

INSIDE CIVIL SOCIETY IN MEXICO: The RGK Center Partnership

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CIVIL SOCIETY IS EXPLODING AROUND THE world and in Latin America in particular. In countries like Mexico, civil society organizations are stepping up to deliver critical services, to pressure government reform, and to build important new

networks of collaboration. According to the Federal Register of Civil Society Organizations (CSO), in Mexico from 2000–2006 there was an increase in the number of registered CSOs from 1,222 to 2,236 representing an 82 percent growth rate. The actual number is much higher as this figure does not capture the many unregistered CSOs and community groups working informally throughout Mexico.

According to Manuel Arango, the founder of the Mexican Center for Philanthropy, civil society in Mexico is best thought of as progressing through three different and important historical periods. From the 1500s to the mid-1800s marked the period when the Catholic Church was the dominant Mexican institution organizing community life. It was the central provider of charitable relief to the poor. The second period, from the 1860s to the 1960s, marked the emergence of the state as the principal provider of social services in education, health, and human services. The third period extends from the 1960s to the present and is marked by a rapid growth in citizen participation and a developing civil society sector. Mexico is now emerging from a culture of paternalism into an era in which civil society organizations have greater influence over the way in which public problems are framed and addressed. All of which raises interesting and significant questions regarding the role of civil society organizations in Mexico and across the region.

But what exactly do we mean by civil society? The term has come to cover all formal and informal organizations that use public and private funds to formulate solutions to community problems and implement programs aimed at addressing these needs. Civil society organizations include everything from local associations and unions, to human service delivery organizations, to groups that advocate for policy changes.

Operating between the state and the market, these organizations are both a way for citizens to express and enact their values and a way in which basic human needs are met.

With an eye to understanding better the role of civil society in Mexico and building on UT's longstanding close ties with universities in Mexico, the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at UT Austin developed the Bilateral Civil Society Educational Partnership (BCSEP) program in collaboration with four Mexican universities: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP); El Colegio Mexiquense in Toluca; Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM or "the Tec") in Mexico City; and Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) in Puebla. The formal goal of this effort was to move students in exchanges between Mexico and the U.S. The end result of this multi-year collaboration has been a much deeper appreciation of the fundamental challenges and opportunities facing Mexican civil society organizations. Funded through a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the partnership coalesced in response to a Higher Education in Development/USAID request for funding proposal. The RGK Center was able to identify viable partners for the BCSEP with expertise in Mexican civil society studies. The partnership represented a strategic blend of teaching institutions and research institutions.

The principal work of BCSEP involves student exchanges through an innovative Civil Society Summer Institute (CSSI). This program is an intensive six-week term designed for Mexican graduate students who cannot participate in a full academic semester exchange. Mexican students take two civil society graduate courses at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. The courses focus on the nonprofit sector with an emphasis on practical learning through case studies, fieldwork, and nonprofit site visits. Courses in the past have included: Improving the Management of Nonprofit Organizations in North America, Contemporary Issues in Civil Society Studies, and Working with Boards,

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Committees and Community Volunteers.

While working with our Mexican colleagues on this effort, we have learned a great deal about how to effectively manage the exchange process for Mexican graduate students. In the first year of our grant, we struggled to recruit qualified graduate students into the program. The length of the exchange program (four months) was simply too long for most of our targeted recruits. Mexican graduate student mobility is often limited due to the age of the students. Older students tend to have more familial and work obligations, making it difficult to commit for a four-month full semester. Clearly we were not going to hit our recruiting targets unless we changed the program. Short intensive exchange programs are attractive to graduate students from both Mexico and the U.S. The students are in class for the same amount of time and are required to do the same amount of work, just over a condensed period of time. Students receive full credit for the courses and are able to transfer the credits to their home institution.

In addition to student mobility, BCSEP also had a research agenda. El Colegio Mexiquense and ITESM took the lead and initiated the Mexican Civil Society Research Symposium. The two-week symposium was designed as a space for Mexican scholars and UT faculty and students to critically assess the current state of Mexican civil society and to propose directions for its future. Prior to the symposium, each invited scholar researched and wrote a paper on a topic relevant to Mexican civil society with professors from ITESM and El Colegio Mexiquense setting the research agenda. Topics ranged from Accountability and Transparency in Mexican NGOs to Emerging Trends in Mexican Civil Society to the Current Research Agenda for Mexican

Civil Society.

The symposium was hosted by the RGK Center and held at the Nettie Benson Latin American Collection at UT Austin. The nine Mexican scholars were fully funded with travel and accommodations to participate in roundtable discussions, to attend lectures, to meet formally and informally with their U.S. counterparts, and to build relationships while presenting their current research for review.

The following themes and insights emerged from the Mexican Civil Society Research Symposium:

- Civil society organizations have played a critical role in the struggle for democracy in Mexico and will continue to play a vital role in continuing to ensure that government institutions are democratic and accountable.
- The civil society sectors in Mexico and the U.S. have emerged from different historical contexts, yet their CSOs share similar challenges in capacity building and fundraising, just as these organizations do in the U.S. and around the world.
- Information gaps exist with the field of Mexican-specific civil society organizations. There is a need for research especially in the areas of effective CSO management, transparency and accountability, and building reliable financing systems for these organizations.
- The regulation of CSOs in Mexico is very different from that in the U.S., and there are a fair number of hurdles that must be overcome in Mexico at present to create a CSO that has state recognition.

Upon returning to Mexico, the scholars have had a series of meetings to refine their research papers, integrate the feedback from their U.S. counterparts, and create the chapter outline with a goal of publishing in spring 2008. The BCSEP program has helped

foster a new network of Mexican and U.S. academic contacts for third-sector research and information. Through the work with our Mexican colleagues, we have identified several interesting areas for future comparative CSO research, such as governmental support via the tax code, the legal framework for starting and receiving official CSO recognition, and the impact of the regulatory environment on CSOs.

Finally, for both UT Austin and the four Mexican universities, the experience of developing this partnership was an effective way to create a framework for future collaborative efforts. As UT President Powers noted recently: "For many years, The University of Texas at Austin has cultivated a healthy, bilateral relationship with students, educators, scholars, business leaders, researchers, and alumni from Mexico. Today we are interconnected, as good neighbors should be. We are collaborators in education, in commerce, in scientific research, and in the arts. It's vitally important that our ties remain close, that our interactions remain open and effective, and that our partnerships be strengthened by ever new, evolving, and creative initiatives." We hope that the work we have done and the new work we are just now beginning with our colleagues in Mexico around the role of civil society in Mexico will continue to both strengthen these relationships and shed light on the exciting developments that are unfolding in Mexican civil society.

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