Wanted! 'Strong publics' for uncertain times: Active Citizenship in Central America project.

Abstract:	This paper places the DCU led Active Citizenship in Central America project within wider theoretical discussions on the role of civil society in development. It examines the project's development and content and assesses its effectiveness using a framework based on Nancy Fraser's (1993) concept of 'weak' and 'strong' publics. It finds that the project oscillates between both these positions, and makes recommendations to help move it closer to a 'strong publics' conception. It concludes that in the current conjuncture of global crisis a 'strong publics' conception is a useful guiding principle for this and other civil society projects.

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Wanted! 'Strong publics' for uncertain times. The experience of the

Active Citizenship in Central America **project.**

Introduction

The concept of Civil Society as a crucial tool to help develop democracy and further

development emerged in aid circles in the late 1980s, in particular after the demise of

the Cold War. Numerous development agencies began to include civil society

programmes as an integrated part of their overall strategies and these met with

varying levels of success. Most development agencies were guided by an

institutionalist perspective in the framing of their civil society programmes. Free

markets and liberal democracy were seen as the essential elements to achieve

development and civil society was one of the fundamental ingredients to help achieve

this. In essence, civil society would either act as a check on the state thus improving

its efficiency or legitimacy and/or substitute the state in the provision of services,

while facilitating the implementation of structural adjustment programmes in favour

of the market.

Many within civil society itself questioned this orthodox perspective and

instead held to an alternative vision of the role of civil society. This 'alternative' view,

as Howell and Pearce (2001) articulate it comes from within the community of

activists and NGO members which criticise the present form of global capitalist

development. This group rather sees civil society "as agents in reimagining what

development is and what it ought to be according to a distinct set of

values…reclaiming civil society…as a means through which capitalism's critics and

capitalism's losers can participate in the redirecting of global change and

development" (Howell and Pearce, 2001:7). Civil society programmes therefore, as these authors note, oscillate between the first perspective, with its aim of creating, in Nancy Fraser's (1993) concept, 'weak' publics and the second perspective which would help create 'strong' publics.

This paper seeks to place a current civil society project in Central America, led by Dublin City University (DCU) into this wider theoretical context. It will examine the development of this project, *Active Citizenship in Central America*, looking firstly at the overall geopolitical and policy context out of which it emerged, before going on to examine the aims, objectives and activities involved. The paper will then examine the effectiveness of the project using a framework derived from Fraser's 'weak' and 'strong' publics concept, arguing that, like other projects previous to it, the present project oscillates between both these positions. In the current conjuncture of global financial and ideological crisis, however, it is asserted that a 'strong publics' conception should be the project's main guiding principle and should act as a guide for other such projects. The paper finishes by giving some suggestions as to how this can be achieved.

Active Citizenship in Central America: Context and Evolution

This section will examine the background to the project, first placing it within the political, social and economic context of Central America, paying particular attention to civil society in the region, and then examining the overall policy context for civil society in official Irish Aid discourse. Finally we will look at the project's own trajectory in more detail.

Since the late 1980s the three Central American nations identified in this

project - Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras - have gone through a transitional

period of democratisation accompanied by an accelerated process of regional

economic integration and a much slower 'formal' institutional integration process.

Previous to this, two of these countries - Nicaragua and El Salvador - experienced

brutal and divisive civil wars. Honduras avoided a war but nonetheless suffered great

civil stress due to its use as a base from which counter-insurgency and counter-

revolutionary activities were launched into the neighbouring two countries of El

Salvador and Nicaragua. Since the early 1990s the region has been living in relative

peace and has been experiencing a transition to democracy. All countries, however,

have weak institutions, weak democratic cultures, increasing social violence,

migration and static or increasing poverty within an overall context of profound

economic change.

