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Leadership and Citizenship in the Chilean Civil Society

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Introduction

This is the presentation of the Chilean delegation. It includes the main findings of the articles prepared by Javiera Gómez (Education Matter of All), Stephan Schubert (Reality and Proposals for Sustained Development in Chile), Luis Marchant (Education and Human Rights), and Nicolas Pavéz (Inequality in the Internet).

In order to work upon a common thread we analyze how civil society exists, evolves and participates in Chile today . We share the belief that civil society is a concept with as many definitions as those who make part of it.

As young Chilean students,we understand by civil society those groups, organizations and movements freely formed by citizens to advance public or common good. Also known as "third sector" organizations they include all voluntary groups independent of the government, political parties and the business sector. It includes indigenous community groups, cooperatives, nongovernmental organizations, religious societies and church organizations, professional organizations, philanthropic institutions, foundations and not-for-profit corporations, among others.

In our opinion, civil society and its organizations emerge to give representation, identity, and possibilities of participation for those for whom being mere citizen is not enough and that feel they are not

well represented in their aims to contribute to social welfare and public policies.

This feeling may be attributed to various factors including, among them the phenomenon of globalization and multiculturalism and the fact that political parties, particularly in Latin America, have suffered a deep decay and they do no longer play a mediator role among those who they represent and the aims and needs of the people.

From an academic point of view we share the concept of civil society, used by professor Felipe Viveros, who says : “civil society can be understood as a group of individuals, activities and expressions that are displayed in society in a somehow independent way of the State and the globalizing instances of collective life; we are talking about activities made by individuals, families, associations and communities, unions, business, and organizations that do not have a direct dependence from political power, although they can relate to it. As such, the activities developed by civil society can only be considered as cultural, social, economical, religious, etc, only if they are not under the direct tuition or the responsibility of the State. “¹

¹ VIVEROS Felipe, “La Participación de la Sociedad Civil en acciones de interés público”, Santiago, Chile, 1998.

Civil Society in Chile

The decade of the sixties was one of deep social change in Chile. By this period, peasant's unions and the cooperative movement emerged and local organizations in poor urban neighborhoods were created. These organizations were a result of an increasing social mobilization, reform initiatives from the State, Church influence, and the presence of multiple political parties².

Later, in the seventies, in Chile as in many other Latin American countries, we lived under a military regime for 1973 to 1990 a fact which greatly affected the development of civil society.

Since the 1990's, civil society organizations have been revitalized and several new social actors have emerged in this arena. Although much is still to be done nowadays civil society organizations are looking for renewed support in order to truly represent individuals and become part of the decision – making processes.

Nonetheless this overall process has not been as fast as it should have been. In fact in the Chilean society, it has been a very slow process due to the following factors:

- **Polarization:** Chile is a highly polarized society when it comes to the moment of adopting positions and to standpoints on specific

issues. Historically the country has organized and thinks on the bases of the the existence of two opposite poles, wether it is in politics or in any other aspects of social and economic life.

Chileans tend to take party for one of the only two standpoints and there is seldom place or room for other options. Beacause of this, expressions for diversity or multiculturalism has little or no space in this scenario.

- **Eskepticism of the population towards organizations that do not belong either to the public nor the private sector:** this eskepticism exists because of a generalized lack of knowledge or information on civil society itself and the aims, motivations and activities of civil organizations in the country.
- **Poor teaching :** Civic education is bearily taught, including the rights and obligations of citizen participation. The responsibility for providing education for citizen participation is undertaken by schools being the problem that they do not prepare students to fulfill their duties as informed citizens neither do they teach that civil organizations are also places where they can become aware of their rights and obligations. As such citizen participation is seldom encouraged at schools from the primary levels of the school system.

² Extract from www.civicus.org, search: country profile Chile.

- **Existence of a dynamic fear to conflict:** Our society has been characterized by the lack of debate. Even though there exists opposite standpoints of political, cultural and social issues little or no debate has been developed on them and it always end up in a neutral position in order to avoid confrontation.

This may be clearly seen in a certain national incapacity to promote informed dialogue among people and to examine issues from different approaches. This characterizes both citizens and the organizations, and due to it little improvement is made on the necessary conditions to improve and develop public dialogue and prepare informed citizens.

