

# Participation for whom?

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## Background

Guatemala, one of the Central American countries bordering the south of Mexico, is ethnically diverse<sup>1</sup>. It has approximately 11 million inhabitants who speak 21 Mayan languages. Spanish is the official language. Historically the Mayan population has been marginalised from political and economic power, and the country registers one of the highest inequalities in income distribution in Latin America. A series of military dictatorships have governed the country since 1954, and the systematic destruction of any political democratic opposition led to the start of armed conflict in 1960. The conflict formally ended in December 1996 with the signature of the Peace Accords between the government and the URNG (the coalition of guerrilla forces).

The Peace Accords settled a framework for a series of economic and political transformations to advance democracy in Guatemala, particularly in the field of human rights and civilian power. The process has been difficult and in many areas the Accords have not been complied with. This has provoked discontent with and distrust of the democratic process among the population.

## A 'Popular Consultation'

In May 1999, a 'Popular Consultation' was held in Guatemala, in which the public was asked to consider constitutional reforms that would provide a legal framework for compliance with some of the country's recent Peace Accords. This particularly related to indigenous identity and rights.

During the months leading up to the event, various social organisations made intensive efforts to promote the main provisions of the Accords, and to raise public awareness about the importance of the constitutional reforms that would enable compliance.

However, in a voter referendum, voters rejected the reforms. This caused shock waves, especially among sectors involved in human rights, some of whom up to that point had accepted in good faith that the external

agenda was on a parallel track with the community agenda. In some cases, they had come to perceive the event as an authentic 'empowerment' exercise by so-called civil society.

Civil society groups wondered why, in a country so poor and in which structural discrimination takes such violent forms, the population had not supported reforms that would nurture democratisation. For the conservative groups who had opposed the reforms with vehemence and abundant resources, the 'No' vote was proof that the Peace Accords did not have public support.

## Reasons for rejection of the reforms

A number of reasons can be put forward to explain the rejection of the reforms.

1. Some of the critical progressive sectors suggested that there had been insufficient citizen participation in negotiating the Accords signed in 1996. The rounds of negotiation leading up to the signing of the Peace Accords scarcely included formal representation of those directly involved in the conflict, and a minimal involvement, without vote, of civil society groups. The lack of a genuine process of participation by civil sectors at this stage was a lost opportunity to prioritise, in local and national agendas, those underlying problems that must be addressed in peace building. The political process was sorely lacking in comparison with the effort that went into proposals and public messages related to constitutional reform.
2. Participation in public consultations is not a common experience in Guatemala. For many observers the low turn out which was experienced was a result of the authoritarian past. People were unaccustomed to being listened to, and their caution and lack of confidence limited their ability to contribute to the peace process. Low turn out was also due to a number of factors, including illiteracy, lack of institutional credibility, inaccessibility of polling stations, family and community restrictions on women's voting, and limitations imposed by some fundamental religious sects.
3. The 'No' victory was swayed heavily by the social, geographic, and political divisions of the armed

<sup>1</sup> The population of Guatemala is comprised of approximately 55% Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish or assimilated Amerindian – in local Spanish called *Ladino*), 43% Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian, and 2% whites and others.



Participation should not be like inviting someone to fit together the pieces of a pre-determined puzzle, but rather to play a role in determining the shape and tones of the puzzle itself

conflict, both locally and nationally. It was also influenced by the lack of a government policy to communicate the content of the Accords to the public. By the same token, representative civil sectors lacked political unity and focus, especially amongst those who signed the Accord.

- In addition, the extreme conservative groups invested vast resources and held more fora to spread the idea that the constitutional reforms would amount to a shift in favour of indigenous people and against *ladinos* (people of Spanish descent), and through intensive campaigning they instilled uncertainty among certain groups of voters.

### A flawed participatory policy process

In a country with a long history of conflict, with sharp economic, social, cultural and linguistic differences, and low levels of literacy, it is perhaps not surprising that 'participation' was flawed.

While citizen participation remains a trend in the national political agenda, to date, the concept has been badly abused, used to gain credibility and resources, and to legitimise political discourses. For example, while the World Bank proclaims the need to extend the margins of citizen participation, it promotes and imposes policies that further impoverish the poor and hence further excludes them from taking part in the decisions that affect their lives.

Today there are practically no programmes or projects that do not emphasise the necessity of participation and

community-based support. Nonetheless, it has to be recognised that to participate it is essential to be informed. In this sense, as much effort must be given to the process itself as to the substantive content. This is a fundamental issue to ensure that efforts to involve people are enduring and sustainable over time.

But the process depends upon the availability of information that is really and truly 'accessible' and that takes into account not only the idioms and language familiar to the people, but also the cultural context and world view, and the problems and priorities of the people to whom it is directed. This means that there must be a conscious effort to create an agenda, and not simply an interpretation of an agenda created from the 'outside'.

From the most localised efforts of political involvement to processes of participation in negotiations during and after the war, it is therefore vital to have a long-term vision of collaboration in creating a different society, and a shorter-term vision of concrete changes that the people want to achieve. These efforts must be based in a conscious effort to share and access information that will allow people to feel that the process belongs to them, rather than simply something that is seen as 'politically correct'.

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