The democratic transitions taking place are at different stages in each country,

but Beekart (1999) identifies two obstacles to achieving democratic consolidation

common to them all. First, on the economic level there is a high level on inequity in

income distribution and widespread poverty. Recent liberalising economic policies

have exacerbated this situation. Second, traditional sectors are still dominant, most

notably military and powerful economic groups, while political parties and other

mediating groups are weak. Nonetheless a new factor has been the huge growth in

civil society in the region, mostly in the guise of non-governmental organisations

(NGOs). These organisations, however, often have a top-down, paternalistic

leadership, with weak internal accountability, all signs of a persisting political culture

of authoritarianism and exclusion. *Active Citizenship in Central America* emerged

largely as a response to this situation as it seeks to strengthen civil society in the

region through capacity building in administrative systems, information generating

and advocacy.

Another important contextual area that needs to be taken into account is Irish

Aid policy towards civil society. This is laid out in two key documents: the *White*

Paper on Irish Aid launched in September 2006 and its *Civil Society Policy* document

published in 2008, which looks at the issue in more detail. In the White Paper, Irish

Aid emphasises the importance of civil society, both in Ireland and in developing

countries, in the delivery of aid. Civil society for Irish Aid is broad based, including

"community groups, educational institutions, women's organisation, faith-based

organisations, professional associations, trade unions, employers groups, the media

and advocacy groups" (2006:75). Nonetheless, the main civil society groups receiving

aid both within and outside Ireland are NGOs.

For Irish Aid, civil has two main roles: "appealing to and bringing pressure to

bear on, governments to respond better" and "delivering essential services to people,

where state systems are incapable of doing so" (ibid.). Citizens have "a right and a

responsibility to participate in and influence political decisions" but participation

simply goes as far as voting and "organising themselves to demand better services

from their governments" as well as demanding "more responsive and more

accountable government" (ibid:77). Civil society aids this process by articulating

needs and monitoring the performance of governments in relevant areas. Within

development activity, civil society can be involved in planning and monitoring

processes, through, for example, Policy Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), these

being participative processes designed for and demanded from national governments

receiving aid by the World Bank. By strengthening such processes Irish Aid aims "to

help build better-functioning societies" (ibid.). The latter *Civil Society Policy* (2008)

document discusses these essential points at greater length.

Irish Aid's conception of the nature and role of civil society therefore fits in to

what Howell and Pearce (2001) call 'mainstream' perspectives of civil society. In

these, such as that represented by Diamond (1999), civil society is an intermediary

phenomenon, standing between the private sphere and the state. Its role is to help

deepen and consolidate democracy, through vigilance and proposal, limiting state

power and controlling it on behalf of society through democratic political institutions.

It also helps build democracy, by stimulating political participation, educating citizens

for democracy, providing channels for group representation and articulation,

improving the workings of the political system, disseminating information etc. In this

way civil society is not anti-state but rather through its suggestions for improvement

seeks to strengthen the state and its legitimacy. Moreover, and equally importantly, in

terms of the economy, civil society should "mobilize support for (and [neutralise]

resistance to) (economic) reform policies" (ibid: 248). In sum therefore, civil society's

role is to support and improve on the existing liberal democratic political model and

market-led economic model, but not to question it.

Much of this is borne out in the direct context of Irish Aid activity in Central

America from which *Active Citizenship in Central America* emerged. The direct

antecedent to the project was previous work done by the now defunct APSO (Agency

for Personnel Services Overseas) an Irish government semi-state (i.e. state owned but

autonomous) body which sent Irish professionals to work in developing countries,

usually for a minimum of two years. *Active Citizenship* was built on work which had

at its centre a Diploma in NGO Management, delivered by three universities in the

region, one in each of the project countries, and developed in conjunction with APSO.

This diploma was originally conceived in 2001, when APSO contacted these universities to deliver the diploma to APSO partners in the three countries, aimed at raising their management capacities. The Diploma was fundamentally aimed at providing "a response to the deficits of knowledge outlined by the NGO representatives and the initial objective proposed by APSO to raise the management capacities and the sustainability of the NGOs" (Pallavicini, 2008: 9-10). In this it was conceived within a managerialist, business conception of the role and values of NGOs, and indeed it is business administration departments within the Universities which are responsible for the development and delivery of the Diplomas. Little content was directed at provoking critical examination of the concept of development or of the role of NGOs in the delivery of development in a democratic context.

