

Editorial

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Latin America has often been the seedbed for policies that are then exported elsewhere—the World Bank's structural adjustment 'safety-nets' were, for instance, tried out initially in Bolivia (Whitehead 1995), and the early experiments in the privatisation of public services and reduction of social security provision were initiated by Pinochet in Chile from the 1980s onwards. If the region's 'dirty wars' and 'low-intensity conflict' in the 1970s and 1980s gave us the term 'disappeared' to refer to the victims of state-sponsored repression, these outrages also galvanised some of the most effective forms of popular mobilisation to be seen in the South. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa rightly won international acclaim; but Latin America too has a long history of post-conflict 'reckonings', most recently in Peru, and recent rulings in countries from Mexico to Argentina have removed the traditional immunity given to military officers held to be responsible for human rights violations.

Political debates in Latin America have also been marked by the lively involvement of intellectuals and creative writers. Even in the midst of the Salvadoran war, local think-tanks, influenced by Gramscian thinking and prompted by events unfolding in Eastern Europe at the time, were beginning to grapple with the meaning(s) and role(s) of the 'third sector' or 'civil society'—terms that are now in the mainstream development lexicon. More recently, since 2001, the World Social Forum's gatherings in Porto Alegre highlighted the city's participatory budgeting process as well as acting as a focal point for the 'Another World is Possible' global movement—known in some quarters as the '*altermundistas*',¹ in an attempt to counter the negative media portrayal of opposition to current trends as being merely 'anti-globalisation'. As if to prove the point, on 1 January 1994 the Zapatista uprising erupted in southern Mexico, timed to coincide with the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, bringing the disparate economies of Canada, Mexico, and the USA into a single trading area. Today, movements across the entire continent are joining to oppose the US goal of expanding this into the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTTA), claiming that the impact would be catastrophic for poorer countries, and for the poor in all countries, in critical areas such as food security (movements described, for instance, by Anner and Evans 2004; Huyer 2004). Indeed, this issue contains two timely pieces on this subject: an essay by **José Antonio Sanahuja Perales** on the debates surrounding the work of former World Bank Chief Economist Joseph E. Stiglitz; and an interview conducted by **Alina Rocha Menocal** with Oxfam GB's campaigns manager on the collapse of the 2003 WTO Summit in Cancún.

Despite the huge disparities in income that characterise most Latin American economies,

and the continuing discrimination against the region's indigenous peoples, Haiti is now the only country in the Western hemisphere to be ranked as 'low' in UNDP's human development index, compared with two Asian countries (Nepal and Pakistan) and 31 countries of sub-Saharan Africa listed in that category. Some Latin American countries are ranked as 'high', namely Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Uruguay, and several Caribbean island states (UNDP 2003). Of course, these rankings are a crude measure, masking very different realities for people living in those countries. However, such categorisations fuel perceptions both among the general public and within the aid industry that poverty in Latin America is somehow not as 'bad' or intractable as that experienced in other parts of the world. Even the region's many wars and armed conflicts seem to hit the headline news only when foreign tourists are kidnapped. So it is regrettable, but not entirely surprising, that when aid budgets get tight, 'middle-income' Latin America is one of the first to drop off the priority list.² The fact that the region's population is increasingly urban—Brazil alone has two of the world's mega-cities—may well be another factor influencing international aid agencies to focus their attention elsewhere.³ And while some of their staff may relish the lively and articulate political environment that characterises the region, this can also represent a challenge to agencies' conventional ways of working. My own experience, and that of colleagues in many other international NGOs, has been that although dramatic situations, whether Hurricane Mitch in Central America or anti-privatisation demonstrations in Bolivia, may focus their attention, it can be hard work to 'mainstream' a sustained interest in Latin America in agencies that do not have a special focus on the region.

