

# Empowering People: Decentralizing Authority in Guatemala

The landmark Peace Accords that ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war in 1996 created a significant opening for progress in democratic governance, respect for human rights and equitable economic development. Buried in the peace formula was an array of measures promoting decentralization—a broad concept that advocates devolving decision-making authority to local and regional governments so as to foster greater participation by civil society. The accords thus explicitly recognized decentralization's potential as a catalyzing agent for reaching the broad goals and ensuring their sustainability.

At the time, the National Economic Research Center (CIEN), a non-partisan research institute had already been at work to bolster these goals. Seizing the opportunity offered by the peace process, CIEN stepped up its efforts in 1996 under a CIPE-sponsored program aimed at moving policymaking away from the center and closer to the constituents it affects.

## Identifying Obstacles

Beginning in February 1996, CIEN launched a series of projects closely tied to the peace accords, a document that is long on goals and deadlines and short on guidance about how to attain them. CIEN took up the challenge of providing some of the missing strategy by selecting five topics from among those that the peace accords had targeted for reform: education, health, fiscal re-

form, the legal system, and property registration.

These early efforts concentrated on building awareness of the importance of moving government policy closer to the needs of constituents. Under a project titled "Decentralization: A Step Toward Development," CIEN conducted general research arguing the benefits of decentralization and identifying the obstacles to its achievement in the five chosen areas. The results were published in *Decentralization: A Path Toward Development and Peace*, which contained 14 general policy recommendations.

CIEN reached a wide audience for its study results and recommendations via a succession of presentations and press conferences. Nine workshop presentations held between April 15, 1997 and May 28, 1998 stemmed from this project. The first was aimed mainly at the media (major newspapers, radio stations and television). Targeted later were members of the executive branch with a direct interest in decentralization such as the Ministries of Education, Health and Labor, the Property Registration Commission, the Secretariat of Public Works, congressmen, businessmen, representatives of nonprofit and development organizations, and the media.

Others that CIEN succeed in reaching included members of the Congressional Decentralization Commission, the UNDP, FUNDAP (a local NGO), representatives from civic groups, students, Mayan organizations, unions and other

labor advocates, and business organizations. In keeping with the goal of promoting decentralization, several conferences were held at the regional level, attracting teachers, health sector workers, businessmen, university professors and their students at Francisco Marroquín University, local politicians, municipal authorities, and nonprofit organizations.

### Making Specific Recommendations

CIEN embarked on a second CIPE-supported project in June 1997 and honed the program objectives to a finer

point. For the "Decentralization: A Step Forward" project, CIEN undertook additional research, including more focused interviews with government officials, ministry employees, congressmen and municipal and other local authorities. The range of topics was narrowed as fiscal reform was dropped from the project agenda.

The result was an umbrella study, *Decentralization: Toward Peace and Development*, which consisted of six separate publications, each focusing on a different subject. CIEN's policy recommenda-

## CIEN: A Decentralization Pioneer

The National Center for Economic Research (CIEN), a long-time advocate for a democratic approach to social and economic policies, has been at the forefront of the decentralization debate. Its mission is to study Guatemala's socioeconomic problems and propose solutions within a democratic, market-oriented framework. CIEN professionals are highly regarded in Guatemala's private- and public-sector circles. Widely viewed as politically neutral, the research institute, founded in 1983, has broad support among many key stakeholders. Both the executive and legislative branches of the government look to it for analysis and recommendations.

CIEN undertakes specialized studies on a contract basis for those who want to tap into its deep knowledge of Guatemala's socioeconomic and public policy issues. It also disseminates a range of publica-

tions to a wide audience. Among these is *Informe al Congreso*, a periodic report published by CIEN's Legislative Support Program, whose primary audience is the congress. The monthly *Carta Económica* summarizes larger research projects and addresses current issues in a brief, accessible format. It is distributed to policymakers and opinion leaders. *Temas Públicos* is published when needed for in-depth analysis of current social and political topics.

CIEN's familiarity with decentralization issues runs deep. It was an early advocate of citizen participation in public affairs via its writings and seminars. The 1991 study, *Centralism: Point of Departure for Decentralization*, marked its first significant foray into decentralization territory. After hosting a seminar on the topic in 1995, it became a permanent advisor to Guatemala's Congressional Decentralization and Development

Committee. The timeliness of CIEN's research efforts (i.e., overlapping peace accord discussions) enabled it to focus more attention and debate on the decentralization issue.

These efforts have yielded a host of legislative achievements. Over the past eight years, CIEN's decentralization recommendations have been instrumental in the passage of eight laws or decrees including tax modernization, financial reform, health sector restructuring, and a new health accord. In infrastructure, it played a role in the reform of the electric power, telecommunications, aeronautics and hydrocarbons sectors. It assisted in the design of the highly acclaimed National Program for Educational Self-Management (PRONADE) program. Legislative proposals to reform the private education system and social security, in which CIEN has collaborated, are now pending.

tions became more technical and specific for each of the components to facilitate their implementation by policymakers. In education, for example, recommendations included promoting school autonomy via "educational committees," and defining educational quality

page). Articles in the monthly *Carta Económica*—which is widely distributed to policymakers and opinion leaders—featured the study's findings and recommendations. *Temas Públicos* provided in-depth analysis of the issues. And *Informe al Congreso* kept the decentraliza-



*CIEN's publications fill a yawning gap for legislators in Guatemala.*

more precisely. In the health sector, CIEN advocated the institution of a universal healthcare system.