A further important contextual issue is the strategic policy move on the part of Irish Aid to work with the Irish University sector. In 2007 Irish Aid embarked on a new strategy aimed at deepening the level of engagement with higher education and research institutes in Ireland. The programme's main objective and overall aims are to "promote linkages and cooperation between higher education and research institutions in countries supported by Irish Aid and in Ireland with the objectives of institutional collaboration for knowledge generation, knowledge exchange and mutual learning. The overall aim of such support is to increase the capacity of southern institutions to make an effective contribution to poverty reduction" (Irish Aid, 2007:2). DCU's involvement with the project comes within this wider Irish government policy on development cooperation.

An earlier research project developed by DCU for the Advisory Body of Irish Aid, a preliminary part of this new Irish Aid university based strategy, provided some of the evidence used to develop the aims and objectives of the project. This research

project, *Engagement with Civil Society for Poverty Reduction*, published in 2007, consisted of in-depth research aimed at finding out how Ireland's official development cooperation programme and civil society in Ireland and in the South could work together to contribute optimally to poverty reduction and sustainable development. (1). Key findings relating to the development of the programme in Central America were that civil society leaders reported a dispersion and duplication of their efforts due to the dependent relationship with donors, most of them from outside the region. While leaders of these organisations assessed the effectiveness of their programmes and projects relatively highly, they assessed their impact on national political decisions as being very weak in relation to other sectors, and they also identified the prevailing neoliberal economic model as generating greater poverty.

In the light of these findings, DCU, in coordination with IEN (*Instituto de Estudios Nicaraguenses*) of Nicaragua proposed an *Active Citizenship in Central America* project to Irish Aid, in May 2005, which consisted of three pillars:

1. Improve relations within civil society by establishing collaboration at regional level, developing common positions, and elaborating policies based on those in order to strengthen and develop civil society capacity;

2. Foster a dialogue between political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs) particularly at the municipal level, so as to develop better relations between state officials and CSOs, promoting co-operation to achieve common aims;

3. Develop relationships of greater equality between donors and CSOs, with the object of fostering more sustainable and mutually satisfactory relationships.

The majority of activities were to be based on workshops, seminars, and training events. This proposal gained a grant from Irish Aid to employ a person to research and develop a formal proposal over a six-month period from Jan to June 2006, which was further extended for another year before receiving three year funding in 2007.

Active Citizenship in Central America - 2007-2010

On the basis of these experiences DCU made two successful project applications to Irish Aid's civil society fund, representing two components of what is in effect a single *Active Citizenship in Central America* project. The first component, *Active Citizenship in Central America*: Research and Advocacy Component, has as its main aims and objectives "to support Central American civil society, on a national and regional basis, in influencing public policy in the region in favour of the poor, by facilitating the strengthening and deepening of civil society participation in policy making processes through evidence-based advocacy" (Cannon, 2007a). This would be achieved by "the construction of effective, coherent civil society pro-poor policy proposals…through research based activities led by universities" and by positively influencing "the adoption of these pro-poor policy measures by decision-makers" through advocacy and network building on a national and regional basis (ibid).

This would be achieved through building greater capacity on information gathering, policy formation and policy advocacy amongst civil society organisations on key issues affecting the region. Activities would involve conducting research on a local, national and regional level, carrying out advocacy programmes based on research results, and holding series of workshops, conferences, and seminars in both Central America and Europe encouraging networking on a national, regional and international basis. Research results would also be published in book and article form

and circulated nationally, regionally and internationally. To date activities held have

been:

- A regional workshop for partners in León, Nicaragua on October, 2007 to
  introduce the component to the partners and seek their participation in the
  creation of the necessary conditions for its further development.

- A meeting of the newly appointed Project Regional Committee in El Salvador
  January, 2008 to establish the financial and operative functioning of the
  project component.

- A call for research and advocacy proposals disseminated mostly through Irish
  Aid networks in each of the countries involved in the project (March-April
  2008).