- **Individuals are mostly consumers and the more they consume the less they participate :** Citizen participation has, to a great extent, been replaced by mass consumption. By consuming goods individuals can fulfill their need of identification and by this means they get what they need to become part of a social stereotype.

Effects of the Chilean Civil Society Situation on Specific Issues

From this very general perspective, we will now examine specific issues dealing mainly with education, sustainable development and technology.

In the educational issue, every country in the region faces similar challenges: they must ensure quality education for all, improve equity, strengthen and improve school management and open the educational system to the demands of society. Moreover, schools should be able to prepare students for a competitive and globalized world and incorporate new technologies to teaching and learning

For this to happen participation of all actors is crucial. Schools can become a good ally in improving education for citizen participation and making teachers accountable for this. Civil society can be a key actor in the task of improving the analytical and managerial capacities of teachers and promote the exchange of information, experience and competences among society as a whole and the school system as such.

Among the arguments to defend civil society in educational reform and school improvement, there is, what seem to be comparative advantages of, for example, NGOs, the churches, businessmen, parents, the media. Such advantages are related with areas in which this participation could bring greater benefits to education and among them, we can mention the following potential contributions

i) Capacity and potential to mobilize local resources, where private actors and local communities have proved to be a good ally when complementing the effort of the State to achieve a good

school performance. Complemented with policies to strengthen school autonomy, these actors can play an important role if working in the poorer schools and with those students with worst achievement.

ii) Capacity to link education and work and incorporate the use of new technologies, the actors from the business world, foundations, independent academic centres and NGOs have proved to be key at the time of designing policies and executing programs based on the skills employers want and incorporating them to the educational system. There are incipient efforts from which a lot is expected in the region. As an example we can mention various educational sites in the web, promoted by private foundations, the use of technologies in primary education, and the national efforts to incorporate computer science in school.

iii) Experiencing and providing different approaches for education, the actors of the civil society have more freedom for experimenting methodologies that contribute to the improvement of the quality and equity of the public school system. Either by managing schools directly or associating with governments for the execution of projects, civil society organization can establish school networks to work under a same organization and pedagogical approaches. They have also promoted the exchange of experience and the

participation of parents in education management as a successful mean to foster educational changes

iv) *Promotion of educational innovation*, enterprises through their foundations, churches, NGOs, and independent academic centres are experts in the promotion of the educational innovation. They manage concepts and instruments that help to improve the internal organization of schools and introduces new strategies to renew teaching and learning . “Fundación Arauco” in Chile is a clear example of this type of contribution

v) *Promotion of reforms and support to citizenship participation*, civil society organizations have demonstrated a capacity to influence on educational policy and promote public campaigns in favor of reforms. In Chile, although not as much as in more developed societies, these actors have played an important role in the identification of policy options and project execution.

We bet and argue in favor of the capacities and potencial of these actors in educational reform processes and policy improvement. Education, it must not be forgotten is a matter of all and efforts should be made by the entire society to provide students with good basic and secondary education. Involvement not only of the governments but that of the business sector the churches, social movements, parents and other actors should be seeked in order to succeed in making education a tool for development.

Contribution of society as a whole comes through the fundamental participation of individuals in policy and decision-making as well as in public debate. This is accomplished by organizations trying to generate a true democratic dynamics. To achieve this, a change in the minds of individuals is needed, consciousness raising towards becoming autonomous beings, gifted with inalienable rights. To obtain this, a strong investment is needed in time and resources in the educational system, as well as integral teaching of the human rights, in a very serious and systematic way, because they represent the base of the survival of the future democratic life.

Let us remember that Latin American societies, and particularly Chile, have gone through deep changes in the past decades, not only in the political arena but also in the economic and cultural dimensions. These changes have been the source of very serious social conflicts. The way in which each country of the region has faced this matters has been diverse. Today once it has been proved that solutions to resolve social tensions have become relevant, and that more than once weak democracies in the region have been threatened, an evergrowing consciousness raising on respect for human rights, is needed and such consciousness can only be reached with a serious reform of the educational systems.

