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LATIN AMERICA: Indigenous policies face obstacles

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Abstract

The development of indigenous policies in Latin America.

On September 22, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) released a report on the region's indigenous peoples. Prepared for the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York, it notes progress in areas including education, healthcare, political participation and territorial rights, but also highlights an ongoing lack of reliable, disaggregated data as a key stumbling block for effective public policy design.

Full text

SUBJECT:The development of indigenous policies in Latin America.

SIGNIFICANCE:On September 22, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) released a report on the region's indigenous peoples. Prepared for the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York, it notes progress in areas including education, healthcare, political participation and territorial rights, but also highlights an ongoing lack of reliable, disaggregated data as a key stumbling block for effective public policy design.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

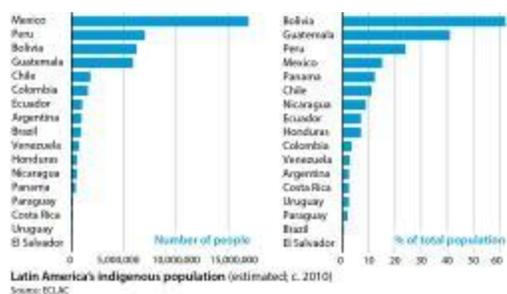
Deep-rooted prejudice against indigenous peoples is changing only slowly, as reflected in insufficient protection of indigenous languages.

Climate change and natural resource exploitation threatens the survival of some of LAC's fragile indigenous peoples.

As more people of indigenous origin migrate to cities, new hybrid cultural forms (including consumer patterns) will emerge.

In *Guaranteeing Indigenous People's Rights in Latin America*, ECLAC estimates that, in around 2010 (depending on the date of national censuses), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) had almost 48 million indigenous inhabitants, 8.3% of its total population. However, there are wide variations between countries as regards both absolute numbers (ranging from almost 17 million in Mexico to fewer than 100,000 in Uruguay and El Salvador) and percentage of total population (62.2% in Bolivia but just 0.5% in Brazil).

LAC's estimated 826 indigenous peoples are also variously distributed, ranging from 305 in Brazil and 102 in Colombia to just three in El Salvador and two in Uruguay. Similarly, their size varies widely. Bolivia has some 1.8 million Quechuas and 1.6 million Aymaras but, out of its 39 different indigenous peoples, at least 13 reportedly face disappearance -- also the case for some 70 of Brazil's indigenous peoples.



Most LAC countries have now adopted the internationally accepted criterion of self-identification for estimating their indigenous population or -- eg Colombia, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Peru -- plan to do so in their next census. However, despite recent improvements in data, important gaps remain:

Numbers. According to ECLAC, indigenous peoples' numbers have increased from an estimated 30 million in around 2000, to the current 45 million. This probably relates more to greater self-identification than demographic growth. However, in the case of Bolivia, according to ECLAC, the indigenous population

represented more than 62% of the total in 2010. Yet according to the 2012 census, only 42% considered themselves indigenous -- 20 percentage points less than in 2000. This can be explained both by changes in census questions and in self-identification.

Economic data. The report found that, in 2000-11, only eleven countries included a self-identification question in employment, income and living condition surveys and, even then, did not always collect this data systematically.

Health data. Implementation and evaluation of health programmes as well as advocacy by indigenous groups is hampered by a lack of data disaggregated by ethnic group. Indigenous women are particularly affected by these gaps which include limited information on maternal mortality and violence against women.

Education.

Based on 2010-11 census data for eight countries, ECLAC estimates that school attendance among indigenous 6-11 year-olds ranged from 82% in Venezuela to 99% in Uruguay. For 12-17 year-olds, rates were 72-80%, still a significant increase on a decade earlier.

However, progress has not extended to higher education. In both urban and rural areas, the percentage of indigenous 20-29 year-olds with 13 or more years of education was well below that of their non-indigenous peers (see *LATIN AMERICA: Education ills threaten social progress* - April 29, 2014). The difference was most marked in rural areas, particularly in Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua and Panama where the figure for the

indigenous group was below 5%.

Consultation.

The International Labour Organization Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which requires measures including consultation of indigenous peoples on decisions that affect them, has been ratified by 14 LAC countries. In addition to implementation difficulties, the report identifies other problems:

In many countries, the need for consultation is still questioned and/or viewed as giving indigenous peoples (a minority) a veto over national natural resource decisions seen as key for economic growth and energy supply.

Partly as a result, emphasis tends to be on formal compliance with the consultation process rather than its use as a vehicle for reaching mutual understanding and consensus. Indigenous peoples are often consulted but their views do not influence final decisions.

Right to territory.

Over the past two decades, recognition of indigenous territorial rights has been strengthened across most of LAC, either through constitutional reform or other legislation. Similarly, land has often been returned or compensation provided.

However, development of commodity exports has increased conflicts over control and use of land and natural resources. The report notes that many projects currently under way were undertaken without appropriate consultation.

Policy contradictions are particularly clear under progressive governments in Bolivia and Ecuador. On the one hand, both administrations have aimed to expand indigenous representation and increase cultural awareness. On the other, both are enthusiastic supporters of natural resource extraction, which they see as essential to increase social spending and promote redistribution (see BOLIVIA: Morales leaves opponents lagging in elections - September 24, 2014; and see ECUADOR: Water law will raise indigenous conflicts - June 26, 2014).

Political participation .

Indigenous peoples' participation in decision-making bodies has increased but remains heterogeneous:

Municipal level. Bolivia stands out in this area, with changes in state structure resulting in the formation of indigenous governments in most municipalities. Similarly, in Mexico's Oaxaca state, the indigenous municipality has been recognised as a vehicle for the exercise of autonomy and, out of 570 municipalities, 418 are governed by the system of uses and customs.

National level. According to ECLAC, indigenous representation in national parliaments is highest in Bolivia (nearly 32%), followed by Guatemala (12%), but remains well below 10% elsewhere. Although a few countries have created special indigenous constituencies and some political parties have established quotas, indigenous candidates face important barriers in fund-raising and the fact that parliamentary constituencies often fail to coincide with indigenous territories.

Contradictory trends.

The report gives little attention to contradictory trends, particularly in Andean countries:

New urban middle class.

Migration of indigenous groups to cities has been significant in recent decades. This has expanded economic

opportunities and created upward social mobility, but difficulties in maintaining cultural heritage. The resulting hybrid culture has specific consumption patterns, religious customs and labour practices. These groups (which may or may not figure in statistics as 'indigenous') will influence future political and socio-economic models.

Traditional indigenous enclaves.

More traditional indigenous groups have refused to migrate. Progressive politics have given them greater political rights and recognition but also increased pressures on their own territory. Conflicts over space and cultural identity will also constitute significant future influences over political trajectories in Bolivia, Ecuador and, possibly, Peru.

CONCLUSION: As migration to cities continues, they should benefit from higher standards of living, including access to health and education. Yet inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples will persist as social services remain poor in rural areas. The clash between pro-modernisation strategies based on exploitation of natural resources and the worldview of many indigenous groups is likely to intensify.

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