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Citizen participation and democracy in Latin America and the European Union

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United in diversity

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The terms citizen participation and democracy are used refer both to an open political culture and spirit and to systems based on popular representation. In fact, the concepts of representative, participative and consultative democracy not only complement each other but are inseparable. Today, citizens, as a collective group, are seen as the source and regulator of institutional power.

Over the **last 30 years** we have seen how democratic freedoms and electoral processes have taken root in Latin America as never before¹. We now have international democracy-monitoring bodies, such as the OAS, which effectively uphold the state of democracy in the hemisphere, particularly at moments of crisis.

Reality has shown us that institutional democracy alone cannot guarantee prosperity and equal living standards. Today we have a more **realistic** view of democracy in Latin America. The formalistic ideals of the past have faded away. At the same time as democracy is taking hold throughout Latin America, some regimes continue to use older, more **antidemocratic** methods, such as cronyism, closed circles of power, use of the official media for propaganda purposes, and even repression. In other cases, democracy is manipulated by interest groups, particularly local ones.

Although democracy **is not perfect**, it has been welcomed by Latin Americans as our political system of preference and we are not prepared to relinquish the freedoms it brings us. On the contrary, we seek to broaden it and make it more effective, particularly in moments of crisis, both in our immediate societies and in the wider, global society.

PARTICIPATION IN IMMEDIATE SOCIETIES

The changes which have taken place in our countries over the last three decades have come about as a result of democratic institutions. The adoption of new constitutions and economic policies, progress in social rights, the creation of supra-national agencies, the development of local democracy, social crises and the recognition of cultural minorities have all taken place within a framework of representative democracy enriched by new forms of popular participation.

Nine major elements of popular participation in immediate society can be identified in Latin America: the rise of local democracy, digital networks, grassroots consultation on urban development rules and permits, obligatory prior consultation of cultural minorities, dissemination by the media of diverging expert opinions, public assessments of performance, democratic processes within political parties, protection of ethnic minorities and a culture of consensus-building in small social areas.

Perhaps the most significant political transformation in Latin America has been the extent to which local democracy has **developed** and the role it plays as a real democratic learning process in the broadest, most responsible and institutional sense. Since 1989, Porto Alegre, in Brazil, has been implementing a paradigmatic model of citizen participation in preparing the municipal investment budget², which

has been copied by many other Latin American cities. The principal outcome of this participatory form of budgeting has been to foster investment in human development projects and programmes. It has also been shown that policies based on a broader social and political consensus have the added benefit of being **sustainable** and lasting.

Another trend is that Latin American governments are setting up **electronic channels** through which the general public can make their opinions known. These mechanisms encourage discussion and citizens' participation in parliaments, ministries and town councils, as well as in the technical bodies which control public services. During political campaigns, candidates and parties use the internet and social networks to keep directly in touch with the population and gauge public opinion.

It should be emphasised that these electronic channels are not just used to provide and gain access to official information but also play an **interactive** role in involving citizens in project design, proposals and public surveys³. This form of popular participation builds social cohesion, gives added legitimacy to decisions and strengthens citizens' collective identity.

It must be acknowledged, however, that use of these participative networks results in the **exclusion** from such debates of elderly people and those who are unfamiliar with modern information technology.

Alongside the increased use made of information technology by political parties to attract new supporters and put their ideas across, most of the large Latin American countries and some of the smallest ones have in recent years reformed the laws applied to political parties, opting for state-funded election campaigns and requiring internal democratic procedures to be followed when selecting candidates and reaching decisions. This has helped to reduce the influence of big businesses, whose abundant resources give them a natural advantage when trying to sway decisions to their advantage.

Participation by Latin America's indigenous communities has increased considerably since the collective rights of the continent's original peoples first began to be recognised in the 1990s. Prior consultation of indigenous peoples is an important legal provision enshrined in ILO Convention No 169 and in several Latin American national constitutions which establishes the right of ethnic minorities to participate politically in state decisions affecting them. The prior consultation requirement protects the fundamental collective rights⁴ of original peoples to their own cultural identity. Constitutions have established a complex pluralistic legal system and additional protective measures to address the social, economic and cultural disadvantages of indigenous peoples.

Small-scale participatory mechanisms are widely used in schools, universities, residents' associations, cooperatives, indigenous councils and rural associations, helping to build social cohesion and integration in accordance with democratic

principles, and their priorities and focus are specially tailored to the particular social group involved.

PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL SOCIETY

Given that democratic principles are naturally expansive and are particularly important in **times of crisis, democracy** needs to find new ways of allowing social and cultural movements to voice their political concerns. Crises must be seen as opportunities to usher in more far-reaching social changes. If we truly believe in democracy, then in Europe - which was the birthplace of democracy in ancient times and of the democratic social security model in the 20th century - this is no time to refuse to listen to the citizens of 21st century Greece, Ireland and Spain and to subject them to the dictates of European technocrats and the financial institutions.

If we truly believe in democracy, this is also **no time to abandon our solidarity** with Europeans and European countries. The euro, as an adventure in monetary integration, has already brought huge economic and social benefits to Europe's citizens. Nevertheless, this daring venture also requires radical adjustment⁵. With hindsight it is easy to identify government errors, such as a lack of clear financial analysis, or the failure to enforce recommendations more vigorously. It was clear from the start that the stakes were high in the European unification process and **setbacks** were likely to be encountered, such as the current crisis due to the over-indebtedness of certain States.

