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

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This article places the experiences of the Active Citizenship in Central America project, led by Dublin City University, within wider discussions on the role of civil society in building democracy and furthering development. The article examines project development and content and assesses its effectiveness, using a framework derived from Nancy Fraser's (1993) concept of 'weak' and 'strong' publics. It finds that the project oscillates between these positions, and it makes policy recommendations to help to move it closer to a 'strong publics' conception. It ends by asserting that in the current conjuncture a 'strong publics' conception is a useful guiding principle for the design of development projects to strengthen civil society.

On recherche: des «publics forts» pour une époque incertaine: expérience du projet Citoyenneté active en Amérique centrale

Cet article positionne les expériences du projet Active Citizenship in Central America (Citoyenneté active en Amérique centrale) mené par l'Université de Dublin dans le contexte de discussions plus larges sur le rôle de la société civile dans le développement de la démocratie et le renforcement du développement. Cet article traite de l'élaboration et du contenu des projets et en évalue l'efficacité à l'aide d'un cadre dérivé du concept de Nancy Fraser (1993) de publics «faibles» et «forts». L'auteur constate que le projet oscille entre ces positions et fait des recommandations de politique générale pour l'aider à se rapprocher d'une conception de «publics forts». Il conclut en affirmant que, dans la conjoncture actuelle, une conception de «publics forts» est un principe directeur utile pour l'élaboration de projets de développement relatifs à la société civile.

Procura-se! 'Público forte' para momentos de incerteza: a experiência do projeto de Cidadania Ativa na América Central

Este artigo coloca as experiências do projeto de Cidadania Ativa na América Central coordenado pela Dublin City University dentro de discussões mais gerais sobre o papel da sociedade civil na construção da democracia e aumento do desenvolvimento. O artigo examina o desenvolvimento e conteúdo do projeto e avalia sua efetividade utilizando uma estrutura derivada do conceito de Nancy Fraser (1993) de público 'fraco' e 'forte'. Ele constata que o projeto oscila entre essas posições e faz recomendações de políticas para ajudar a mudá-lo para mais perto da concepção de um 'público forte'. Ele finaliza afirmando que na conjuntura atual uma

concepção de 'público forte' é um princípio norteador útil para a concepção dos projetos de desenvolvimento sobre a sociedade civil.

¡Se busca! Poblaciones fuertes para tiempos inciertos: el proyecto 'Ciudadanía activa en Centroamérica'
Este ensayo sitúa los resultados del proyecto 'Ciudadanía activa en Centroamérica', impulsado por la Universidad de la Ciudad de Dublín, en los debates sobre el papel de la sociedad civil en la construcción y el fortalecimiento de la democracia. El ensayo analiza la elaboración del proyecto, su contenido y su eficacia, utilizando como marco de referencia el concepto de públicos 'débiles' y 'fuertes' elaborado por Nancy Fraser en 1993. El ensayo constata que el proyecto osciló entre estos dos tipos de públicos y recomienda el diseño de políticas que puedan posicionar el proyecto más cerca de la idea de 'públicos fuertes'. El ensayo concluye diciendo que en la coyuntura actual la noción de 'públicos fuertes' es un principio orientador útil para proyectos de desarrollo diseñados para la sociedad civil.

Introduction

The concept of Civil Society as a crucial tool to help to develop democracy and to further development emerged in aid circles in the late 1980s, especially after the end of the Cold War. Numerous development agencies began to include civil-society programmes as an integrated part of their overall strategies, with varying levels of success. Most development agencies were guided by an institutionalist perspective in framing these programmes. Free markets and liberal democracy were seen as essential elements for development, and civil society as one of the fundamental ingredients for the delivery of such initiatives. In essence, civil society would either act as a check on the state, thus improving its efficiency or legitimacy, and/or would substitute for the state in the provision of services, while facilitating the implementation of market-friendly structural adjustment programmes.

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 NGOs that 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, which would help to create 'strong' publics.