- Selection of eight proposals out of a total of 27, two each in Honduras and
  Nicaragua, three in El Salvador and one regional (see appendix 1).

The second component, *Active Citizenship in Central America: Building Capacities*,

involves the continuation of the existing NGO diploma and the development of a new

Municipalities management diploma, with a small research element. It aims to

concentrate resources on the poorest areas of each country, further encourage

NGO/University collaboration, on a national and regional basis, helping to develop

capacity in NGOs and local government. The overall aim of this component of the

project, therefore, is to achieve greater capacity on leadership, information gathering,

policy formation and policy advocacy amongst civil society organisations and in local

government on key issues affecting participating local municipalities. Activities are to

update existing diploma and develop a new municipal diploma, provide scholarships

to CSOs and local government officers and representatives for these diplomas, define

a research and advocacy agenda, carry out research and advocacy projects, and hold a

variety of events to encourage networking and disseminate findings and exchange

ideas and experiences and to publish findings for circulation.

The evolution of this component during its initial year and a half was

characterised by efforts to change the direction of existing diploma towards a multi-

disciplinary and local development ethos, moving away from the overt business

orientation of existing courses. Efforts in this direction were concentrated on carrying

out a consultancy to look at these issues, which took place between February and

September 2008. While a number of activities took place and two reports were

submitted by the consultant these met resistance from existing partners in the

universities involved, causing difficulties in the internal working of the project. There

was a feeling that the consultancy was conceived and framed with little heed to

previous processes and procedures built up by project partners since the Diploma's

inception five years previously. The result of this process has been the amalgamation

of both components of the project into one governing structure and the replacement of

departments and universities running the courses in two of the cases.

Contrasting perspectives: 'weak' and 'strong' publics

As discussed earlier, Irish Aid's approach to civil society comes within what Howell

and Pearce (2001) term 'mainstream' perspectives on civil society involvement with

development. Howell and Pearce contrast this with what they call 'alternative'

perspectives of civil society. This perspective emphasises the role of civil society as

not just a reflection of the actual constellation of forces of society but also as the

realm in which the status quo can be contested and new forms of society imagined

and struggled for. Howell and Pearce identify this perspective particularly with the

work of Nancy Fraser (1993) and her conception of 'weak' and 'strong' publics.

In this conception, Fraser argues that for civil society to truly have impact on public

policy four requirements must be satisfied. First, political intervention is needed to

achieve socio-economic equality because without this some sectors of civil society

will be more privileged than others in public policy deliberations. Second, the

separation of a number of issues – such as the 'family' - as 'private' and thus beyond

the realm of public discussion and concern, and ultimately state action, impedes full

and free discussion required for a properly functioning public sphere. Third, the

rejection of such notions, leads Fraser to identify a multiplicity of publics, based for

example on gender, sexuality and ethnicity, rather a unitary 'public sphere' or in our

case civil society. Fourth, a sharp separation of state and civil society mitigates

against a fully functioning public sphere, and that rather "some sort of

interimbrication of these institutions is needed" (ibid:133).

Fraser refers in particular to the conception of civil society, very common in

development theory, as "the informally mobilized body of non-governmental

discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state" (ibid:134). Liberal

conceptions of civil society thus promote what Fraser calls "*weak publics,* publics

whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not

also encompass decision making" (ibid.). Indeed liberal theory goes further by

claiming that if civil society crossed from discursive authority to decision making,

this would threaten its autonomy "for then the public would effectively become the

state, and the possibility of a critical discursive check on the state would be lost"

(ibid.). To contest this, however, Fraser cites the case of 'parliament', as a public

sphere *within* the state. It is therefore an example of *strong publics* as its discourse

"encompasses both opinion formation and decision making" (ibid). Parliament blurs

the line between state and civil society as it both deliberates and legislates. "Opinion"

can be translated into authoritative decisions by it that then can become law.