Since its inception, however, *Development in Practice* has consistently sought contributions from or about Latin America, and has long been actively committed to translating to and from French, Portuguese, and Spanish.⁴ We are pleased, therefore, to present an issue focused on some of the development processes currently taking place in Latin America. Democratisation is one such question, as many countries still grapple with the various legacies of military (mis)rule, often involving gross violations of human rights. **Wanda C. Krause** looks at the role played by the organisations of Mothers of the Disappeared formed in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s (and throughout Central America in the following decade) in holding the security forces accountable for political disappearances. In so doing, they continue to represent an example of how civil society organisations both foster and shape the evolution of democratic governance. With reference to the work of CARE in Bolivia, **Antonio Rodríguez-Carmona** analyses the extent to which development NGOs encourage or impede the formation of social capital. The record is mixed, even within a single programme, and the author concludes that part of the problem lies in the rigidity of conventional project-based interventions that usually focus on one local partner, to the exclusion of relationships with other social actors. Facilitating the emergence and functioning of local networks or South–South cooperation is likely, in the long term, to lead to more sustainable outcomes. **Bill Abom** makes similar observations in his case study of a low-income urban community in Guatemala. Long-standing (and well-founded) fears related to violence and corruption within what has historically been an authoritarian state tended to prevent people from participating in any form of civic life. However, Northern-led NGOs providing services in the area reinforced this reluctance to get involved—albeit unwittingly—by fostering dependency through interventions that were external, top down, non-participatory, and not community based. A focus on collective solutions, and on the promotion of links between local communities and various government structures, might help to establish the basis for greater confidence and independent initiative. Sounding a cautionary note, however, about the presumed benefits of participatory approaches to development, **Janice Tate** looks back on her work with a small health project among indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon, and argues that culturally inappropriate

participation may in effect be used to legitimise prescriptive intervention.

Turning to the official aid sector, **Flavia Galvani** and **Stephen Morse** provide a critical analysis of UNDP's 'cost-sharing' model currently being applied in Brazil and likely to be exported elsewhere. Now a major source of funding for UNDP, this approach may have perverse consequences, as noted by the authors: for instance, the government agencies of the countries intended to benefit from its assistance in effect become 'clients' of the local UNDP office which subcontracts them, and for whose services they pay. On a quite different scale, **Bob Frame**, **Linda Te Puni**, and **Chris Wheatley** draw out useful lessons for small and larger agencies alike from the way in which NZAID, New Zealand's bilateral aid agency, went about developing a new Latin America programme that would be coherent and meaningful in terms of the region as a whole, as well as to the taxpaying public, by focusing on quality rather than on size.

Two articles on rural Mexico further illustrate the need to shape interventions around quality rather than expansion for its own sake. Proyecto Tequisquiapan is a rural workers' union in the state of Querétaro whose services to members include microfinance. Reporting on their recent in-depth study into its importance to households across a range of economic circumstances, **Ben Rogaly**, **Alfonso Castillo**, and **Martha Romero Serrano** find that its small loans are especially valued by the very poor. The project's success, sustained even during the Peso crisis of 1994–1995, is largely due to the willingness and ability of its staff to adapt their services to members' changing lifeworlds, with particular attention to the most vulnerable households. Their vision goes way beyond the technical provision of savings and loans. The authors therefore challenge current orthodoxies, promoted by the World Bank in particular, that microfinance services need to be large scale in order to be effective. **José de la Paz Hernández Girón**, **María Luisa Domínguez Hernández**, and **Julio César Jiménez Castañeda** describe their work with Mixtec craftswomen in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca. Artefacts based upon traditional Mexican crafts are potentially a source of income, but only if the producers have a good understanding of the markets in which they operate (local, national, and international) and are able to price their products appropriately. The authors undertook a detailed participatory exercise with indigenous palm-weavers, as a result of which the craftswomen have improved the quality of their products and developed a sharper commercial sense. Not only are they now better-off financially, but their self-esteem and organisational capacities have also been enhanced.

The concerns addressed here are by no means exclusive to Latin America, of course, so please do remember that we—and our contributors—always welcome feedback from readers, whether in response to articles appearing in the journal, or to suggest topics for special issues.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Miguel Pickard of CIEPAC in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico, for drawing my attention to this term.
- 2 According to a 23 October 2003 report in the *Guardian*, 'Aid cash diverted to Iraq—charities furious at ministry cutbacks', the British government is requiring major cuts in programmes in countries such as Bolivia in order to foot the bill for its involvement in Iraq.
- 3 Adrian Atkinson (2001:274) notes that 'in spite of the world having radically changed in terms of the geographic location of populations and the economic development process as a whole, urban interventions have been stubbornly maintained at the margins within the universe of development assistance'.
- 4 For instance, abstracts to articles appearing in the journal have been translated into these

languages and a comprehensive archive is posted on our website, as are selected items from our *Development in Practice Readers* series. Five titles in this series have also been published in Spanish, and two further titles are in preparation. These are available in full text on our website, along with purchasing details, at www.developmentinpractice.org.

References

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