So, we are not talking about easy or short-term changes, on the contrary, we understand that education requires time to see some results. This long term process has to assume from the beginning, that an authentic human rights education goes far beyond the study of texts of international conventions, or decalogues of rights; but it is the true establishment of a transversal objective of school curricula that will serve as orientation to build the school activity we want. We do not want just informed students, but persons with a critical consciousness and creative spirit

Educational systems are expected to prepare modern and informed citizens able to participate in democracy building and able to fulfill the demands of the labor market.

This requires making policies that will hold institutions and central authorities accountable to the people as much as it requires individuals and groups to participate in the decision making process of the political, social and cultural life. Only with an active and critical citizenship enables us to talk of healthy democracies and only these can guarantee respect for human rights.

In Chile's particular case educational changes are necessary to achieve improved knowledge on civil and human rights.

The world is changing at an overwhelming speed. As an example we can mention that Christopher Columbus took several months to get to

what later would be known as America. Today, with just a few hours you can travel from one continent to another. Globalization and the technologies, have also affected the participation of individuals in civil society. For instance, now with the new technologies, a person that was far from decision-making, can now participate in different ways.

Technological changes puts the world in front of our eyes. Technology transforms the way in which we know and interpret the world as well as the ways in which we relate with each other. Whatever happens today in Tumbuktu, Saskatoon, Anillaco or Cachiyuyo affects us directly.

For this reason, access to technology has become a first order need, so to be inserted in our community. The ones that do not have these tools, are slowly becoming a little hermit that only knows and understands his square meter, and does not speak or comprehend this new language.

Unlikely, this is not only the reality of some portions of the ones who live in Chile, but also of the rest of the world.

This is what has been called "digital divide", a social division in between those who have and those who do not have access to global communication.

Internet generates inequality together with all the advantages that it provides. With a very simple example we can graphic the

inequalities generated by the web : “if you have a universe of 10 students in a class with 10 computers with access to internet, and for some strange reason (that I am sure, these children will not understand) two out of ten children own 9,3 of the ten computers in the class. The other 8 students will have to think up a way to share less than a computer. Confronted to this scenario we have the impression that these eight students will not have access to live the technological change while the other two will separate themselves from the rest of their classmates, at unimaginable levels. If there is no action taken, we would likely return to the traditional society that existed 60 years away from now ; where only a small group had access to education and information.

This inequality has only contributed to increase the gap between the rich and the poor. But, in this scenario, new technologies can become a historic opportunity to produce precisely the opposite.

Nowadays you can see this reflected in the life of a group of children who live in a lost village in Africa, or South America, where even though if we could improve their living conditions , if they have no access to new technologies, they would have minimal possibilities of coming forth. On the contrary, with a proper access to technologies, they would have the world in front of their eyes and, for instance, they would be able to visit the Louvre Museum or check the news at

the time they occur, having access to the same information that available in developed societies.

Thus, in front of us we have a unique possibility of decrease social inequities.

It is important to remark that everything we have said about access to technology, are just tools for social transformation, which have to be complemented with the fulfillment of other basic needs which have not been yet universalized in most of the countries. So, basic needs and technological development must be pushed forward in a parallel way, or on the contrary, the satisfaction of just one of them, can create a gap that is and will be hard to solve.

We have referred to civil society in Chile, and its participation in different aspects of our daily life. Sustainable development is also affected by the lack of participation of Chilean civil society.

Civil society should have a protagonic role on issues of sustainable development insofar its development involves all of us as a society.

We can dictate numerous rules, create entities dedicated to development, and plan many projects that promote sustained development. But, civil society does not participate nor is informed, nothing will be accomplished. It is people that execute projects and it is people who actually put written words into practice. Environmental action is basically a public function. But it also is a social matter that

requires the commitment and participation of everyone, including the private sector, in such a way that the overall society is willing to assume the costs implied in implementing politics and policies.

This also means a continual process of improving the ability of the country to carry out its plans. We speak of “partnerships” between public and private sectors required in modern administration that desires to be efficient. For that to occur we must look for methodologies and instruments of greater diversification, where creation, innovation, and association make it possible to combine goals for social well being and economic efficiency both of them fundamental for sustained environmental development.

