

Neo-Corporatism and Territorial Economic Development: The Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement in Local Government

PABLO OSPINA PERALTA

*Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito, Ecuador
Instituto de Estudios Ecuatorianos, Quito, Ecuador*

ALEJANDRA SANTILLANA ORTIZ and MARÍA ARBOLEDA^{*}
Instituto de Estudios Ecuatorianos, Quito, Ecuador

Summary. — This article argues that the democratization of local governments that has been led by indigenous movements in Ecuador can best be described as “neocorporatist”. The article, based on the evidence from two cases of indigenous local governments in the Andes, argues that the forms of “neo-corporatism” created by the Ecuadorian indigenous movement on its entry into government are designed as participatory institutional frameworks that also serve as channels for the expression of social movements’ demands. The neocorporatist practices deployed by indigenous movements in these areas have had mixed results, both in terms of their implementation and of their capacity to foster viable income-generating activities for poor rural areas. On balance, while the forms of neocorporatist government fostered by the indigenous movement *can* have positive impacts on economic development, there are still two broad limitations. First, it continues to be difficult to foster a process of territorial economic development that effectively addresses the distinct interests that exist among different community organizations. Second, the negative effects of the wider economic context in which local territories find themselves remain beyond the control of the local government.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement has emerged as a social and political actor with a speed and visibility almost unprecedented in the countries’ history. Given that it questions the very underpinnings of the country-State founded two centuries ago, the movement’s importance stems as much from its historical and moral weight as its symbolic significance. But what, in the final instance, have been the effects of this movement on the political economy of local territorial development in Ecuador? How (if at all) are its actions

altering the power relationships, institutional frameworks, and the operating conditions of the Ecuadorian economy?

These are the underlying concerns of this paper, and we address them through two main questions. First, what is the broader project for societal change being pursued by the indigenous movement, and how might this project be characterized. Second, how is this project

^{*} This paper draws on the findings of a more extensive study published in Ecuador (Ospina *et al.*, 2006). Final revision accepted: November 13, 2007.

affecting the dynamics of local territorial development? In response to these questions, we first suggest that the processes of local government democratization that have been pursued by the main organizations of Ecuador's indigenous movement can be reasonably described as "neocorporatist."¹ We then argue that the mechanisms of neocorporatist democracy that derive from experiences associated with the indigenous movement are more successful, although modestly, in the formulation and implementation of economic policies for local territorial development compared to the clientelistic model they replaced. This is because they change the balance of power and patterns of participation in public policy decision-making processes and, as a result, the sorts of public investment that are prioritized as a result of this decision making.

To make this argument, we begin the paper conceptually, elaborating our definitions of corporatism and neo-corporatism, and arguing that these concepts can also be used to analyze the political projects of indigenous organizations in the Ecuadorian Andes. Following this, we describe and analyze the experience of two local administrations in Ecuador (the municipal government of Cotacachi and the provincial government of Cotopaxi), in which indigenous organizations have played decisive and leading roles. Both the administrations are "successes" in that they have been re-elected at least once and have, throughout, been grounded in the support of grassroots organizations that have sustained their capacity for social mobilization. The principal purpose of these two case studies is to demonstrate that (i) with the presence of indigenous organizations, traditional clientelist practices in local government have been progressively replaced by practices that might be characterized as neocorporatist and (ii) that this transition has had real—albeit modest—effects in the promotion of territorially based economic development in each region. This argument then provides the basis for some concluding comments.

Research for this study was conducted between March and December 2005. It involved 50 in-depth interviews with senior and mid-range indigenous leaders in Cotacachi and Cotopaxi. We also participated actively in various assemblies, meetings, evaluation workshops, and discussion meetings with grassroots, provincial, and municipal leaders as well as with persons closely involved in the processes we were studying.² We conducted

two public opinion surveys on the achievements and problems associated with these processes of participatory government. In Cotopaxi, the survey was conducted in October 2005, with 683 interviewees from seven municipalities of the province. In Cotacachi, the survey was conducted in September 2005, with 602 interviews completed. In addition, "mini-ethnographies"³ of three months duration were conducted in rural sectors of Cotacachi, and we collaborated with a socio-economic study being led by the local indigenous federation (UNORCAC, the Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas de Cotacachi).

2. NEO-CORPORATISM, CORPORATISM, AND TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

(a) *Indigenous movements and the transition from clientelism to corporatism*

The bargaining between dominant and subordinate stakeholders in any given territory always takes place in a context of historic power relations and particular political traditions. For this research we identify three "ideal models" of traditional bargaining for decision-making regarding territory and its development: *clientelism*, *corporatism*, and *citizenship*.

While definitions of *clientelism* differ, they all share an emphasis on the existence of an asymmetric power relationship between patron and client and the notion that under conditions of *clientelism*, decisions regarding the investments and development plans take the form of a highly unequal exchange of favors between a "patron," on the one hand, and individual or family groups on the other. Works and goods flow in one direction and political loyalties flow in the opposite direction. To this definition, we would also add that for relationships to be deemed "clientelistic" they should link individuals and/or loose networks of association. Where the client is a *formal organization*, it is more accurate to talk of a corporatist relationship. While the boundaries between the formal organization and the loose association are of course not always clear-cut, it seems useful to sustain this distinction given the different types of social context and political regime implied by the presence or absence of links to formal social organizations.⁴

Under conditions of *corporatism*, organizations allocate favors, works, and services without any intermediating role being played by

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