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Barriers to Citizen Engagement in Developing Countries

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Abstract: Developing countries often face distinct and formidable challenges in their efforts to build citizen engagement and democratic governance processes. In this article, we examine these challenges and consider how they relate to international efforts to foster democratic governance in developing countries. We consider the impact on developing nations of external incentives, the absence of democratic culture and civil society, profound poverty, time pressures and demands for immediate results, and the lack of an institutional infrastructure. We find that existing international aid programs may, in some instances, actually work to thwart citizen engagement efforts. We conclude by suggesting how a realistic recognition of the barriers to citizen engagement in developing countries can inform international efforts to foster democratic governance.

Keywords: developing countries, citizen engagement, citizen participation, governance

In developed democracies across the globe, communities and public agencies are finding effective ways to get citizens involved and working to foster civic culture and infrastructure. Going beyond voting and the typical “public comment” hearings of the past, these efforts require creativity, energy and commitment to succeed. But the payoffs can be significant, including fostering a sense of community, engendering trust, and finding new approaches to solve complex public problems. For these reasons, direct citizen participation in processes of collective decision making is pervasive in the United States, to the point where some have even claimed the practice of civic engagement “is leading theory” (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O’Leary, 2005).

Interestingly, the developed nations see the need to help foster democratic governance in developing countries as not only advantageous to those countries...
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but also as essential to their own security and economic stability. Encouraging citizen engagement in developing countries is not a simple proposition. Our purpose here is to identify some of the common problems and challenges that are involved in efforts to foster democratic governance in developing countries.

We begin by briefly examining some of the common challenges faced in the United States and other developed nations in implementing citizen engagement processes. We then briefly examine the need for and potential benefits of building civic capacity and citizen engagement in developing countries that are struggling to put into place democratic governance systems. Next, we consider the additional and unique barriers and challenges facing developing countries as they attempt to do so, noting specific examples where these challenges have been overcome. In identifying these challenges, we concentrate mainly on the experience of some Eastern European and Latin American countries for which the results of recent reforms has been extensively documented and widely available. Countries in these geographic areas share as a common denominator the strong influence of the experience of two major economic and democratic powers: the European Union and the United States. By limiting the analysis to these regions, we acknowledge that the discussion presented here may not be easily generalized to all developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. However, confining our attention to these countries facilitates exploration of some of the factors that may influence and limit the effectiveness of efforts to enhance citizen engagement. The article concludes with some ideas about the role of these efforts in achieving democratic governance, how to best understand these efforts in context, and how these examples may inform efforts to achieve and maintain active and authentic civic engagement around the world.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND THE NEW PUBLIC SERVICE IN THE UNITED STATES

The idea that there should be more citizen engagement and participation in government and public administration has been frequently discussed (Kaufman, 1969; Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1994; Peters, 1995). Roberts (2004) has defined citizen participation as “the process by which members of a society ... share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to the community” (320). The importance of the role of public administration in engendering citizen participation has more recently outlined in the model of the New Public Service or NPS (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003, 2007). NPS is based on the premise that democratic values and service in the public interest should be the pre-eminent normative values in public administration. Focusing on developed democracies, the Denhardts suggest that public servants engage with citizens rather than treating them as consumers or
customers as suggested by many modern management theorists, particularly those advocating New Public Management (NPM). NPS recognizes the important contributions of New Public Management and related business principles in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of government, but suggests that such efforts ought to be considered within a framework of higher-level democratic principles and norms. Fostering citizenship and democratic governance requires engaging with citizens in a dialogue about the public interest, involving them in planning, implementing, and evaluating public policies and programs.

However, stimulating citizens’ participation by implementing NPS principles, even in developed countries, faces several challenges. In her overview of current state of citizen participation Nancy Roberts (2004) finds that there are both theoretical ambiguities and inconsistencies, as well as more practical challenges. Among these practical “dilemmas” of direct citizen participation are basic questions of scale (how can citizen participation work in large complex systems?), who participates (who is a citizen and who is likely to be excluded and how can that be overcome?), knowledge (what level of expertise is needed to effectively participate?), and time (how do we deal with time constraints, particularly in crisis situations when decisions have to be made quickly?). More fundamentally, those attempting to foster citizen engagement struggle with the dilemma of how we can ensure that citizen engagement reflects the common good and thoughtful, deliberative democracy, rather than simply serving as a mechanism for measuring public opinion.