This article describes a current civil-society project in Central America, led by Dublin City University (DCU), and seeks to place it in this wider theoretical context. First, it examines the development of this project, *Active Citizenship in Central America*, looking at the overall geopolitical and policy context out of which it emerged, before going on to examine its aims, objectives, and activities. Second, the project's effectiveness is assessed by means of a framework derived from Fraser's concept of 'weak' and 'strong' publics, arguing that, like earlier projects, the present project oscillates between these positions. Finally, the article makes key policy recommendations to improve the project in line with the 'strong publics' conception. It concludes

that the framework based on Fraser's work, developed in the course of the article, can act as a useful guide for other such civil-society projects.

Active Citizenship in Central America: context and evolution

Since the late 1980s the three Central American nations identified in this project – Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras – have experienced a transitional period of democratisation, accompanied by an accelerated process of regional economic integration and a much slower process of 'formal' institutional integration. Nicaragua and El Salvador had also experienced brutal and divisive civil wars. Honduras avoided a war but nonetheless suffered great civil stress, due to its use as a base for counter-insurgency and counter-revolutionary activities to penetrate neighbouring countries. Since the early 1990s the region has experienced relative peace and a transition to democracy. All countries, however, have weak institutions and weak democratic cultures, increasing social violence, intensified 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 Biekart (1999) identifies two obstacles to achieving democratic consolidation that are common to them all. First are the high level of inequity in income distribution and widespread poverty, which have been exacerbated by recent liberalising economic policies. Second, traditional sectors are still dominant, most notably military and powerful economic groups, while political parties and other mediating groups are weak. Nonetheless the region has seen a huge growth in civil society, mostly in the guise of NGOs. These organisations, however, often have a top–down, paternalistic leadership, with weak internal accountability: signs of a persisting political culture of authoritarianism and exclusion. *Active Citizenship in Central America* emerged largely as a response to this situation, seeking to strengthen civil society in the region through capacity building in administrative systems, information gathering, and advocacy.

Another important contextual issue is Irish Aid's policy towards civil society. For Irish Aid, civil society is theoretically broad-based but in practice is restricted to NGOs. Civil society 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' (Irish Aid 2006: 76). 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, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), participatory processes designed for and demanded from aid-recipient national governments by the World Bank. By strengthening such processes, Irish Aid aims 'to help build better-functioning societies' (*ibid.*). Its concept of the nature and role of civil society therefore fits into what Howell and Pearce (2001) call 'mainstream' perspectives. Diamond (1999), for example, conceptualises civil society's role as being to support and improve on the existing liberal democratic political and market-led economic models, but not to question them.

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 project was built on a pre-existing Diploma in NGO Management, delivered by one university in each of the project countries, developed in conjunction with Irish development co-operation. This diploma, launched in 2001, aimed to raise the management capacities of local Irish Aid-funded NGOs, and as such was conceived within a managerialist, business definition of the role and values of NGOs.

Indeed the diploma is still offered by the business-administration departments in the three universities. 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.

Active Citizenship in Central America, 2007–2010

The current three-year project, approved by Irish Aid in 2007, consists of two components. The first, *Active Citizenship in Central America: Research and Advocacy*, 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.*: 9).

Activities therefore are directed at building greater capacity for information gathering, policy formation, and policy advocacy among civil-society organisations (CSOs) on key issues affecting the region. These involve conducting research at the local, national, and regional levels, carrying out advocacy programmes based on research results, and holding workshops, conferences, and seminars in both Central America and Europe to encourage 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 there have been two calls for research and advocacy proposals, in 2007–08 and again in 2008–09, and 11 projects have been funded: eight in the first year and three in the following year (see Appendix 1). In year three (2009–10) all those projects already selected will be invited to make advocacy proposals based on the research projects, and one per country will be selected for funding for further development.

The second component, *Active Citizenship in Central America: Building Capacities*, involves the continuation of the existing NGO diploma and the development of a new municipal management diploma, with a small research element. It aims to concentrate resources on the poorest areas of each country, further encourage NGO–university collaboration at the national and regional levels, and help to develop capacity in NGOs and local government. The overall aim is to achieve greater capacity in leadership, information gathering, policy formation, and policy advocacy among CSOs and in local government on key issues affecting participating local municipalities. Activities undertaken in this component are the updating of the existing NGO diploma; the development of a new municipal diploma; the provision of scholarships to NGOs and local government officers and representatives; the definition and execution of a research and advocacy agenda; and the holding of various events to encourage networking and disseminate findings, including through publication.