There are questions, of course, around the optimum articulation of these two

'publics', on a local, national and supra-national level and, indeed, the articulation of

the public spheres between these different geographical levels, and Fraser admits to

being unable to answer these questions. She draws, however, one salient conclusion:

"any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between

(associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-

management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to

a democratic and egalitarian society" (ibid:136). Instead, what Fraser calls a "post-

bourgeois conception" is needed, one which brings the role of civil society beyond

that of mere opinion formation and towards authoritative decision making. This would

have both strong and weak publics and hybrid forms of the two, and would allow us

to seek a variety of relations between both hence developing democracy beyond its

actually existing state.

Concluding her essay, Fraser puts forward four tasks for critical theory of

actually existing democracy. These are to: 1) identify and unmask how social

inequality taints deliberation in current democracy; 2) show how the different publics

are affected by inequality in terms of power relations; 3) expose the limits of the

'private' in formulating and dealing with problems in society; and 4) "show how the

overly weak character of some public spheres in late-capitalist societies denudes

'public opinion' of practical force" (ibid:137). For the purposes of this paper

therefore, these four tasks can be transformed into a framework to test if a

development project aimed at strengthening civil society is working towards the

creation of strong publics. In essence four questions based on these 'tasks' could be

asked:

1. Does the project confront social inequality and how?

2. Does the project confront power relations between the different publics and
   how?

3. Does the project show the limits of the private in its attempts to deal with
   social problems?

4. Does the project aspire to give 'public opinion' practical force?

The next section will use this framework to evaluate the project's progress in

strengthening civil society in Central America from Fraser's 'weak' and 'strong'

publics conception.

Active Citizenship in Central America: Towards 'strong' publics?

In this section we will evaluate each the project in each of the four areas of the

framework: social inequality, power relations between the different publics,

private/public dichotomy and state/civil society separation.

Active Citizenship in Central America and Social Inequality

The first question raised as we have seen, was: *Does the project confront social*

inequality and how? Fraser (2003) in later writings identified two conditions for

parity of participation, the first of which we will only refer to here, the second being

more suitable for the next question. The first condition, an *objective condition*,

"precludes forms and levels of economic dependence and inequality that impede

parity of participation" (2003:36). This includes "social arrangements that

institutionalize deprivation, exploitation, and gross disparities in wealth, income, and leisure time, thereby denying some people the means and opportunities to interact with other peers" (ibid.). It is taken that this question's purpose therefore is to ask if the project seeks to make "visible the ways in which social inequality taints deliberation" (1993:137) in Central America. This can be taken to mean if the project seeks to reveal social inequality and/or its negative effects on access to decision-making in the region.

The main focus for both components of the project is on poverty. The *Research and Advocacy* component aims to influence "public policy in the region in favour of the poor" by researching and constructing "coherent civil society pro-poor policy proposals based on evidence of key issues affecting the poor" and encouraging their adoption by policy makers through advocacy (Cannon, 2007:9). This is done primarily through a restricted call for research proposals from mostly Irish Aid associated NGOs and universities. The document circulated to NGOs and universities calling for research proposals, however, only lists poverty as a sub-theme but rather calls for papers within a greater question of: "How Central American Civil Society can promote an active citizenship which will confront the challenges of globalization?" Within this overarching theme applications are sought in such areas as regional integration, poverty, Free Trade Agreements, migration and under sub-themes of social movements, construction of a Central American citizenship, and international cooperation. Rarely is poverty or inequality mentioned.(2).

Similarly, the *Building Capacities* component aims to "focus more accurately on the structural impediments obstructing poverty alleviation", by providing training to both NGO personnel and local government representatives and personnel who can then make joint "pro-poor" policy recommendations arrived at through research

activities (Cannon, 2007a:7). Yet the ability of the participants involved to speak for

the poor is taken for granted, and little in the proposed content of the diplomas, briefly

reviewed here, provides them with sufficient knowledge to enable them to do so.

Rather its largely technical content is more geared to providing functionaries capable

of constructing and administering development projects within their organisations,

rather than critically reviewing the causes of poverty, never mind inequality. There is

thus, despite declared intentions in the aims and objectives of the project, little

evidence of a concerted effort to "confront social inequality" in its activities. This is

rather assumed as those involved are civil society organisations whose ostensible

mission is to reduce and eradicate poverty.