The EU's democratic and technocratic institutions have forged ahead by surmounting crises with **political maturity**.

There is a worrying possibility that the price of the macroeconomic mistakes which have been made will largely be paid by Europe's citizens if social programmes are cut back. As Latin American members of parliament we are particularly concerned by the fate of our immigrants in Europe.

It is also unfortunate that the public debt crisis in Europe took hold before the goals of international cooperation with developing countries could be fully realised. In any event, Europe's responsibilities towards the developing world are no less real now than they were before the crisis.

Agricultural development in Africa has still not been achieved. Food security, as former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet⁶ has noted, continues to be one of the major human priorities in the 21st century. We hope that European public spending cuts will not be directed primarily at cooperation and development aid to third world countries, which would feel extremely frustrated if international solidarity was the first thing to be struck off the agenda of European integration.

As Latin American parliamentarians, we have no intention of preaching to Europe on matters of social policy and programmes. None whatsoever. But we do firmly support the continued funding by the European Parliament of development programmes in

Africa and Latin America. I particularly have in mind the food crisis in southern Somalia and the reconstruction of Haiti⁷ following the earthquake of 12 January 2010.

It could be asked what this has to do with citizens' participation. It has a great deal to do with it, as democracy is a universal ideal which legitimises the exercise of political power and guarantees fundamental citizens' rights, which include the social welfare rights to food, health, education, housing, public welfare and employment, which call for financial resources and administrative structures that can be costly. Potential threats to democracy - understood as universal solidarity - are particularly likely to arise in moments of crisis.

The global interdependency processes on which we are embarking are also hugely deficient in terms of citizens' participation. The emerging global society calls for increased participation in decisions and responsibilities whose repercussions are felt beyond national frontiers. In a technologically and commercially integrated world, democratic principles need to acquire a practical validity at global level. Or will we be content with a theoretical global democracy of words?

It can be seen that most of the international political institutions, whether international or supranational, have a closed structure and are controlled in an oligarchic style, as if left over from the days of the monarchies and the bipolarity of the second half of the 20th century. These hermetic structures will gradually lose legitimacy if they fail to incorporate mechanisms for democratic participation. Or is it a mistake to believe that globalisation should also be influenced by democracy?

The EU is fortunate enough to have its own directly and democratically elected European Parliament, and has held referendums on the major decisions taken by the Union. In contrast, in the case of the UN, some of the Security Council's permanent members have lost their political representativity and only continue to sit there and exercise their right to veto thanks to the inertia of an institution which remains unchanged since 1945, over 65 years ago.

There is a structural democratic deficit in international institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank⁸. The major world bodies take an imperialistic approach and reject any input by developing countries, to the extent that it today seems unrealistic to even suggest the creation of democratic mechanisms.

This is not my own original thinking: these arguments have already been repeatedly expressed. Reference can be made to the bold proposals outlined in the 2002 UN human development report 'Deepening democracy in a fragmented world'. The emergence of a global civil society makes it necessary to consider making the international institutions more participatory and democratic, or allowing developing countries to increase their participation and responsibilities in the multilateral bodies.

The UN report points out that just seven economically powerful states hold 46% of the voting rights in the World Bank and 48% of the voting rights in the International

Monetary Fund. This unequal international participation by developing societies is even more evident in globalised social movements. A survey of 738 NGOs attending the ministerial conference in Seattle in 1999 revealed that 87% of them were from developed countries⁹.

The 'defunct' G-8 failed to renew itself in time to keep up with the pace of international politics and has been superseded by the G-20, which continues to discuss and attempt to decide the fate of the world's people without involving them, with an approach that seems left over from the absolutist days of the European Holy Alliance.

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Given that the EuroLat parliamentary committee on political affairs is a suitable forum in which to reassert that political freedoms and citizen participation are fundamental human rights, I offer these queries and concerns on the subject of citizen participation and democracy in Latin America and Europe for the consideration of my parliamentary colleagues.

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¹ IDB. Document 'How democracy works in Latin America'. Volume 23. September-December 2010, Washington. <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=35469591>.

² A political contract was signed in 1989 between the city of Porto Alegre and society, which has been renewed on an annual basis ever since.

³ OECD. DSTI/ICCP/IE(2006)7/ 12-Apr_2007 FINAL. Committee for information, computer and communications policy.

⁴ Judgment C-030 of 2008 by the Constitutional Court of Colombia, declaring the Forest Law to be unconstitutional.

⁵ Le Monde, *Le «coup de poker» de Sarkozy et Merkel, selon Delors*, interview published on Tuesday, 18 October 2011, Paris: http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2011/10/18/jacques-delors-denonce-le-coup-de-poker-de-sarkozy-et-merkel_1589753_3234.html#ens_id=1268560.

⁶ FAO. Speech by the UN Under-Secretary-General on World Food Day, 17 October 2011, Rome. <ftp://ext-ftp.fao.org/Radio/MP3/2011/WFD-CFS/Ceremony-17AM/WFD-Bachelet-En.mp3>.

⁷ In 2010, the EU ambassador to Haiti, Lut Fabert, repeatedly expressed the EU's willingness to continue assisting Haiti.

⁸ BADIE, Bertrand. *La diplomatie de connivence*. Éditions La Découverte, 2011, Paris.

⁹ UNDP. *Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. Human development report 2002, p.8.