The evolution of this component during its initial 18 months was characterised by efforts to change the direction of the existing diploma towards a multi-disciplinary and local development ethos, moving away from the overt business orientation of existing courses. This resulted in the amalgamation of both components into one governing structure, and the replacement of departments and universities running the courses in the three project countries.

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 its involvement with development. Howell and

Pearce contrast this with what they call 'alternative' perspectives of civil society, which emphasise the role of civil society as not just a reflection of the actual constellation of social forces 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.

Fraser's theory addresses many shortcomings of Irish Aid's liberal conceptions of civil society, particularly the Irish state's conception of 'active citizenship'. The Irish government turned to this concept as a panacea for the erosion of community cohesion, which was placed under great stress by the economic boom from the mid-1990s to 2008. Its conception of active citizenship was strongly influenced by the work of Putnam (2000) on social capital and is broadly similar to British government policy (Home Office Development and Statistics Directorate 2004). Active citizenship, hence, can manifest itself in terms of civic participation (signing a petition, attending a rally, contacting a political representative), formal volunteering (unpaid help for others through a group organisation), and informal volunteering (helping others who are not members of the family).

Cronin (2009) points to serious flaws and omissions in this conception. First, power differentials are ignored: power is assumed to be horizontally rather than vertically exercised, when in fact the reverse is so; second, the role of the market economy, its elimination of public provision, and its promotion of individualisation is unacknowledged; third, globalisation and its impacts are roundly ignored – solutions are framed within the national context and in terms of individual responsibility, despite the global nature of many of the issues faced by society, such as, for example, threats to the environment, or migration; finally, there is no recognition of the role of social class and socio-economic inequality – which echoes the first point, the nature and distribution of power.

Fraser's conception of 'strong publics' offers a powerful analytical tool with which to examine such liberal-derived concepts as active citizenship. It also offers a more holistic and realistic framework with which to frame civil-society project activities. Fraser argues that for civil society to have an impact on public policy four requirements must be satisfied, a number of them directly addressing the flaws in the concept of 'active citizenship' identified by Cronin (2009).

- Political intervention is needed in order to achieve socio-economic equality, because without it some sectors of civil society will be more privileged than others in public policy deliberations.
- 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 beyond the scope of state action, impedes the full and free discussion required for a properly functioning public sphere.
- The rejection of such notions leads Fraser to identify a multiplicity of publics, based for example on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, rather than a unitary 'public sphere' – or in our case civil society.
- A sharp separation of state and civil society militates against a fully functioning public sphere, and rather 'some sort of interimbrication of these institutions is needed' (Fraser 1993: 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' (Fraser 1993: 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.*: 134). 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.*: 134). 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.*: 134). Parliament blurs the line between state and civil society because it both deliberates and legislates. 'Opinion' can be translated into authoritative decisions by it, which then can become law. Fraser (1993: 136) thus draws 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.*

Instead, what she 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, thus developing democracy beyond its actually existing state.

In conclusion, Fraser (1993: 137) puts forward four tasks for critical theory of actually existing democracy. These are: (a) to identify and unmask how social inequality taints deliberation in current democracy; (b) to show how the different publics are affected by inequality in terms of power relations; (c) to expose the limits of the 'private' in formulating and dealing with problems in society; and (d) to 'show how the overly weak character of some public spheres in late-capitalist societies denudes "public opinion" of practical force'.

For the purposes of this article, these four tasks can be transformed into a framework to test whether a development project aimed at strengthening civil society is working towards the creation of strong publics. In essence, there are four questions based on these 'tasks':

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 practical force to 'public opinion'?

The next section will use this framework to evaluate the project's progress in strengthening civil society in Central America from Fraser's concept of 'weak' and 'strong' publics.