Active Citizenship in Central America and Power Relations

The second question was: *Does the project confront power relations between the*

different publics and how? Here Fraser refers to the second condition of the two

referred to above, the *intersubjective condition* of participatory parity, which

"precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of

people and the qualities associated with them" (2003:36). This can be taken to ask,

following Fraser, if the project aims to reveal the unequal power relations between the

different publics in Central America, such as women, indigenous and ethnic groups,

sexual minorities, people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and if it seeks to

redress that by providing these publics with spaces to "withdraw and regroup" as well

as prepare for "agitational activities directed towards wider publics" (1993:124).

        Irish Aid as the funder of the project has four cross-cutting themes which must

be incorporated into project applications. These themes are gender, human rights, the

environment and HIV/AIDS. With the project under study a particular issue at pre-

approval stage was gender balance on the various committees, particularly in the

regional committee of the research component. Despite attempts this gender balance

was not achieved in the Regional committee, although it was achieved in the national

committees. Little effort was made to seek representation of women's groups or of

those of ethnic minorities, sexual minorities or of other 'different publics' referred to

by Fraser on these committees, although neither was this required by the funder. A

mechanism used to ensure representation of gender issues, and that of the other cross-

cutting themes, was to place a requirement on fund applicants to indicate that their

project impacted on at least one of the four cross-cutting requirements. Applicants,

however, were not required to show in what way it impacted on them.

　　　As it turned out, of the eight projects funded in the first round of project

applications, three had a gender theme, one looking at migrant women on a regional

basis, one at gender images and their effect on the young in El Salvador, and another

on rural women in the same country. Other proposals were on working with migrants;

people with disabilities in the work force in Nicaragua; on the effect of

biocombustibles on the price of food in Honduras; on the cost of medicines in El

Salvador, and on the impact of international cooperation in Honduras, all issues of

importance affecting the poor. Hence while there were very weak mechanisms to

ensure the representation of 'different publics' in the research component of the

project, projects accepted did have relevance to a number of 'different publics'

(women, migrants, young people, disabled people) and to the poor in general (See

appendix 1).

　　　Another element of this component of the project was the provision of funding

to hold public events on topics of importance in the participating countries, in order to

open up spaces for discussion for civil society on these topics. Despite funding being

available, however, few activities took place in the first year.

The Capacities component of the project was subject to the same requirements

with respect to the funder's cross-cutting themes. With respect to gender this was

acknowledged through including the subject in the curriculum of the Diploma in NGO

management. Committee membership was not subject to gender requirements, nor

were other 'publics' provided with such facilities, nor space in the curriculum. As this

Diploma and the further planned addition of a diploma on administration for local

government in 2009, this was the extent of opening up of this component to the

project to 'different publics'.

In conclusion, while little space was provided in the governance mechanisms

for 'different publics', through the research component, various of these publics were

provided with space, and in the capacities building component, gender was covered as

a teaching subject. The extent to which this gives voice and space to these different

publics, however, remains to be seen. Furthermore, the submission of a number of

gender based projects may reflect the international donor communities' and local

NGO's concern with this issue rather than as a result of particular efforts on the part

of the project to solicit such projects.

Active Citizenship in Central America **and the Private/Public dichotomy in civil society**

The third question was: *Does the project show the limits of the private in its attempts*

to deal with social problems? The question here would be, as Fraser puts it, if the

project attempts to "expose ways in which the labelling of some issues and interests as

'private' limit the range of problems, and of approaches to problems, that can be

widely contested" in Central America (ibid.). As Fraser writes in her essay on

Habermas and gender "…in classical capitalism the (official) economy is not all-

powerful but is, rather, in some significant measure inscribed with and subject to the

norms and meanings of everyday life" (1989a:128). Hence activities that are

normally associated with the private, such as child-rearing for example, have in fact

impacts on the public, both in terms of the economy and in terms of the state, and

vice-versa. The division between what is 'public' and what is 'private' therefore is

open to interrogation.

