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Forum: Social and Human Sciences (SF1)

Issue: Strengthening participatory decision making and governance with a special emphasis on South America

Student Officer: Ece Deniz Yıldırım

Position: President Chair

Introduction

Participatory decision making and governance is the active participation of the masses in processes concerning said group's governance and decisions. Active participation without external interference is vital for the operation of each democracy. While the very definition of a democracy requires the presence of participatory decision making and governance, many states issue de facto procedures that often violate this principle. Furthermore, the socio cultural stigmas that are present in a society usually become unofficial barriers on the road to fully executing this ideal.

Strong participatory decision making and governance procedures hold many advantages from both an administrative viewpoint and a public viewpoint and their absence can lead to even more problems.

During our time in the committee, we will be discussing measures to strengthen public participation in democratic processes with a special emphasis on the current democratic situation in South American countries.

Definition of Key Terms

Democracy: The United Nations defines democracy as “Democracy, and democratic governance in particular, means that people’s human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, promoted and fulfilled, allowing them to live with dignity.”

Transparency: The transparency principle is a principle in which the governing body or bodies acts in a way that is openly observable by the governed/public. It implies openness, communication, accountability and is often issued to fight or prevent corruption.

The Democracy Index: “The Democracy Index is an index compiled by the UK-based company the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) that intends to measure the state of democracy in 167 countries of which 166 are sovereign states and 165 are UN member states.”

Background Information



Democracy is the most common regime in the world. According to the Democracy Index, 167 countries out of the 192 countries in the world are democracies. And 165 countries out of the 167 democracies are UN member states. So, democracy and the proper application of it is a crucial matter for the United Nations.

Participation is a fundamental block of democracy. Specific participation activities in democracies may include; town hall meetings, opinion polls, participatory budgeting, referendum, protests, votes and citizens' juries.

Importance of participation in decision making and governance

Without the proper participation of the public in processes that determine their governance, we cannot speak of a true democracy. Strengthening of participatory decision making and governance can prove fruitful from both an administrative viewpoint and a public viewpoint. From an administrative viewpoint; when the public is fully immersed in the actions of the government and thoroughly expresses their right to decide, the government and the activities of the government gets better public support. It helps governments to operate more efficiently without facing much backlash from members of the society who feel underrepresented, especially minority groups. From the citizen's viewpoint; participation enables individuals and groups to influence major agency decisions and gives the citizen a say in important matters.

In the absence of strong participatory decision making and governance, major public dissatisfaction leads to uprisings. An important example to this is the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. The Bolivarian Revolution is a movement lead by the deceased president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez, which aims to build an inter-American coalition to implement their ideologies. The movement was born out of the claim that the government did not promote sufficient participation in governance. The movement has since taken a bloody turn and is one of the root causes of politic and social turmoil in Venezuela today. Other examples of movements born out of inefficient participatory governance are "Democracia Real Ya" in Spain and the international "Occupy" movement.

Challenges that face participation

There are several reasons why this fundamental asset of democracy is still an issue in many self-proclaimed democratic countries. From an administrative point of view, some governments tend to be against giving too much participatory opportunities to the hands of the public simply because they fear opposition. Without opposition, governments usually have a faster process of decision making and governance. This is why most countries implement "states of emergency" during urgent times that require a faster process of action. During these times, participation from the public is kept at a minimum representational point.

From a socio-cultural point of view, stigmas against certain groups of people in the society can lead to decreased participation. In many communities, certain groups of people face stigmas that alter their actions in the society. An example of this might be women and the notion that women "do not understand politics" that is still present in many societies.



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Participation requires proper information and awareness of the activities of the public and the governance and decision making processes. In many countries, those with lower socioeconomic situations have less access to proper information and education that will prove important in participation. The American Political Science Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy has found that people with higher socioeconomic status participate at higher rates than those with lower status. Furthermore, those with lower socioeconomic status and thus with a lower rate of education and awareness face a higher chance of manipulation by corrupt government officials. This manipulation and blind application of information leads to false and inefficient participation in decision making and governance, which might have even more detrimental effects than no participation.

Participatory decision making and democracy around the globe

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EUI) conducts annual reports and global democracy index markings. In the most recent Democracy Index conducted in 2017, the top 5 pioneer countries in democracy were found to be Norway, Iceland, Sweden, New Zealand and Denmark, in respective order. The bottom 5 were found to be the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Syria and North Korea. While the exact reason behind this situation cannot be told precisely, it can be attributed to the economic, and thus, social disparity between the two sets of nations.

Situation in Latin America

South America and specifically Latin America has a notorious history of political and social unrest. The current democratic situation in this part of the world seems to be worsening by the day. South American ballots hold an increasingly low number of turnouts, with the citizens often saying that they “believe elections offer a choice between two evils, and that political leaders are generally corrupt”. This loss of confidence in democracy has a detrimental effect on the governments’ efficiencies. In the Democracy Index, the only two Latin American countries who earned scores that categorized them as full democracies were Uruguay and Costa Rica; while the rest of the region is still experiencing a “deadlock in the process of democratization”. Brazil, Chile and Argentina were classified as imperfect democracies –in accordance to the recent struggles they have been facing. The undeniably most undemocratic member of the region is Venezuela.

This concerning situation in Latin America can be given to the fact that most democracies in South America are not mature. But this still does not cover the whole deal. A further obstacle to democracy in Latin America is its undeniable distinction from mature democracies in terms of economic and social inequality. In an absence of economic stability and essential spending on health and educational issues by the government, it is and will be nearly impossible to ensure complete implementation of democratic processes.



Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Norway

Undeniably the biggest role model for democracy worldwide, Norway holds the highest score in the Democracy Index. Their implementation of democracy and strong participatory decision making makes them a leading power in this subject.

Argentina

After Venezuela, Argentina is the most criticized in the region of Latin America in terms of complete application of democracy. Democracy is fairly new in Argentina –the 30th year of democracy was celebrated very recently. So, the fledgling democracy of Argentina is just being established and faces many challenges along the way.

United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)

UNDEF was created by the former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2005 as a United Nations General Trust Fund to support democratization efforts around the world. The UNDEF provides financial support to projects that promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The UNDP is the United Nations' global development network. While they are not specifically founded for the purpose of democratization, they do hold an active presence on the matter. The United Nations Development Programme provides great support for strengthening the participation of all groups in democratic processes and they hold a special emphasis on women's participation in governance and decision making.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

While there have not been any direct actions to solve this specific aspect of the issue, the UN has issued numerous resolutions on the issue of democracy which hold clauses that encompass this issue as well. One such important example of this is the resolution adopted in April 1999, which was titled "Resolution on Promotion of Democracy Adopted by Human Rights Commission". The resolution was submitted by the United States of America and got passed with zero votes against. It focuses on many implementations of the promotion of democracy and touches on the issue of strengthening participation. Another resolution passed by the UN is the March 2015 dated resolution 28/14 submitted by the delegate of Mongolia in the General Assembly, titled "Education for Democracy". The resolution contains clauses that focus on using education as a tool to widen awareness on democracy and processes. Furthermore, in 2012, the Human Rights Council yet again passed a resolution titled "Human rights, democracy and the rule of law". This resolution further reaffirmed that "democracy, development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing".



Besides passed resolutions, the UN and its organizations actively work to strengthen the participation of youth and women in decision making and governance processes, specifically by the campaigns, reports and actions of its organs UN Youth and UN Women.

Possible Solutions

There are many aspects that should be taken into consideration when looking for a solution for this topic. First of all, measures should be taken against the administrative abuse of this subject. Since most governing bodies abuse their powers and manipulate the public towards a weak participatory scale, measures that will supervise these administrative bodies must be taken. Transparency is also a big issue at hand. Transparency leads to better communication between the citizens and the administrators and leads to better and more productive participation on the citizens' side.

Another crucial thing for strong participation is awareness and proper education on the public's side. So, the solutions must include ways to raise awareness and educate the masses on the processes of democracy. These educational measures also must especially target the youth –seeing that they are the future decision makers of a society. So much information needs to be gathered for the decision making process to reach success. In this case, technology may come in handy as a mass tool of awareness and education.

Strengthening participation in decision making and governance is a part of the overall process of democratization, and democratization goes hand in hand with nationwide development. Without nationwide social and economic development, it will be hard to maintain a successful process of democratization. So, as possible solutions, development programs in LEDCs with poor democratic conditions should not be put aside.

Useful Links For Further Research

- For UNDP's coverage on the issue <http://www.undp.org/>
- UN Report on Youth Participation in Decision Making <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch10.pdf>
- UN Report on Youth Political Participation and Decision Making <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-political-participation.pdf>
- UN Report on Equal Participation of Women and Men In Decision Making Processes <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/FinalReport.pdf>
- UN Resolution 19/36 “Human rights, democracy and the rule of law” http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/RES/19/36
- For the Economist's Democracy Index <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>
- For UNESCO's coverage on the issue <http://en.unesco.org/>
- All UN Documents Database <http://www.un.org/en/documents/ods/>
- For researching your country's stance on the issue and relations to the area
 - CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
- For researching about the procedures of international law



- UN International Law <http://www.un.org/en/sections/what-we-do/uphold-international-law/index.html>
- For media coverage and recent advancements on the topic
 - BBC news <http://www.bbc.com/news>
 - CNN news <http://edition.cnn.com/>
 - Al Jazeera <http://www.aljazeera.com/>
 - New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/?WT.z_jog=1&hF=t&vS=undefined
 - The Economist <http://www.economist.com/>

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- [Participation \(Decision making\), WikiWikiUp, 19 Aug. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKo0o-Rufcs.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKo0o-Rufcs)
- [Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution, www.worldfuturefund.org/Reports/Chavez/Chavez.html.](http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Reports/Chavez/Chavez.html)
- [Arias, Oscar. “Democracy in Latin America: Successes and Challenges.” ReVista, Harvard, revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/democracy-latin-america-successes-and-challenges.](http://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/democracy-latin-america-successes-and-challenges)
- [“Uruguay is the most democratic country in Latin America.” Invest in Uruguay Uruguay XXI, www.uruguayxxi.gub.uy/invest/uruguay-is-the-most-democratic-country-in-latin-america/.](http://www.uruguayxxi.gub.uy/invest/uruguay-is-the-most-democratic-country-in-latin-america/)
- [Weyland, Kurt. “Why Latin America Is Becoming Less Democratic.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 15 July 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/why-latin-america-is-becoming-less-democratic/277803/.](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/why-latin-america-is-becoming-less-democratic/277803/)
- [“General Assembly Adopts Resolution Aimed at Promoting Peace, Democracy through Education | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” United Nations, United Nations, www.un.org/press/en/2015/ga11625.doc.htm.](http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/ga11625.doc.htm)
- [“RESOLUTION ON PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY ADOPTED BY HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” United Nations, United Nations, www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990428.HRCN937.html.](http://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990428.HRCN937.html)