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The Cultural Implications of Democracy, Empowerment and Citizenship

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"The Cultural Implications of
Democracy, Empowerment and Citizenship"

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Conceptual Issues

Democracy is still a contested concept. In the many societies that are now governed by elected regimes, the main political challenge is how to construct institutions that combine majority rule with respect for minority rights. In practice, however, few national governments have political institutions that adequately represent both majority and minority interests. Even many "consolidated" political democracies, moreover, lack the systems of proportional representation and regional autonomy that are crucial for minority groups to defend their rights and cultures, to govern their own affairs and to influence national governments. This essay will explore key conceptual issues that frame the process of citizenship empowerment, followed by a discussion of challenges facing policy-makers concerned with institutional design, and will conclude with a brief discussion of project opportunities.

Debates over democratic process involve, at one pole, those who consider the holding of elections to be a sufficient condition for democracy. Others use the experience of elected governments that are less than democratic to argue that democracy does not adequately represent excluded groups. Some suggest that socially-biased economic policies are evidence that regimes are not democratic. In between are those who contend that free and fair elections are necessary but not sufficient for the consolidation of democratic governance.

Democracy is most usefully understood as a process rather than an outcome. According to most political theorists, the minimum conditions for political democracy include: universal adult voting rights in completely free and fair elections for governing offices at all levels, truly guaranteed freedoms of association, expression and media access, and civilian control over the military and police. Such institutions do not necessarily solve all of society's problems; for example, they will not necessarily produce social equality. But political democracy is supposed to provide at least a level playing field for competing alternatives. In this view, social equity is a possible outcome of a democratic political process, a goal citizens fight for, rather than a defining condition of the political regime itself.¹

If one takes this procedural definition of political democracy seriously, then all of the various minimum conditions for democracy need to be met for a regime to be called democratic. If any of these conditions are systematically violated, then the regime falls short of the democratic threshold. In this view, for example, the United States was not a full political democracy until the implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 guaranteed all racial minorities

the right to vote.

The Difficult Construction of Access to Citizenship Rights

The concept of citizenship has recently been widely invoked in two very different ways around the world. In societies undergoing the strain of ethnic conflict combined with economic uncertainty, often involving immigration controversies, citizenship has become a banner for exclusionary nationalism, for drawing sharper boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In contrast, in the many countries that have experienced the transition from authoritarian to elected rule, citizenship has become a banner for individual and group rights, legitimating and encouraging an on-going shift in the balance of power from the state towards civil society.²

The usual use of the term "rights" refers to constitutional norms and official declarations. In practice, however, the public institutions responsible for guaranteeing these rights operate very unevenly in most of the world. As an old-fashioned Brazilian politician once said, "for my friends, anything -- for everyone else, the law."

Respect for citizenship rights often lags far behind the holding of national elections. Indeed, the list of regimes around the world that hold elections but fall short of the basic minimum conditions for democracy is growing, hidden behind the widespread use of euphemisms like "fragile democracies" and "flawed elections." Some democracies are certainly fragile, but other elected governments are simply not democracies. It is therefore more useful to frame the concept of rights in terms of degrees and effective access. In this view, citizenship rights do not fit the conventional dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian rule, and are instead better understood in terms of a three-dimensional contoured map that reflects widely varying *degrees* of effective access to basic political and civil rights.³ This diversity of access often has a cultural basis, since in many societies certain socially-constructed groups (ethnic, racial, gender, regional) have more rights (or more consistent guarantees) than others.

To speak of access to rights refers to the diverse ways in which public institutions actually treat citizens in practice. For example, while a judicial system may guarantee citizens equal rights on paper, if it does not provide translation to linguistic minorities, then those people lack access to a basic civil right. Even more extreme are those nominally democratic regimes that ban the use of major minority languages in public life. Actual access to basic political and civil rights is what determines how much "space" is available for excluded groups to build their own representative organizations that can defend their interests and identities.

People who actually have access to political rights should have less to fear from engaging in collective action. For autonomous citizens' groups to be able to survive and to spread, people need to be able to participate without provoking violent reprisals -- to make the difficult transition from clients to citizens. Freedoms of assembly and expression often erode as one ventures away from large cities, and authoritarian political machines remain alive and well even under the trappings of "modern" politics.⁴ Indeed, in spite of much dismissive rhetoric about "merely" formal democracy, certain so-called formalities of formal democracy matter *most* to the politically *weakest* members of society. Starting with freedom of assembly and association and including unconditional access to voter registration, guaranteed ballot secrecy, and pluralistic access to political information, such "formal" political rights are crucial for the politically excluded to be able to choose their own leaders and fight for their interests. Formalities such as secret ballots make it possible for those voters who are usually excluded from the public arena to confront local bosses without being "seen," as well as to "sell" their votes to local bosses while voting their conscience at the same time. Having access to citizenship rights in practice includes the freedom to vote for those candidates willing to defend interests that are under-represented within political systems.