The Active Citizenship project in general does little to challenge or interrogate

accepted divisions between what is deemed 'private' and what is deemed 'public'.

Certainly in terms of gender, within conservative Central American societies, when

there is discussion it is mostly in terms of gender aspects of international cooperation,

with the agenda being set by international organisations. In this context, as we have

seen above, Irish Aid subscribes to the 'mainstream' notion of civil society being

outside the realm of the family. Hence, it can be said that in general there is little

appetite for probing the private/public dichotomy to any great extent and this is

reflected in the project content.

Active Citizenship in Central America and 'deliberative practices'

The final question was: *Does the project aspire to give 'public opinion' practical

force?* Fraser does not positively identify what would constitute 'strong publics'

though she does mention in passing "self-managing institutions" […] where "internal

institutional public spheres could be arenas both of opinion formation *and decision

making*" (my italics) (1993:135). Hence in answering this question it can be asked if

such deliberative practices are being encouraged or instituted in the project under

study. David Held in his *Models of Democracy* (2006) outlines a number of

'institutions of deliberative democracy' such as citizens' juries, deliberative polls and

deliberative days, e-polls and fora, and referenda amongst many others (pp.246-252).

This point is of fundamental importance to the project's content. Within the project's own governance structures Central American civil society is provided with opinion and decision-making powers. The vast majority of committee members in both components of the project are from both civil society organisations and universities in the region. These committees not only decide on how the project will be governed but also, in the research component, are deeply involved in the selection and approval of projects. DCU sits on both committees as an ordinary member. Civil society organisations are the main recipients of capacity building diplomas, and through research surveys have had input into content.

Furthermore, as seen in the aims and objectives of both components outlined above, one of the basic premises behind the project is to provide civil society with the wherewithal to construct pro-poor policy proposals and advocate for their adoption with policy makers. Hence the objective is not only to provide opinion, but to agitate so that such opinion be acted upon, be translated into policy, either wholly or partially. As such the project aims to facilitate a 'decision making' dimension to civil society, in the limited sense of seeking policy makers' approval of civil society proposals, which are more substantiated due to information gained through research and to the higher capacity within civil society to put the case due to capacity building provisions, such as the diploma.

The project, however, cannot be said to have advanced much in this regard. Firstly, it is early days in terms of research projects as few of those funded until the time of writing have been completed. As the advocacy element will be based on results of such research, any attempts at placing themes on the public agenda are not expected until after findings are published. Moreover, as discussed earlier, despite

there being funds available to hold public events on issues of importance within each

national jurisdiction, there has been little take up of these funds. In the capacities

component, the existing diploma concentrates more on providing technical know-how

to deal with existing structures within NGOs rather than developing critical faculties

in students. This component provides little space for discussion or debate on existing

theories and structures with regard to development or democracy in society in general

and in their own organisations in particular. Discussing more deliberative democratic

structures therefore has not been placed on the agenda so far.

Conclusions: Active Citizenship in Central America - The way forward

Active Citizenship in Central America has a number of characteristics and elements

which can contribute to the creation of 'strong publics' and hence the advancement of

an 'alternative' type of civil society in Central America. First, the project is by and

large self-governing with civil society members and university representatives from

each of the three project countries involved in its decision making structures. Second,

the research component facilitates civil society in the three countries, or at least that

part funded by Irish Aid, to identify issues of importance within their societies and the

region and to generate knowledge on those issues through research. This not only

provides it with this knowledge, but also builds its capacity in generating such

knowledge, and eventually designing policies on these issues based on it.

Furthermore, the project provides a framework from which civil society and

universities can create and widen public spheres, to "withdraw and regroup" and

create 'agitational" activities directed at policy makers and the wider public. Finally,

the possibility of a further diploma for local government representatives and

personnel opens up a range of opportunities in terms of widening spaces for civil

society within local authorities, including greater involvement in decision-making

powers. All of these characteristics contribute in a positive way to the promotion of a

culture of deliberation in decision-making processes.