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

We now evaluate the project in each of the four areas of the framework derived from Fraser: 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 is: *Does the project confront social inequality, and how?* Fraser identifies two conditions for parity of participation. The first, an *objective condition*, 'precludes forms and levels of economic dependence and inequality that impede parity of participation' (Fraser and Honneth 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.*). This

question's purpose therefore is to ask if the project seeks to make 'visible the ways in which social inequality taints deliberation' (Fraser 1993: 137) in Central America. This can be taken to mean *Does the project seek to reveal social inequality and/or its negative effects on access to decision making in the region?*

Poverty is the main focus for both components of the project. 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 using advocacy to encourage their adoption by policy makers (Cannon 2007a: 9). This is done primarily through a restricted call for research proposals, mostly from NGOs and universities associated with Irish Aid. The document calling for research proposals, however, cites poverty only as a sub-theme 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, and migration, and under sub-themes of social movements, construction of a Central American citizenship, and international co-operation. Rarely are 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 2007b: 7). Yet the ability of the participants to speak for the poor is taken for granted, and little in the proposed content of the diplomas provides them with sufficient knowledge to enable them to do so. Rather, its largely technical content is more geared to preparing functionaries capable of constructing and administering development projects within their organisations, rather than critically reviewing the causes of poverty, never mind inequality. Thus, despite the declared intentions in the aims and objectives of the project, there is little evidence of a concerted effort to 'confront social inequality' in its activities. This is implicitly assumed, as those involved are CSOs 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 of the two conditions, the *intersubjective condition* of participatory parity, which 'precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them' (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 36). This can be translated into the question of whether 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, and people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS, and if it seeks to redress any such exclusion by providing these publics with spaces to 'withdraw and regroup' as well as prepare for 'agitational activities directed towards wider publics' (Fraser 1993: 124).

Irish Aid has four cross-cutting themes which must be incorporated in project applications: gender, human rights, the environment, and HIV and AIDS. With the project under study, a particular issue at pre-approval stage was a gender balance on the various committees, which in practice 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 other 'different publics' referred to by Fraser, although Irish Aid did not demand that this should be done. Fund applicants were required to indicate that

their project related to at least one of the four cross-cutting themes, but they were not obliged to show how it did so.

As it turned out, three of the projects funded had a gender theme, with other proposals on people with disabilities, a number of projects on children's and young people's rights, and others on the effect of agro-fuels on the price of food in Honduras, the cost of medicines in El Salvador, and the impact of international co-operation 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, the projects that were accepted were in fact relevant to a number of 'different publics' and to the poor in general (see Appendix 1). Another element of this component of the project was funding for public events on topics of importance in the participating countries, in order to open up spaces for discussion for civil society on these issues. 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 cross-cutting themes. With respect to gender, this was acknowledged by 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 or space in the curriculum. This diploma and the planned addition of a diploma on administration for local government in 2009 was the extent of the opening up of this component of the project to 'different publics'.

In conclusion, while little space was provided in the governance mechanisms for 'different publics', various of these publics did achieve space through the research component, and gender was offered as a topic in the capacity-building component. The extent to which this gives voice and space to these different publics remains to be seen, while the submission of gender-based projects may reflect the concerns of international donor communities and local NGOs, rather than being a result of particular efforts on the part of the project to solicit such projects from the 'publics' covered by them.

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, whether the project attempts to 'expose ways in which the labelling of some issues and interests as "private" limits the range of problems, and of approaches to problems, that can be widely contested' in Central America (Fraser 1993: 124). As she writes 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' (Fraser 1989b: 128). Hence activities that are normally associated with the private, such as child rearing, have in fact impacts on the public sphere, in terms of both the economy and 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' or 'public'. Certainly in terms of gender, within conservative Central American societies discussion usually focuses on the gender aspects of international co-operation, with the agenda set by international organisations. As we have seen, Irish Aid subscribes to the 'mainstream' notion of civil society as 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', although she does mention in passing 'self-managing institutions' where 'internal institutional public spheres could be arenas both of opinion formation *and decision making*' (Fraser 1993: 135; my italics). Hence in answering this question it can be asked if such deliberative practices are being encouraged or instituted in the project. David Held (2006: 246–52) outlines a number of 'institutions of deliberative democracy' such as citizens' juries, deliberative polls and deliberative days, e-polls and forums, and referenda, among many others.

This point is of fundamental importance to the project's content. Within its own governance structures, Central American civil society is provided with opinion-forming and decision-making powers. The vast majority of committee members in both components of the project are from CSOs 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. CSOs are the main recipients of capacity-building diplomas, and have had input into content through research surveys.