The process of democratization is not limited to the state. Indeed, a growing body of literature contends that the quality of democratic governance depends largely on the nature of civil society. In this context, the concept of "social capital" has been gaining increased attention, referring to the societal webs of horizontal networks and norms of reciprocity that facilitate cooperation, accountability and institution-building. Effective democratic governance, broad-based economic development and large stocks of "social capital" often go together. While these outcomes be correlated, analysts differ over which way the causal arrows go. One long-standing social science tradition assumed that levels of economic development determined the degree of consolidation of civil society and possibilities for democratic governance. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that the causal arrows point the other way; that governmental performance and economic development is determined largely by the stocks of social capital, or the "thickness" of civil society.⁵ Analysts who agree on the impact of social capital differ, however, over how civil society "thickens," that is, how more and more groups gain the capacity to come together to articulate and represent their interests. Some analysts see social capital as largely culturally determined and historically inherited, and thereby relatively immune to deliberate efforts to engineer its accumulation (Putnam, 1993). In this view, historical legacies leave some societies more prone to "high civicness," and others more likely to fall into "low civicness." This approach sees each outcome as mutually reinforcing, producing "virtuous circles" of high social capital and good

governance, as well as "vicious circles" of low social capital and poor governance.

Analysts who focus more on the actual process of democratization (as distinct from the performance of already democratic governments) tend to find more room for maneuver for action and ideas. Hirschman addressed the issue of how social capital consolidates, but he took a much more actor-oriented approach than Putnam: "the Principle of Conservation and Mutation of Social Energy."⁶ For both, most of the time, failed efforts at collective action lead people to turn away from public life -- Putnam's "low civicness equilibrium." But since Hirschman is more interested in explaining "social capital formation" than its absence, he looks for the exceptions. First he stresses the role of external threats in provoking resistance, which is well known, but then he turns to cases where such unifying factors are not present. After studying a wide range of community development groups in Latin America, he found that many of them "shared one striking characteristic: when we looked into the life histories of the people principally involved, we found that most of them had previously participated in other... experiences of collective action, that had generally not achieved their objective, often because of official repression. It is as though the protagonists' earlier aspiration for social change, their bent for collective action, had not really left them even though the movements in which they had participated may have aborted or petered out. Later on, this "social energy" becomes active again but is likely to take some very different form" (1984: 42-43).

The usual response to failed collective action is demobilization, but it turns out that those initiatives that people manage to sustain in inhospitable environments are also often responses to past failures. For Hirschman, societal success can come from previous failure, whereas for Putnam only past success explains success. Putnam's approach explains the dominant patterns but not the exceptions. But why does civic failure lead to frustration and powerlessness in some cases, while it is "conserved and mutated" into constructive social energy in others? A more dynamic, actor-oriented approach to collective action gives more weight to the social capitalists, their values, and culture, all of which shape their capacity to sometimes turn defeat into success.

Those who explain how social and civic movements emerge in hostile environments have found many examples of successful efforts by societal elites, such as religious groups, non-governmental development organizations, and even reformists inside otherwise authoritarian regimes, to work in partnership with civil society to "co-produce" increased stocks of social capital.⁷ It is clear, however, that for groups to come together and form associational webs that can encourage both "good government" and economic development, some degree of freedom of association is necessary, which brings this "society-side" question back to the state and the issue of the degree to which governments allow citizens to come

together to form autonomous associations.⁸ Indeed, the capacity of social actors to come together from below depends greatly on the "political opportunity structure." This "opportunity structure," including conflict and cooperation among elites, shapes what citizens perceive as the costs and benefits of collective action, reveals potential allies and shows where elites are vulnerable.⁹

There are two main challenges to the societal dimension of democratization. The first is the question of how social, political, civic and cultural organizations can represent the diversity of interests and identities inherent in any complex society. The main tension is over scale. If organizations are small enough, leaders can remain close to their members, keep aware of their concerns and be held accountable (through a wide range of culturally-specific mechanisms). But unless organizations grow to a certain scale, they are unlikely to have sufficient clout to be able to influence the public and private sectors and thereby encourage accountable governance and broad-based economic development. The "Iron Law of Oligarchy" is a longstanding challenge to any effort to "scale up" locally-based representative organizations, but what some consider an all-powerful law is better understood as a strong *tendency*, which can only be held in check by internal counterweights, often through a multiplicity of alternative channels for membership voice and representation.¹⁰