These challenges in developed countries pale, however, compared to those facing countries without any history of democratic practices and without the social, civic and institutional framework to support civic engagement. While there is no commonly accepted definition of the term “developing countries,” it generally refers to those countries that have low levels of income per capita, less developed or undeveloped economic and social institutions, human resource weaknesses (in the areas of nutrition, health, education, and adult literacy), and inadequate infrastructure (see, for example, the UN website at http://www.un.org/special-rep/ohrlls/kde/kde%20criteria.htm and World Bank website at http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/beyond/global/glossary.html#99). The World Bank website states that, “More than 80 percent of the world’s population lives in the more than 100 developing countries” (http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/beyond/global/glossary.html#99).

Developing countries have all of the problems faced by developed countries in attempting to build civic infrastructure and citizen engagement, but in addition, they have different external incentives, contend with barriers and constraints unique to their status as a developing country, often lack an institutional framework that those of developed countries largely take for granted, and start from a different historical and cultural foundation. While the history, culture, institutions, and challenges faced in each country are distinct, we can identify some common themes in terms of the barriers to citizen participation
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in developing countries. In the sections that follow, we explore some of these barriers.

EXTERNAL INCENTIVES

New Public Management (NPM) has served as the guidepost for many of the administrative reform movements around the world over the past 25 years. With its emphasis on market mechanisms, business models, instrumental rationality, and privatization to deliver more “efficient” public services, NPM has received both acclaim and criticism for its effects on governance. With regard to the latter, opponents argue that the values of participation and collaboration have been neglected in favor of individualism and instrumental efficiency, particularly as transnational, intergovernmental, and supranational organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) work to influence the political and economic landscape in some developing countries.

According to Williams (2001), “The identification of the EU with democracy and the incentives of membership have been sources of external pressure encouraging political reform . . . [but] the European Union insists that the governments of . . . Central and Eastern European states implement a wide range of legislation . . . over which they have no say prior to accession” (30). While prospective EU member-states must enact the legislation that facilitates democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy, they are also required to develop administrative institutions that are lean, modern, and based on European standards of professionalism — much of which is grounded in principles and practices of NPM (Republic of Montenegro Ministry of Justice, 2003). While other organizations such as the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have recently begun to promote citizen participation and democratic processes, the external incentives offered to developing countries is, at best, mixed with regard to participatory governance because “in general, participation . . . only adds to the complexity and length of [accession] negotiations” (Williams, 2001, 28).

Given that many industrialized nations such as Germany (Klages & Loffler, 1997), New Zealand (Pallot, 1998), Great Britain (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000, Kettl, 2000), and the United States (Lynn, 2006) have relied on NPM in their own reform movements, it is not surprising that the EU would emphasize New Public Management in Central and Eastern European developing countries. While Rhodes (1994) and Terry (2005) have cautioned against the utilization of NPM in developed democracies due to their “hollowing” or “thinning” affects on public institutions, the negative consequences of New Public Management practices with respect to civic engagement can be even more crippling to developing countries where political institutions and citizens’ attitudes toward government are fragile, if not volatile.
Patrick Kilby (2004), for example, emphasizes how “importing” New Public Management practices in developing countries such as India can actually disempower citizens and thwart civic engagement. Lynn (2006), however, takes a different view. He argues that while the New Public Management is widely accepted by international donors, democracy is what drives changes in developing countries. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, it is undeniable that the reforms in many developing countries and countries in transition were patronized by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which had policy agendas that corresponded with the basic principles of NPM.

What came to be known as “Washington Consensus” at the beginning of 1990s reflected a set of macroeconomic policies, such as trade liberalization, wide tax reforms (wide tax base and low tax rates), deregulation, and privatization; policies that Washington-based institutions were advocating at that period in Latin America (Williamson, 2000). The “Washington Consensus” is “a consensus between the IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury, about the “right” policies for developing countries” that preferred “the free market mantra of the 1980s” (Stiglitz, 2002 p. 16). “Many developing countries were left with no other choice but to fall into the welcoming but stern arms” of a New Public Management agenda (Naim, 2000 p.92).

