movement to the parliament in order to *“control the politicians.”*

It could be demonstrated that relations between the poor communities and the local, regional, and national governments develop according to certain patterns. The experience many respondents described in their relations with the authorities followed common patterns. There are moments of



hope, congruence, disconnection, negotiation and frustration. It seems that there is a cyclical connection between the different moments that lead to a vicious circle that always ends up in a new frustration.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that there are also two moments when this vicious circle can be broken. One is the hope for a new leader and the resulting congruence when a leader is found. The other is the negotiation by strengthened associations of the poor. Both possibilities offer no guarantee of breaking the vicious circle, and cases of falling back on old patterns are frequently reported, but there is also a lot of energy for change, especially when the promising new leaders are combined with the internal strengthening of associations of the poor.

## 9

## Typology of political action

The specific dynamics of the cycle depend strongly on individual patterns of interaction within the group. As shown before, many respondents did not feel represented by political leaders, and access to decision making is extremely limited or even closed. Although reactions differ widely and are based on the interviews, we can distinguish between 5 types of political action:

- The interlinked
- The solidary
- The disinterested
- The frustrated
- The opportunistic.

These are, of course, ideal types and do not reflect exact reality. Over time, political beliefs and attitudes change, and most interviewees exhibited the characteristics of several types.

### Type 1: The interlinked

Enrique, Pilar and Emiliano, for example, express political consciousness and a high level of commitment. Typically, they engage in political parties and movements, or unions and cooperatives. Involved people perceive themselves as an integral part of the political system even though they are fully aware of their weak position; poverty, marginalisation, and the lack of social justice are the motors of participation. To strengthen bargaining power, networking, exchange, and cooperation with other social groupings is intended and actively promoted. Activists are willing to shoulder considerable burdens and seek to prepare themselves: *“It’s an honour, but in some moments you’re really sick of it because as dirigente [Authors’ note: Elected leader of a local organisation] you don’t earn money and you have to wait whether they give you an indemnity or not. You may even be starving but the most important is that you meet so many people. You learn so much, you get to know daily life, you find out how our municipality works, the central government or the prefecture...”* [Enrique, Tiquipaya].

The success of these activities is often limited and, in some cases, may contribute to feelings of exhaustion or even frustration (see type 4 below). Others, like Tiquipayan Edward came to the conclusion that they have done their duty and that it is up to coming generations to continue: *“I think, how do they say, I made my contribution, I dedicated my time to my people in the community and I leave satisfied because I always had the unanimous support of the whole municipality, especially in my district. I want to leave, in this situation. I don’t want to leave with any dirty mark.”*

### Type 2: The solidary

Ángela, Ana Belén and Raquel were also highly committed to community matters, but their motivation was solidarity with the peer group: *“Here, in my house and in the houses of some neighbours, we set up some merenderos [Authors’ note: a sort of public refectory], the glass of milk for the children in the weekend.*

*You see, we work always with the community [...] I don't think that it is necessary to hold a workshop to find out what the problem of the barrio is. But it is necessary that the people see their own needs. What does he need? What does the neighbour need? And what do we all need? ... What is missing is communication. And unification...solidarity, exactly" [Raquel, Bariloche].* The identification with a collective "misery" is crucial for the individual to join and participate. Structural sources of poverty and marginalisation are ignored so the focus of activity remains principally issue-related. The level of institutionalisation is low, and association tends to be ad-hoc, issue-related, and of short duration.

### **Type 3: The disinterested**

Despite these differences, both types can be described as politically engaged. Alongside these types, we find those who explicitly or implicitly abstain from politics. Disinterest and accentuated individualism may be one explanation, as shown in the example of Yoli from Sapucaí: *"No, no, I don't like either commissions or associations. These are places to steal money. I don't participate in these commissions; in anything, by the way. I'm bad. I want people to make provisions, just as I did. Nothing is pink-coloured. Everyone has to take precautions to get along. Anyhow, I don't have neighbours. There is certainly some kind of organisation but I won't participate. For me, it's something weird."*

### **Type 4: The resigned**

As seen before, in our focus group, frustration was the main factor shaping passivity and abstention from politics, suggesting a history of disappointing experiences. As outlined above, it was not only the persistence of grievances and social disparities that may have evoked feelings of bitterness and resignation, but also unachievable expectations and hopes. Over time, highly engaged activists may become more and more disenchanted with the limited scope of personal commitment and the opportunistic attitudes of the electorate/public. Jaime from Chacarita, for example, is still an active member of the Colorado Party but he has realised that voters do not reward visionary ideas but gifts, favours and courtesies: *"People here do not vote for a good project. If a politician initiates a good project, we won't get a single vote. But if he offers money, he will be rewarded. It's just...we are all so needy"* (Jaime, Chacarita).