Sustainable development is the final remain in time of economic development due to the fact that goods for further economic development need to be looked after in order to ensure their availability in the future.. To accomplish this goal, society has to establish development plans, long lasting in time, and only then, begin to work. This is not an easy decision, because it logically implies a high cost and an active intervention of the civil society. On the contrary, those projects would not take place.

In the Chilean case, there are two reasons which in our opinion have been crucial in the present status of sustainable development and objectives which have been hard to reach. First, we think there is a

lack of political will and, secondly there is lack of information and organization of civil society.

The lack of political will, is due to the fact that voters do not appreciate the value of sustainable development projects, because most of the time they are long term projects. Because of this, politicians do not include them in their proposals, nor promote them, because of the long period of time that is required to see their results. But, if an informed and organized civil society existed and sustainable development projects were demanded, politicians would know that those projects are a concern to society, and they would commit with them.

In Chile as in many other Latin American countries, there is a passiveness about a search and demand of sustainable development projects due to excessive centralism that attempts against freedom of action by civil society. Most of the time, people feel that their needs can only be fulfilled, if the central government determines it so. That generates a frustration that leads individuals to self-limitation in their aspirations of participation in the decision making process. That way, centralism is an obstacle for sustainable development.

According to Gabriel Salazar³, in Chile there are positioning factors that allows to see sparks of action coming from civil society for later execution. At the same time there are civic molecules upon

which bases and energy enables to speak about a civil society involved in social issues. The feasibility of this idea, depends on how to operate with those factors these molecules.

Among these positioning factors we can quote:

- a) The notorious decrease of the civil and military political classes prestige
- b) The State centralism
- c) A model unable to overcome poverty, unemployment, bad income distribution, drug adiction, urban violence.

Those same positioning factors, have been the ones which allow the creation of civic molecules of alternative actions, such as:

- 1) Public communities spaces have arised, that promotes the development of new kinds of citizenship, specially among between women from villages.
- 2) The transformation of political apathy in a critical and andsystematic conscience, revealed not only in the appearance of an alternative speech, but also in the huge approval of critical proffesional literature.
- 3) The creation of a similar civic consciousness in different points of the globe. That phenomenon for diverse reasons tends to work for the national molecules.

³SALAZAR Gabriel, **Sociedad Civil y Nuevo Pacto Social**, <http://www.chilesustentable.net/textos/doc006.htm>, Santiago, September 30th 1997, (September 2001).

- 4) The arise of several kinds of networks formed by organizations, institutions and citizens, that are oriented to rationalize, spread and consolidate development in several molecules of critical and alternative projections.

In this way, in inspite of not having a solidly structured civil society, there are material spaces to work and build upon. They are minimal spaces, but at the same time, fundamental to ensure the projection and feasibility. As civil society, it is our duty to remark these tendencies and resolve the numerous methodological and strategic problems that our country shows.

Existing distances between policymakers and consumers must be minimized by means of involving a higher participation from civil society and bringing these organizations closer to the State.⁴

As a Conclusion

We have reached the conclusion that “civil society” is a concept difficult to define and there are as many definitions as there are authors.

We understand civil society, as citizen organizations interested in public affairs which do not include the State, neither the economic sectors.

In the Chilean case , we can see that citizen participation is very low in decision making processes. This represents a problem for the country and ourselves, because it affects our own perception of and influences our behaviour.

A proposition we bring up to the discussion, is our need to strengthen citizen participation and civil society organizations so as to increase our civic consciousness and improve our self-perception.

Finally, we think that each person can make the difference. In history, changes have seldom been initiated by huge number of people but by individuals who are able to persuade their peers and generate the necessary changes.

⁴This ideas can be found in : “POLITICAS SOCIALES Y DESARROLLO REGIONAL”, <http://www.chilesustentable.net>, (September 2001).

As young Chileans, we think that at this point in time, Chile does not have a positive leadership to follow on ideas and subjects as the ones we are dealing with. Great men are silent on most of these issues and the politicians are discredited. We see that the people do not know what they want and are expecting that others will make the proposals. If no one is willing to lift their voice to guide the uninformed people, this is a role that will have to be played by the generation of youngsters who are preparing today to lead policy and decision-making of our people in the future. Each of us, in his area and according to his possibilities, understands that we can make a difference and are willing to act as committed citizens and contribute to improve public affairs from civil society and its organizations.

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