Unfortunately, these policies have proven inefficient and counterproductive in many developing countries (Stiglitz, 2002). For example, while the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his cabinet in 1997 “were generally committed to a process of decentralization, bringing government closer to the people,” the IMF was insisting on policies that they felt would best ensure loan repayment regardless of their negative consequences for democratic values (Stiglitz, 2002, pp. 27–28). In this case, the IMF insisted that interest rates be based on the market, a policy that effectively disenfranchised Ethiopian farmers who typically have no collateral of other guarantees for loan repayment. This is an example of what Kilby (2004) suggests about NPM approaches: That they “tend to focus accountability upward to the donor—effectively at the expense of the beneficiary.” (p. 210). In other words, when developing countries are accountable to their donors and benefactors rather than their own citizens, a basic building block of democracy is neglected.

Even if one is solely concerned with the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery, this neglect of citizen engagement is problematic. As Peters (1995) asserts, “The argument. . .can be made that quality in the delivery of public-sector services depends to some extent upon cooperation in production rather than on government employees simply delivering the service” (52). It is not just these substantive benefits of participatory rulemaking in terms of making service delivery more effective (Kerwin 1994) that are of concern, however.

We argue that the establishment and implementation of a participative process, in and of itself, is essential to the legitimacy of the state, its institutions,
and long-term democratic development. As nation-building and democratization continue to serve the interests of Western, industrialized nations such as the United States and those within the EU, can they afford to neglect the potential benefits of a more inclusive, community-oriented approach to governance such as the development of the habits, values, and procedures necessary for a functional democracy?

A symbiotic relationship between citizens, government, and civil society is essential to the development of sustainable democracies. An increasing number of scholars, commentators, and representatives of international development organizations have begun to question the lack of attention to and incentives for citizen engagement (Naim, 2000; Stiglitz, 2002). As Naim (2000) points out, no reforms could be expected to produce sustainable results on the long run, unless they were accepted by the people and consistent with the shared values and culture. So, although market-based approaches to reform remain dominant, they are increasingly being complimented with efforts to build democratic values and citizen engagement.

In recent years, the World Bank and other donors, for example, have started to recognize that direct citizen participation is part of the process of building governmental capacity for sustainable development (World Development Report, 2005, 2006; Keefer, 2007). Likewise, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has recognized the need for technical and other forms of assistance to both government and non-government sectors to foster democratic processes in these countries. In addition to providing financial aid to support the education of the citizens, especially education of disadvantaged groups, such as women or minorities, USAID allots financial resources to directly promote democracy in the developing world.

A document published by USAID (2005) reports that in 2004 alone, the amount spent on democracy programs reached 1.2 billion U.S. dollars. USAID defines democracy and governance programs as:

... technical assistance and other support to strengthen capacity of reform-minded governments, non-governmental actors, and/or citizens in order to develop and support democratic states and institutions that are responsive and accountable to citizens... Democracy programs promote the rule of law and human rights, transparent and fair elections coupled with a competitive political process, a free and independent media, stronger civil society and greater citizen participation in government, and governance structures that are efficient, responsive and accountable (http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/).

In examining USAID democracy and governance programs, Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2006), found that these programs have positive and significant input for the development of democratic (government) institutions, strengthening the role of civic society, and encouraging citizen participation
in public affairs in these countries. It is reasonable to suggest that the emphasis on democracy, rule of law and protection of civil rights, as opposed to market-oriented principles of government effectiveness and efficiency contributed to the success of the USAID democracy programs.

A central question remains, however. Even if the incentive structure created by external organizations can be shifted to consistently encourage more citizen engagement, how can we overcome the challenges and the problems related to citizen participation in developing countries, and how can this participation be made more meaningful for those who are affected by the public policies? The answer to this question may lie in a better understanding of the internal barriers and challenges to doing so, including the lack of civic culture, poverty, time pressures, and inadequate institutional infrastructure.

LACK OF DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

March and Olsen (1995) contend, “a central requirement of democracy is a commitment to the civilization of citizens, public officials, institutions, and political processes,” and in this construction of civil society, collective efforts shape a sense of solidarity, specific identities, and institutions (50–51). Putman argues that this civic society is a prerequisite to citizen participation (1993). In a civic society, citizens are characterized by their

(a) interest in public issues and devotion to public causes;
(b) equality of rights and obligations imbedded in horizontal relations of reciprocity;
(c) helpfulness, respect, and trust to one another; and
(d) engagement with the broad political system though their participation in civic associations.