### **Type 5: The opportunistic**

As previously demonstrated, opportunism is a frequent attitude in Latin American politics. For many respondents, politics and public affairs are, at least partially, channels through which they try to maximise personal benefit and the principle of reciprocity is often vital for social interaction. Yoli from Sapucaí, for instance, expected the local leaders to provide for her and her family, especially her jobless daughter. Others admitted to attending electoral events only because of free catering. Often, they also accepted monetary or in-kind gifts in exchange for their vote (Marcelo, La Chacarita). So, in practice, opportunism can take multiple forms, culminating in criminal favouritism ("*amigismo*"), patronage, and even corruption. In the literature, these phenomena have been widely discussed and are often identified as a specific form of social redistribution since the State hardly meets the population's basic needs. That notwithstanding, the corrosive forces of institutionalised corruption should not be underestimated.

# 10

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

In southern South America there is a separation between the daily life of the poor and the world of politics. This separation manifests itself in the knowledge either side has of the other. Poor people show little interest in the world of politics, its constraints, and its mechanisms of functioning. Their disinterest reaches a point where they hardly recognise the political dimensions of local action and self-help. On the other hand, they complain – obviously with good reasons – that authorities hardly know their reality nor show interest in it.

In spite of this separation, the world of the poor and the world of politics are closely interwoven in the current political structures in southern South America. There is a great desire for change, but current linkages between the poor and the politicians tend to perpetuate disparities and marginalisation. In general, relationships are based on reciprocities of small ad hoc benefits for either side, but hope for long term commitments are usually frustrated and, therefore, lie further and further beyond the imagination of poor people. There is a vicious circle between hopes and frustrations that plunge the poor into deeper and deeper depression. Possibilities for breaking this vicious circle are expected from either side, from above - through new leaders - and from below - through the strengthening of the associations of the poor - but both approaches are probably too weak in themselves and need to be brought together to generate greater dynamism for change.

Individual leaders who emerge from poor communities are frequently co-opted. They change their behaviour in a way that is not understood by those they represent, and they are criticised for taking up bad habits. On the other hand, commitment and dynamism in associations of the poor are often reduced once immediate needs are satisfied. Thus, social achievements entail the risk of individualising the poor in a self-esteem lowering bureaucratic relationship with the state.

Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that change can be achieved through unilateral short-term interventions. Correspondingly, policy messages need to be derived for three sides: representatives of poverty groups, political authorities, and external supporters.

### **Policy messages for representatives of poverty groups:**

- Develop a better understanding of the mechanisms and constraints in the world of politics, life, and levels of political education.
- Analyse the different roles group members can adopt (supporter, advocate, campaigner, follower, sceptic, troublemaker, etc) and proactively integrate them into different activities.
- Recognise the political dimensions of local action, self help and solidarity.
- Analyse local experiences in groups and draw conclusions for step-wise improvements.
- Foster self-esteem, personal autonomy, and responsibility.
- Propose long term programmes, monitor implementation, and demand continued commitments.
- Do not build up single leaders, but look for groups of leaders, networks and coalitions.

- Get a better understanding of the function of organisations and the different officials and institutions behind them.

### **Policy messages for political authorities:**

- Show interest in living conditions of the poor and share with them whenever possible.
- Recognise local associations without exploiting them for party interests.
- Make the mechanisms in which you act and your constraints transparent.
- Foster decentralisation and create spaces for learning or joint action in medium-term projects.
- Where decentralisation is not suitable, create mechanisms for the flow of information and coordination between the central and the local level. Connect with existing local associations.
- Do not just create new laws, but also ensure that conditions are suitable for their implementation.
- Create programmes for ideologically-neutral political learning and promotion of self esteem and responsibility.

### **Policy messages for external supporters:**

- Analyse the situation of the people (the 'Political Process Theory' and the 'Power Cycle' can help structure this analysis; both are explained above).
- Identify the active people (the interlinked and the solidary) to demonstrate rapid success and get more people (the disinterested, the resigned and the opportunistic) engaged.
- Promote *political understanding and political capacity building*.
- Promote better understanding of the function of organisation and the difference between the person working in a position and the institutions behind it.
- Facilitate organisational coherence and continuity of the associations of the poor.
- Encourage the emergence of *formal or informal coalitions*, or collaboration between such associations.
- Create neutral spaces for political debate.
- Transmit knowledge about the functioning of politics and the living conditions of the poor.
- Adopt multi-level action, linking local solidarity work with policy advice.
- 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 any sector policy.
- Strengthen implementation capacities.
- Highlight administrative bottlenecks and propose improvements.
- Recognise that you have to adopt a political role within the partner country, but refrain from taking sides and maintain a neutral position.

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