Furthermore, as seen in the aims and objectives of both components outlined above, one of the basic premises of the project is to provide civil society with the wherewithal to construct pro-poor policy proposals and advocate for their adoption by policy makers. Hence the objective is not only to provide opinion, but to agitate for that opinion be acted upon and translated into policy, whether 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 its proposals, which are more substantiated, on account of information gained through research and the higher capacity within civil society to put the case due to capacity-building provisions, such as the diploma.

The project cannot be said to have advanced much in this regard. First, it is early days in terms of research projects, as few of those funded have been completed at the time of writing. As the advocacy element will be based on results of such research, no attempt to place themes on the public agenda is expected until the findings are published. However, all projects will be invited to formulate advocacy policies for the final round of funding in 2009–10. 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 uptake so far. In the capacities component, the existing diploma concentrates more on providing technical know-how to deal with existing structures within NGOs than on developing students' critical faculties. 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 receiving funding from Irish Aid, to identify

issues of importance within their societies and the region, and to generate research-based knowledge on those issues. This not only provides civil society with this knowledge but also builds its capacity in generating it, and designing policy on these issues. Third, 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, 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.

Fraser's paradigm, hence, is an ideal framework, as it suggests a number of areas in which change can be sought to ensure that civil society is strengthened in a real and tangible way, thus making the project more effective. As such, a number of explicit recommendations can be made to improve the project and so positively contribute to the creation of 'strong publics' in the Fraserian sense. These are:

1. Direct activities more towards the eradication of inequality and not just poverty, by recognising its centrality 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.
2. Recognise inequality of access to the public sphere of the different publics identified by Fraser, by positively encouraging their participation in project activities. Their representative organisations should be identified and directly invited to participate.
3. The project should give more visibility to the private–public dichotomy in civil society, by raising the issue through specifically organised forums and by positively encouraging research and advocacy on these issues.
4. In terms of deliberative practices, greater civil-society involvement in both components could be encouraged by unifying the two committees, which has been achieved, and encouraging greater involvement at the national level.
5. The capacities component needs to broaden its reach within the universities, to involve departments that would have a more critical viewpoint on current theory and practice in development and democracy. Curricula need to be broadened to include discursive modules on democracy, development, and the role of civil society, encouraging critique and discussion of existing paradigms and positively evaluating other more deliberative paradigms. This to an extent is being achieved through recent changes within the project.
6. Public spheres need to be created as much within as outside universities to achieve a more just society. The project hence needs to make greater use of the funding available for public events to discuss relevant issues, such as round-table discussions, seminars, and public meetings to broaden 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. The potential to achieve this is, however, limited, in that funders insist that only organisations receiving funding from Irish Aid be involved.

Such measures are necessary now more than ever, as political change in the region, with a noted move to the left, is having a profound impact on civil society–state relations in the three countries. A recent study (Cannon and Hume 2009) found, for example, that civil society in El Salvador, with a new left-wing government led by Mauricio Funes of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), is facing issues relating to co-optation and autonomy as civil society becomes more integrated in government decisions on social policy. In Nicaragua

the concerted effort on the part of the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) government of Daniel Ortega to regain for the state some of the space carved out by civil society, including its funding, has deeply polarised relations between many NGOs and the government. The Ortega government is also institutionalising a new form of popular participation in the form of the CPC (Citizen Participation Committees), which are occupying spaces previously held by NGOs at the local level. Finally, and most dramatically, in Honduras a military coup to oust President Manuel Zelaya, which was supported by business groups and political elites, halted an opening up to civil society by the Zelaya government, particularly in the form of a public consultation on a Constitutional Assembly, the alleged trigger for the coup. Civil-society groups have been at the forefront of proposals to restore the constitutional order, and also in the front line of repressive measures taken by the coup-installed government, as well as resistance to these measures.[3] Each of these cases points to moves in the three countries to include the various 'publics' of civil society in decision-making processes, but with different approaches, creating opportunities, challenges, and dilemmas for civil society in each case.

These cases, and this study, point to the relevance of Fraser's work on strong publics. The study shows that Fraser can offer an instructive and incisive framework with which to design and evaluate civil-society initiatives in international development. Her 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 invaluable in the present international conjuncture, not just for civil society in the developing world but also globally, as the need for alternatives to failed neo-liberal economic policies becomes more apparent, and voters turn away from established democratic parties.