These conditions are often not present in developing countries.

Citizens in long-established democracies are typically socialized in democratic culture virtually from birth, as they grow up learning to give opinions and make choices, listening to people talking openly about the government, and to ultimately practice participative processes in their school, social, and work experiences. So, democratic culture is not something only reflected within the governance process, it is deeply imbedded in how people see themselves in relation to others, how they view the appropriateness and legitimacy of decision making, and how they define authority and responsibility, and how they interact with others in formal and informal organizations. That is not to say that these citizens will necessarily become directly engaged in governance, but they are socialized to understand the importance of participation in collective decision making and may act on these values under the right circumstances. This cultural tradition is simply not present in many
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developing countries and therefore cannot be assumed to serve as a foundation for democratic governance. As common as these values and processes seem to some, they can be unnatural and threatening within other cultural traditions.

As a result, developing democracies not only face the daunting task of unraveling and rebuilding obsolete political institutions, but they also must address the cultural habits and artifacts that have been embedded in its social fabric for decades, and in many instances, centuries. Over the course of totalitarian or socialist regimes, citizens that grew to distrust or fear government also operated under isolationist, individualistic, or nationalistic mindsets that divided populations and suffocated “the human yearning for union and communion” (Barber, 1984, 112). Emerging democracies often have social relationships characterized by hierarchical and authoritarian regimes and social relations characterized by lack of trust between citizens and government and among citizens. It is not uncommon for such governments to have used public policies to award patronage-like benefits, such as in the case of public pensions in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Mexico, El Salvador, and Costa Rica (Mesa-Lago & Muller, 2002). Obviously, such practices undermine citizen trust in a way that is very difficult to overcome.

It is not just that a civic society is typically not present in developing countries; it is that other cultural norms and values that are hostile to democratic governance can often dominate. While the cultures and values of developing countries are, of course, extremely varied, what is a more common cultural norm than civic engagement or democratic values is the “value” of corruption.

Corruption has been defined as the abuse of public position for private benefits (Anderson & Gray, 2005). While corruption in developed countries is generally considered unacceptable, in some developing countries it may be at least informally accepted as a deeply seated tradition and cultural norm, passed from generation to generation. In a society characterized by highly personalized, individualized political interactions, corruption may be viewed as simply the way the system “works” based on relationships, favors, and incentives.

In fact, some authors have seen positive and functional aspects of corruption (Zuzowski, 2005, pp. 12–13; Mahmood, 2005, p. 62). For example, one of the major arguments for the positive role of corruption is that while it is a non-transparent process, it has transparent outcomes (Zuzowski, 2005). One such transparent outcome is the elimination of ineffective participants through the process of “bribe-bidding.” Corruption has also been justified as an incentive for the “incompetent bureaucrats” to grant a government business to the firm, thus fostering development (p. 13). This, according to Zuzowski, will also attract foreign investors, who will compete with domestic firms (with the amount of bribes offered).

Despite these arguments, most would hold that a cultural tradition of corruption is inconsistent with both economic development and the development
of democratic governance systems. In the last 10–15 years, the international institutions, such as the World Bank (WB), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations (UN), and others have shown tremendous interest on the effects of corruption on development. The attitude that these institutions have developed towards corruption is best represented in the following sentence:

In the long run, no country can afford the social, political or economic costs that corruption entails. It erodes public confidence in political institutions and leads to contempt for the rule of law; it distorts the allocation of resources and undermines competition in the market place; it has a devastating effect on investment, growth and development. Furthermore, corruption exacts an inordinately high price on the poor by denying them access to vital basic services. A whole host of conditions can influence corruption, its different manifestations, its pervasiveness and, indeed, its perception by ordinary citizens (OECD, 2000, paragraph 3).

The rejection of corruption and the construction of a civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1965; Reese & Rosenfeld, 2002) largely depends upon inculcating a sense of collectivism, as opposed to individualism and self-interest, as a core social value. As Lindbloom (1977) noted, there are two forms of rationality that characterize governance systems: strategic rationality and synoptic rationality. Strategic rationality is based on the assumptions that people’s decision making capacity is bounded and that problems are complex and changeable, so collective and incremental decision making is likely to lead to the best policy outcomes. Synoptic rationality is more closely associated with classic rationality that assumes that people’s decision making capacity is great and that “correct” solutions to problems can be found by individuals, negating the need for incremental or participatory decision making.