The project needs to take advantage of these possibilities and so positively

contribute to the creation of 'strong publics' in the Fraserian sense within their

communities, nations and in the region in general. First, it needs to direct its activities

more towards the eradication of inequality and not just poverty, by recognising the

centrality of inequality in the perpetuation of undemocratic practices within Central

American polities. Evidence through research must be directed towards revealing the

existence of inequality in, and its impact on Central American societies. Similarly, the

recognition of inequality of access to the public sphere of the different publics

identified by Fraser is necessary within the project. This could be achieved by

positively encouraging participation of these publics, such as women, ethnic and

sexual minorities, people with HIV/AIDS, migrants and other groups, in project

activities by identifying their representative organisations and inviting and facilitating

their participation. More visibility could be given to the private/public dichotomy in

civil society by the project, by raising the issue through specifically organised forum

and through positively encouraging research and advocacy on these issues, inviting

gender focussed organisations, for example, to look at it in more detail.

In terms of deliberative practices, more civil society involvement in both

components could be encouraged by unifying both committees, which has been

achieved, and encouraging more civil society involvement at national level. The

capacities component needs to broaden its reach within the universities to involve

departments which would have a more critical viewpoint on current theory and

practice in development and democracy. Curricula needs to be broadened also to include discursive modules on democracy, development and the role of civil society within both of these theories, encouraging critique and discussion of existing paradigms and positively evaluating other more deliberative paradigms. This to an extent is being achieved in recent changes within the project.

Public spheres need to be created as much within universities as without to achieve a more just society. The project hence needs to make more use of funding available for public events to discuss relevant issues, such as round table discussions, seminars, public meetings etc to broaden that discussion beyond the confines of the universities and NGOs involved. In this, as in other activities, marginalised 'publics' should be specifically targeted — and eventually incorporated into governance structures. This, however, is limited to an extent in that funders insist that only Irish Aid funded organisations be involved.

Finally, in general this study shows that Fraser's various writings can offer an instructive and incisive framework with which to design and evaluate civil society initiatives in international development. Fraser's theories on 'weak' and 'strong' publics offer a radical alternative to mainstream liberal democratic theories providing international development practitioners with strong theoretical guidance in the design of these projects. This is of invaluable importance in the present international conjuncture, not just for civil society in the developing world but also globally, as governments and policy makers search desperately for alternatives to failed neoliberal policies on the economic front and voters turn away from established democratic parties. What Fraser offers is direction on how civil society can take a more proactive role in these discussions. More importantly, however, the current conjuncture is not just experiencing a financial crisis, but a crisis in the entire post-Cold War settlement,

that is the self-proclaimed triumph of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy,

which has underpinned development practice over the last twenty five years or so.

Fraser's 'strong publics' and 'weak publics' concept therefore offers the development

community pointers on ways in which civil society can contribute to a way out of this

impasse, to a more just and equitable society and economy based on sound and

thorough democratic principles.

Notes

(1) Papers relating to this research are available at: http://www.dcu.ie/~cis/research/project-details.php?ProjectID=4

(2) See Ciudadanía Activa en Centroamérica, 2008.

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Appendix 1: Projects funded by research fund in first year of operation of Project, 2007-2008.

COUNTRY	TITLE	ORGANISATION
EL SALVADOR	Characterisation of Pharmaceutical sector in El Salvador.	ASPS
	Contributing to the construction of women's citizenship in El Salvador.	IMU
	Reproduction of gendered images by young Salvadorans resulting in a higher disposition to violence.	Centro de Investigaciones en Ciencias y Humanidades - CICH Asociación Bienestar Yek Ineme
HONDURAS	Agro fuels and its impact on right to food in Honduras.	FIAN
	Analysis of Impact of International Cooperation in Honduras 1990-2008.	Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras, FOSDEH
REGIONAL	Women migrant social networks in Central America.	Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano
NICARAGUA	Human Rights of migrants in Nicaragua	Centro Jesuita de Migrantes –UCA
	Needs of disabled people to achieve social and work integration.	Fundación SOLIDEZ PROCOMIN – UNAN-MGA