Fraser offers direction on how civil society can take a more proactive role in these discussions. More importantly, however, the current conjuncture is not simply a financial crisis, but a crisis in the entire post-Cold War settlement: the self-proclaimed triumph of neo-liberal capitalism and liberal democracy, which has underpinned development practice over the last 25 years or so. Fraser's concept of 'strong publics' and 'weak publics' therefore offers pointers to the development community on how civil society can contribute to a route out of this impasse, to a more just and equitable economy and a society based on sound and thorough democratic principles.

Acknowledgements

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.
3. A number of proposals have been put forward by civil society to solve the current conflict, such as a 'Proposal for Dialogue for National Reconciliation and Transformation by a Group of Honduran Citizens', circulated by well-known civil-society activists in the country: Germán Calíx, Leo Valladares, Adán Palacios, and Efraín Díaz.

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Appendix 1: Projects funded by *Active Citizenship in Central America* research fund, 2007–09

Country	Title	Organisation	Project aims
El Salvador	Characterisation of Pharmaceutical Sector in El Salvador	Asociación Salvadoreña Promotora de la Salud / Observatorio de Políticas Públicas y Salud (OPPS) de la Universidad de El Salvador	Characterisation of the pharmaceutical sector in El Salvador, identifying the processes of registration, commercialisation, marketing, and quality control of medicines with a view to developing a National Policy on Medicines, allowing the population to access essential medicines at a reasonable cost.
	Contributing to the Construction of Women's Citizenship in El Salvador	Instituto de Investigación, Capacitación y Desarrollo de la Mujer (IMU)/ Universidad Nacional de El Salvador (UES)	Generate knowledge and proposals on how to confront gender impacts on rural women, resulting from global and regional integration processes and national projects and initiatives emerging from these.
	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	To understand better how existing gender patterns can influence disposition to violence, in order to provide civil society with scientific data that can help it to intervene in the resolution of conflicts and the construction of equitable citizenship.
	Youth Associationalism in El Salvador: Mechanisms for Advocacy for Young People	Fundación Promotora de Productores y Empresarios Salvadoreños (PROESA) / Escuela de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de El Salvador	Determine potentialising and inhibiting factors on the capacity for advocacy in youth organisations in the 5 municipalities with the highest human-development index (HDI) in El Salvador and the 5 municipalities with the lowest HDI in the period 2006–2009.

(Continued)

Appendix 1: Continued

Country	Title	Organisation	Project aims
Honduras	Agro Fuels and their Impact on the Right to Food in Honduras	FIAN, Honduras	Understand the expansion of production of bio-fuels, with the aim of campaigning for a socially inclusive development programme which guarantees food security for excluded social groups.
	Analysis of Impact of International Co-operation in Honduras 1990–2008	Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras, FOSDEH	Analyse trends of international development co-operation in Honduras, so as to ensure greater collaboration between the different agencies in improving the lives of Hondurans.
Regional	Women Migrant Social Networks in Central America	Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano, San José de Costa Rica	Identify networks of migrant women in Central America and their characteristics.
	Development Strategies in Dry Tropical Mountain Zones: Comparative Study of Viable Productive Systems in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua	Fundación Promotora de Productores y Empresarios Salvadoreños (PROESA) / Escuela de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de El Salvador	Identify alternative productive systems according to climatic conditions in mountainous dry tropical zones of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.
Nicaragua	Human Rights of Migrants in Nicaragua	Centro Jesuita de Migrantes – UCA	Write up and disseminate an alternative report to that of the International Convention for the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families (1990), to serve as a reference point for researchers, national and international organisations, policy and decision makers.
	Advocacy Strategies for Children and Adolescents as Active Citizens in Nicaragua: Methodologies, Forms and Conditions to Facilitate Achieving Real Impacts in their Lives	CESESMA – UNN	Identify methodologies, forms, and conditions which encourage the participation of children and adolescents as active citizens, so that their participation succeeds in influencing public policy affecting their well being and quality of life.
	Needs of Disabled People to Achieve Labour and Social Integration	Fundación SOLIDEZ/PROCOMIN – UNAN-Managua	Determine the support needs of people with different disabilities, to allow their integration into society so they can participate in politics and the economy, at a family and local level.

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