Lindbloom suggested that democratic societies and capitalist economies are closed to the ideal model of strategic rationality, while managed economies and communist countries are closer to the ideal model of synoptic rationality. Applying Lindblom’s logic then suggests that the dominant form of understanding rational decision making processes in many developing countries is directly counter to the notion of collective decision making.

In addition to a logic or rationality based on collectivism and participation, a healthy civil society provides arenas for community deliberation on matters relevant to the public interest, and familiarizes individuals with additional key democratic values such as pluralism, due process, and fairness. This assumes the existence of mediating institutions that can provide the social “space” for community deliberation. As already noted, Putman argues that the American democratic tradition is dependent on civil society, in which individuals are actively involved in a wide variety of organizations and
groups—churches, social groups, voluntary organizations, and clubs—which form the basis for individuals to establish connections with the larger society.

We cannot assume, however, that this idea translates directly in developing countries. To the extent that these groups and organizations exist, they tend to function the same way that other institutions in that same society function. In other words, in societies traditionally characterized by authoritarian control, these groups do not operate as open and participative opportunities for dialogue. Civil society is only helpful to the democratization process when it is independent of the state, represents diverse enclaves of the citizenry, and is characterized by democratic norms and principles. Friedrich (1972) states the importance of such considerations in the development of democracies, claiming “...to be sure, too much tradition ossifies a political order, but equally surely too little tradition undermines and dissolves the community and its order” (13–14).

Nonetheless, the creation of such deliberative space is vital in societies seeking to develop democratic governance systems in order to mediate between the relationship between governing institutions and the individual (Eberly, 2000). Certainly in developed democracies, individuals have opportunity to serve on community advisory boards or other public service committees in order to participate in the governance process.

Where these opportunities are limited or undesirable, however, civil society provides the only outlets for citizens who are overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of state institutions, or are unfamiliar with the process, rules, and regulations inherent to government, and gives them a vehicle for engaging in governance. Civil society is a crucial component of the democratization process not only because of its ability to provide everyday citizens access to governance, but also because of its role as a “watchdog” over governments previously opposed to such oversight.

POVERTY

Citizen participation and civic engagement is important to democratic governance, but is related to economic development as well. The participation of the poor and disadvantaged is particularly important given that, in many cases, the funds that come into developing countries are frequently directed to particular projects that affect the groups that are worse off in these societies. Although developed countries face the same challenges in trying to gain participation from disadvantaged populations, these challenges are not of the same magnitude.

The problems of poverty in developing countries are much more severe and widespread than the problems experienced in developed countries. The 2007 United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals Report (MDG Report), for example, delineates some of the obstacles impeding access to the basic
public and private products and services. More than 40 percent of the people in Sub-Saharan Africa, around 30 percent in Southern Asia, and approximately 10 percent in Eastern Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean lived on less than $1 a day in 2004 (MDG Report, 2007, p. 6). The income distribution is also becoming more extreme, with the share distributed to the poorest falling from 4.6 to 3.9 percent in the period 1990–2004 (MDG Report, 2007, p. 8). Access to information in these countries is also extremely limited. By the end of 2005 only 15 percent of the world population used the Internet. Of those who did, 50 percent lived in developed countries. In addition, limited access to primary education and health services, gender inequality, and hunger among citizens in developing countries also help make citizen participation the exception than a rule.

But the inclusion of the poorest and disadvantaged in creating and implementing public policies now seems to be more urgent than ever before. In fact, Stern, Dethier, and Rogers (2005) see the empowerment of the poor and discriminated as the only way to exit the vicious cycle of poverty. They argue that poverty does not only deprive people access to goods and services, quality health care, and education, but presents other challenges as well. Rebecca Abers (2000) observes that there are “inequality problems” associated with poverty with regards to participation. The author emphasizes the fact that individuals living below the poverty line often do not have time or energy to participate actively as they struggle to meet basic needs. They also have very limited financial resources that would allow them to spend money on travels to the places where public deliberations may occur. In some cases, lower levels of education not only affects the ability (capacity) for participation, but also individuals’ self-confidence to “voice their opinion,” especially among minority groups (such as women, ethnic minorities, and others). Finally, in some other cases, their engagement may be impeded by family or community norms, caste and/or religion.