A second major challenge facing the societal dimension of democratization is the ambiguous issue of political culture. Political culture refers to societal values about how public life should be conducted and how power should be exercised, both from above and from below. But how does one explain the emergence of widely-held normative values? How subject are they to change? Do societal values determine how public institutions work, or do institutions and elites determine values? The classic political science opinion surveys of "civic culture" were based on the former, that values drove institutions. Certain societies were seen as "less civic" and less trusting of government, as though public opinion determined whether or not their governments should be trusted. Associated with this view is the saying: "people get the governments they deserve." But perhaps the causal arrow goes the other way. Perhaps dominant public and private institutions shape society-wide values. This view is especially plausible in strong authoritarian regimes that control education and the mass media. Yet this view is challenged by those societies that manage to maintain strong norms of local participatory decision-making, in spite of violent domination by authoritarian states (as in the case of many indigenous peoples in Latin America). The "state-centered" view of political culture is also challenged by those societies that where the regime is relatively open and the mass media are market rather than state-driven. In such market democracies, the media could well encourage anti-democratic attitudes but its output is shaped in part by "consumer" tastes. Therefore the media owners claim that people "get what they ask for." The most straightforward alternative to

either society-driven or state-driven explanations of political culture is to compromise, and to suggest that political values both shape and are shaped by public institutions.

Public Policy: Challenges for Institutional Design

The key policy issues linking democracy, empowerment and culture involve the problems and processes of access to power. By definition, empowerment requires the sharing of power, and this process has a state dimension and a societal dimension. On the state side, the question is whether public institutions are constructed to encourage balanced input from the diversity of interests in society. On the society side, empowerment requires pluralistic access to information, as well as channels for expression, representation and redress. There is no single institutional formula that can produce these results across historically and culturally diverse societies, but several common tensions cut across the wide range of society-specific institutions that shape the expression of citizenship rights.

* Majority and minority rights.

One of the classic tensions in democratic institution-building is between majority rule and minority rights. Indeed, the aristocrats who created the first experiments in political democracy were quite concerned about the perceived danger of the "tyranny of the majority" (i.e., the possibility that the propertyless majority would decide to redistribute the wealth of the propertied minority). As a result, many of the "checks and balances" built into the first representative democracies were designed explicitly to limit the powers of majority rule (through limiting the right to vote, creating judicial systems impervious to democratic oversight, etc.). Similar issues also arose in the process of negotiated transitions from racial minority to majority rule in Southern Africa.

Democratic political systems differ in terms of the relative weights they give to majorities. "First-past-the-post" electoral systems give virtually all power to those who win 51% of the vote, thereby potentially denying representation to the other 49% of the population. Proportional representation systems of government attempt to compensate for this bias, though they are often charged with losing effective executive capacity as a result. Almost by definition, however, systems of proportional representation encourage broader expression for diverse views. The system of "cumulative voting" has also been developed, most extensively in the private sector, which gives citizens several votes and allows them to either concentrate them or spread them out, allowing for the expression of intensity as well as diversity of views.

* Intergroup relations and rights.

In contrast to societies composed of clearly defined majorities and minorities, the institutions appropriate for balanced inter-group relations in societies composed of multiple non-majority groups are much less clear-cut. This dilemma also arises in cases of regional autonomy within pluralistic nation-states. If one formula for balancing the challenge of representing a geographically-concentrated minority is to grant regional autonomy within a nation-state, then a new unit is created for subnational majority rule. Self-government is a widely-accepted alternative to secession. The next challenge, however, is how to represent those who are not members of that local majority, whether they are part of the national majority or not. In other words, regional autonomy does not necessarily solve the problem of balancing majority and minority voices, since it reappears in the new arena of self-government. Checks and balances that protect minorities are crucial at all levels.

* Cultural/ethnic group autonomy and individual rights.

Democracies that group significant autonomy to ethnic and cultural minorities often recognize the right to distinctive systems of the administration of justice. This is very consistent with cultural pluralism, but sometimes enters into conflict with more "universal" norms of individual human rights. This conflict is especially prominent in the area of women's rights. While gendered norms of social, civil and economic rights will always vary culturally, a line is crossed when cultures permit violations of the physical integrity of the person. Since there is no "universal" institutional formula to resolve the problem of how to defend a minimum "floor" of respect for human rights, while still respecting the autonomy of distinct cultural and ethnic groups, each society will have to find its own distinctive approach. The first step towards developing new institutional formulas, however, is to recognize the dilemma so the issue can be debated in the public arena.

* Centralization and decentralization.