The World Bank addresses these problems in terms of what they call the lack of assets and capabilities (WB, 2002). “Asset” is used to denote physical and financial assets that “enable people to withstand shocks and expand their horizon of choices” (p. 11) “Capabilities,” refer to human capabilities (such as good health or education), social capabilities (such as sense of identity and belonging, or trust), and political capabilities (access to information, associations, and participation in political life). “Given lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers, even in many formal democracies, poor people are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to invest in their assets or exercise their individual rights” (WB, 2002, p. 11).

Even if all of these difficulties can be overcome, there may be resistance by more privileged and political elite to participation by the disadvantaged. For example, in looking at participation at the municipal level in Porto Alegre in Brazil, Abers (2000) finds that even when elected officials have the will to include various groups in decision making processes, the actual implementation
of a policy “must be negotiated within a government structure where a number of groups have influence over government action” (p. 9). Particularly in a highly stratified, but largely impoverished country, inclusion of different stakeholders is impeded by business elites and bureaucrats that do not want to share power.

Finally, the concentration of income in few hands not only places a large percentage of the population in poverty, it also reduces the size and political power of the middle class. The lack of a middle class interested and devoted to public causes makes citizen engagement difficult. The experience of some developed nations suggests that without a middle class who has the necessary incentives, education, and access to both build the economic base and to hold public officials accountable, building a civic infrastructure and a sound economic base is extremely difficult at best.

**TIME PRESSURES AND THE NEED FOR IMMEDIATE RESULTS**

The urgency of reform is also felt more keenly in developing countries. As already noted, democratization is usually seen as a two-edged instrument: both as a tool for immediate economic development and a means of building participative approaches to governance. In analyzing case studies from India, Kilby (2004) found that the poor in India do not have a voice when it comes to public deliberations, in part because of the emphasis on short-term results. He points to the incapacity of the institutions, both governmental and non-governmental to include the citizens in the projects that affect their lives. But he also suggests that the preference and need for short-term results over long term citizen mobilization poses major challenges for the inclusion of citizens in public forums. Similarly, Abers (2000) finds that short-term bureaucratic necessities do not always “fit within the lengthy time periods needed to mobilize participants” (p. 8).

International institutions are important players for democratic and economic development of these countries, and including citizen participation beyond representation, should provide a basis for stable institutions that would support democratic processes in the long run. But the lack of institutional capacity may result in establishing quasi-democratic models of participation, where tyranny would prevail over transformation (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Transformation is about changing the institutions, and as North (1990) points out, change is incremental, costly, and most importantly takes time. Short-run political and economic decisions focus on economic performance and neglect citizen engagement making the lack of civic culture and engagement “more difficult to reverse” (North, 1990, p. 104).

For example, in examining the EU process of integration in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Grabbe (2001) observes that “the formal accession process sets out to adapt CEE institutions and policies to the EU much faster
and more thoroughly than the adaptation of the current EU members, with very limited scope for negotiating transitional periods” (p. 1014). Shortly after the fall of communism, the EU developed the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993 in order to succinctly identify the basic conditions for EU membership, anticipating an influx of Central and Eastern European nations applying for admission. In addition to requiring the existence of a functioning market economy and the administrative capacity to uphold the political, economic, and monetary union, the Copenhagen Criteria indicate that candidate countries need to construct stable institutions “guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities” (Grabbe, 2002, 251).

The conditions became a critical legal benchmark for the development of aspiring countries as the original 15 EU members were apprehensive about developing political, and perhaps more importantly, economic relationships with their unstable European counterparts. Given their rudimentary nature, the Copenhagen Criteria are supplemented by what the EU calls the National Programmes for the Adoption of the Aquis, and Accession Partnerships (released annually), each of which details short- and medium-term priorities (one and five years, respectively), funding measures, and deadlines for institutional development within each prospective member state.

Adhering to the deadlines dictated in each of the documents and maintaining a steady, progressive pace towards integration is significant for a few reasons. On the domestic front, citizens of CEE who have been subjected to communist regimes are eager to unlock the benefits of EU membership, most notably those related to economic growth and development (Gabel & Whitten, 1997). Certainly national politicians acknowledge the potential political ramifications a long, drawn out integration process has on public support for the EU. From an aid perspective, the EU legally binds financial assistance, such as its Community Assistance to Reconstruction, Development, and Stabilisation program (CARDS), with progress in meeting the Copenhagen Conditions. In January 2006, the European Council communicated the following to the Republic of Macedonia:

Community assistance . . . to the western Balkan countries is conditional on further progress in satisfying the Copenhagen criteria as well as progress in meeting specific priorities of this European Partnership. Failure to respect these conditions could lead to the Council to take appropriate measures. . . . Community assistance will also be subject to the conditions . . . [regarding] the recipients’ undertaking to carry out democratic, economic, and institutional reforms. (European Commission, 2006)

Given the internal and external pressures to show efficient institutional development, national governments are not only willing to accept a more paternalistic, technocratic approach to reform, but in many instances have the incentive to circumvent a slower, yet more inclusive democratization process.
THE LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Institutions provide the structure that permit economic growth and generate the conditions for democratic life (North & Weingast, 1996). Many developing countries lack some of the core institutions taken for granted in the rest of the world. Institutions serve many critical functions in addition to the delivery of services and the provision of goods. Institutions structure social interactions and reduce uncertainty in economic and political transactions. Institutions can also create the conditions for equal access of social groups to express their preferences, and constrain individuals who pursue their own interests at the expense of others (Miller, 1985; Horn, 1995; Epstein & O’Halloran, 1999; Feiock, Jeong, & Kim, 2003).

Without institutions that define the rules for economic, political and social exchanges as well as political and property rights, the development of sustainable democracies and citizen engagement will be difficult if not impossible. For example, Harbers (2007) in analyzing the reasons for two failed attempts by the local government in Mexico City to include citizens in public policy deliberations, points to the weak legal framework for policymaking along with lack of financial resources and governmental will.

The development of these needed institutions and structures, however, presents a paradox for developing countries. In order to foster economic growth, they first need to promote an institutional framework that can create stable economies. However, in order to promote these institutional changes, they often rely on authoritarian and unilateral decisions, thereby undermining the development of democratic norms and processes. The effects of doing so are clear in Latin American countries that used centralized and unilateral decision making to implement institutional changes aimed at the transformation of the economy (Delgado, 1997; Ghio, 2000).

Authoritarian regimes in developing countries are typically characterized by unequal distribution of resources and justice (Ratinoff, 1996). In these cases, the establishment of autonomous institutions and organizations for the creation of economic policy has generated a growing tension between social groups. Governments respond by attempting to tighten political controls over dissent. Unfortunately, even if the dissenting groups are successful in taking over the government, they are typically just as authoritarian as the regimes they replace.

In other words, centrally controlled institutional changes focusing on the economy pose a limit to democratic development because they are not accompanied by the creation of participative and open political processes (Ghio, 2000). In a sense, this creates a situation in which there are two competing types of rationality and “rules of the game” at play. The centrally controlled economic system is based on the enforcement of rules and norms to limit uncertainty. On the other hand, the locally controlled political systems are characterized by patrimonial decision making process, individual discretion
and authoritarianism. For example, in Latin American countries, the implementation of policies that decentralize authority to communities clash with hierarchical traditions in the social sphere inherited from Spanish and Portuguese colonies (Rojas, 1995; Dror, 1997).

Governmental systems in developing countries also often lack the checks and balances that characterize developed democracies. Strong executives may use processes that are called participatory, but they are actually only simulations of public participation designed to take advantage of the lack of checks and balances in the governmental system. Sometimes these processes are not intended to create avenues for citizen participation, but rather to build a case to strengthen the “legitimacy” of unilateral decisions by the executive and to weaken the legislative branch (Cavalcanti & Maia, 2000). The executive makes use of these “democratic practices” to undermine the authority of a legislative branch that is struggling to assert its independent role in governance.