One of the most widespread approaches to the problem of representation and accountability vis-a-vis the centralized nation-state is decentralization. Whether political, administrative or both, the goal is the devolution of power from higher to lower levels of representative government. In contrast to systems of proportional representation or cultural/ethnic autonomy, the organizing principle of decentralization is usually strictly territorial. In principle, the closer governmental decisions are to the citizens, the more likely that citizens will be able to influence governmental actions. In practice, however, local government vary greatly in their degree of accessibility and responsiveness to the citizens they

ostensibly represent. Both public institutions and civil societies vary greatly within nation-states, and therefore the results of decentralization vary greatly as well. Within the same society, a program of decentralization could both strengthen responsive, effective government in some regions while bolstering entrenched authoritarian local elites in other regions. Central authorities still have a crucial role to play in defending basic democratic rights throughout entire societies, to permit citizens to defend their rights in regions that lack representative, accountable government at the local level. Indeed, one of the most promising approaches for democratizing local government is through a "sandwich strategy" of combined reform pressures from both above and below.¹¹

The other major dilemma for advocates of decentralization is social and economic. In societies with great regional disparities, full decentralization of resources for social services and economic development reproduces existing inequalities. Often such regional disparities are associated with cultural and ethnic differences, and therefore full decentralization would reinforce ethnic inequality. To take the case of decentralization of education, if the national government does not redistribute resources from wealthier to poorer regions, then unequal access to opportunity will widen rather than narrow over time. Regional inequality in service delivery may also vary because local public institutions are much less developed than national agencies. In this case, even if the amount of resources delivered remains the same while responsibility is fully transferred to local levels, the quality of the services delivered may well drop significantly during an open-ended transition period. The challenge for institutional design is how to harness the advantages of decentralization without paying the costs of abrupt and imbalanced transitions.

* Freedom of information and public access.

Free access to pluralistic sources of reliable information is an increasingly universal democratic norm, yet tensions emerge in the definition of public access. Advocates of freedom of access to information have every reason to be wary of governmental regulation, yet the private market is not necessarily a more democratic mechanism for allocating access. One important example is in the case of political campaign media finance. Where election campaign access to the media is left completely to the free market, then that access is sharply imbalanced in favor of those groups with more resources. The resulting electoral process may well be "free" but is certainly not "fair" in the sense of providing a level playing field of competing alternatives to the public. In response to this problem, many societies have decided that public access to electoral information is a "public good," where governments remove campaigning from the "free" market and regulate equality of access across the political spectrum. In other words, removing electoral use of the media from the market inherently weakens the influence of

money over politics and potentially makes a more politically and culturally balanced array of views more accessible.

Proposals for specific projects:

One of the most promising arenas for UNESCO to contribute to the extension of effective access to citizenship rights to entire societies is to help to make public life more public. That is, UNESCO's many strengths could be focused towards the broadening and deepening of public access to information about the process of governance.

There are three main dimensions to the information flow process: from society to the state, from state to society, and within society.

* The democratic selection of governments is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democratic governance. To govern effectively and responsively, policy-makers need to know both breadth and intensity of public concerns in between elections. Opinion polls can contribute here, where their methodologies are reliable and their sponsors unbiased. Perhaps most important is the availability of a variety of accessible channels through which diverse groups in society can communicate their views.

* Unless societies have clear, prompt and reliable information about what their governments are actually doing, they have no basis for assessing their leaders or participating in the democratic policy process. The mass media play the crucial role here, as well as non-governmental research centers that have the specialized skills and institutional capacity to carry out reliable independent evaluations of the public sector. The breadth of access to information about national affairs also determines the degree to which citizens are able to make informed opinions and therefore participate in public affairs beyond the local level.

* Unless societies have means for encouraging horizontal information flow, citizens will never know whether their concerns are strictly local or whether they are widely shared. Horizontal information flow is especially important for articulating and defending the interests of social, cultural or ethnic groups that may be under-represented in national public life.

These three points converge on one promising area for project development that builds on many of UNESCO's strengths: Capacity-building for independent media institutions that are accountable to under-represented groups (e.g., women, indigenous peoples, racial minorities, lower castes, etc.). Such institutions could bolster political as well as cultural diversity. Capacity-building includes the following dimensions:

1) Increased breadth of access. This includes linguistic access (more systematic translation of national and international materials into local languages), as well as technical access (e.g., broadening public linkages to computer communications, converting radios in local languages from short wave to AM, increasing transmitting power, broadening the social and geographic distribution of printer materials).

2) Increased depth of coverage.

Even where under-represented groups have developed their own media institutions, they do not necessarily have the capacity to carry out the kind of in-depth research associated with investigative reporting. The capacity to carry out the kind of research that is often unprofitable, or controversial, is crucial for the media to play its watchdog role in a democracy. The problem of capacity-building is not simply one of providing resources so that reporters can spend more time on stories, it also involves strengthening non-media institutions that generate reliable information about specialized issues of great importance to the public (e.g., explaining to the public how their tax monies are actually spent, or assessing the performance of educational or health services).

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