Obviously, these unstable and inconsistent institutions create major challenges for public servants attempting to negotiate and broker interests among citizens and community groups in order to create shared interests. It is difficult to convince citizens to participate when institutions lack predictability and are inconsistent in both policymaking and the enforcement of regulations. Worse, in some emerging democracies, public servants are working in institutional environments in perpetual threat of a military coup d’état or economic crisis (Arellano & Ramírez, 2007). Not knowing whether the institutional arrangement will continue to exist understandingly overshadows efforts to develop democratic norms and processes by engaging citizens.

Having said that, however, does not mean that the institutional arrangements created by the New Public Management approach are preferable. One of the major thrusts of New Public Management is to de-bureaucratize government, making it leaner, more efficient, and less bound by red tape. That is one thing in a country with a developed bureaucratic institutional structure, it is quite another in a country that lacks such structures (Cabrero, 2000). Put simply, it does not make sense to try to de-bureaucratize something that has never been bureaucratized.

Certainly there are problems and pathologies associated with bureaucracies, but they have critical benefits as well. As Weber pointed out over a century ago, bureaucracies are a natural outgrowth of societies where authority structures are organized by the rule of law, allowing for a depersonalization of politics and fairness and consistency in the application of policy. Where the rule of law is lacking, or has been superimposed on a culture hostile to it, trying to reform a bureaucracy that has not been fully established risks simply destroying the benefits that bureaucratization can bring to a country characterized by uncertainty, inconsistency, and highly personalized politics.
CONCLUSIONS

Fostering the development of sustainable democracies is one of the key challenges facing the world today. As nation-building and democratization continues in developing countries, those countries cannot afford to neglect the potential benefits of a more inclusive, community-oriented approach to governance. A symbiotic relationship among citizens, government, and civil society is imperative for the development of stable democracies. In this article, we have reviewed some of the key barriers and obstacles which can be present in developing countries, such as external incentives, the lack of civic infrastructure and democratic culture, poverty, time pressures, and the lack of a viable institutional framework. So, what can we bring intellectually to the effort as we attempt to help these countries overcome these barriers?

First, it seems clear that developing countries need help, but the implicit and explicit incentives of that assistance need to be consistent with the desired effects. Countries and organizations that offer financial resources to help developing countries based solely on the assumptions of the New Public Management may be actually creating incentives that are hostile to democratic development. The use of market incentives may, in fact, encourage individualistic behavior and discourage the development of civic culture.

Second, whatever the intellectual framework for the assistance extended to developing countries, if it is blindly based on western ideals, traditions, and assumptions it is unlikely to work as intended. Even as we argue for the ideals such as those expressed within the framework of the New Public Service as more appropriate to fostering democratic development, we recognize that the expression of these ideals in developed democracies may be very different than in developing countries. For example, assistance programs should not be based on the assumption that a developing country already has cultural norms consistent with democratic principles. They should not assume that people’s basic needs are being met.

As the United States and other developed nations work to foster democracy, it should not be assumed that developing countries have the banking systems, communication systems, or transportation systems necessary to provide the basic structures for assuring accountability, information, and access. It cannot be assumed that expressing preferences and trusting the rules of the game will be seen as “normal” and that bribery and corruption will be seen as “evil” in the minds of people in other societies. In others words, what may work in the United States and other developed nations, based on their culture and institutional framework may look very different in a developing country. Changing cultures, norms and ways of thinking is a very slow process, and one that has to grow in the ground where it is planted, drawing its sustenance from native soil. It cannot be forced and it cannot be done quickly.

Third, efforts to aid developing countries should create accountability mechanisms focused on that nation’s citizens as opposed to making government
officials primarily accountable to the granting institution. Many developing countries have no history or institutional mechanisms for holding the government accountable to its citizens, even in some cases, to an elected legislature. Existing aid programs that substitute external accountability do nothing to foster the development of these mechanisms that are so critical to the development of sustainable and independent democratic governance systems.

Finally, there are a wide diversity of circumstances, situations, cultures, and environments in developing countries that need to be considered. The barriers to democracy in Macedonia differ from those in Chile; the obstacles in rural Mexico differ from those of Pakistan. The roots of democracy go deep into the culture and history of a country, and different environments will produce different results at different speeds. Most importantly, those countries that want to develop sustainable democracies need the developed countries of the world to understand the enormously complex challenges they face and work with them to develop goals and strategies that make sense in a particular place at a particular time.

REFERENCES