### Getting the Word Out

The media responded to CIEN's studies and conferences with wide coverage. Articles appeared in *Prensa Libre*, the largest circulation newspaper in Guatemala; in *Siglo*, the second largest; and in *Periódico*, a Guatemala City-based newspaper read mainly by upper income individuals. Interviews with CIEN representatives were aired on radio and television in connection with the conferences.

The Center also publicized its policy recommendations via its own regular publications (see box on previous

tion recommendations before congressional members.

CIEN's publications help fill a yawning communications gap for legislators in Guatemala, where congressmen play second string to the executive branch in setting the policy agenda. They don't have permanent offices in the congressional building and also don't have staff to help secure hard data and other research-related material to inform themselves on issues up for debate.

The CIEN projects were clearly successful in meeting one of the project's top objectives: heightening public awareness of the importance of decentralization. A broad cross section of government officials, the nonprofit community, the private sector, and other key

stakeholders who attended CIEN presentations and received its publications gained a better grasp of and largely accept the need for a decentralized approach to governance. Also, many of those attending CIEN workshops, notably the Ministers of Health and Education, the Head of the General Property Registry and members of the Congressional Decentralization Committee, are best positioned to see that the recommended actions are realized in the four areas CIEN has targeted.

The participation of these top policy-makers gave the CIEN effort greater credibility. Even more significantly, the ministries of health and education approached CIEN to assist with the modernization and decentralization of these institutions. Added evidence that CIEN's work was widely recognized is the requests for presentations the Center received from the UNDP, the Vice-President's Program for Modernization of the Executive Branch, the Congressional Decentralization Commission, and the Business Administration Faculty of Francisco Marroquín University.

The most tangible advances to date have come on the issue of education. The Ministry of Education made a promising start in decentralizing its operations by establishing departmental directorates in each of Guatemala's departments or provinces. The establishment of PRONADE (National Program for Self-Managed Education), which actively involves local communities in the decision-making process, was another step in the right direction. PRONADE advocates a voucher-style system for areas not served by the centralized education bureaucracy. In most models, school boards made up of parents hire the teachers and are responsible for the school's administration. Most boards appear to be functioning adequately, although further work is needed to instill an entrepreneurial vision and develop innovative strategies. PRONADE programs are in force in 20 of the country's 22 departments, benefiting more than 163,000 children.

While the legislation creating PRON-

ADE was already in place when CIEN embarked on its project, it did play an integral role both in the program's genesis and later unfolding. CIEN, for example, helped to develop PRONADE's mission statement and later suggested a trust fund enabling transfers of funds from the government to local committees. In 1997, the trust fund idea was signed into law. CIEN has utilized project forums to actively advocate continuation of the PRONADE program. Those chances have been improved by the Minister of Education's participation in CIEN's workshop presentation on educational reform.

### Getting More Aggressive

Not settling for the results of the first two projects, in July 1999 CIEN launched a third CIPE-sponsored project with a harder hitting approach to advocacy and outreach. In many cases, CIEN's recommendations had been formally accepted by the authorities as appropriate policies, but did not lead to the adoption of legislation or the development of concrete programs. A major obstacle has been resistance to specific reforms from entrenched bureaucracies. Also obstructing progress has been the absence of consensus—even among supporters of decentralization—over just what needs to be done.

For the third project, CIEN trained its sights on the education and health sectors, the areas that have shown the most tangible progress to date, and where the top policymakers (like the Minister of Education) look prepared to back the CIEN effort. Further reforms are needed to consolidate the gains in education and to move decentralization forward in health care, where it has stagnated. The Center will be promoting legislation that offers greater public access to health services. It also will promote the continued involvement of the private sector in educational activities, as a way to diversify educational options, especially at the vocational or high school level.

CIEN's ability to conduct advocacy has been bolstered recently. It estab-

lished a legislative advisory office right within the congressional building that gives it better and more reliable access to legislators. CIEN personnel are thus strategically placed to meet regularly with committees as well as individual legislators, and thus stay abreast of issues before congress.

The Center will be intensifying its outreach activities during this third phase. It plans a first-year evaluation of the recently decentralized education directorates, followed by a briefing of the findings for the ministry of education 's department directors and staff and a seminar geared toward developing a consensus on future initiatives. Also on the drawing board is a roundtable devoted to enhancing private sector involvement in education. Three other roundtables will deal with obstacles to health care, concentrating on ways to restart the stalled reforms of hospitals, health centers and rural clinics.

Reinforcing CIEN activities will be a joint project with a Guatemalan private sector foundation to create guidelines for more coherent and integrated government programs covering fiscal policy, social security, housing, health, energy, transportation, communications, and citizen security. Through this component of the project, CIEN expects to strengthen strategic alliances with other civil society groups that promote decentralization and to take advantage of new forums for pushing its education and health-care reform agenda.

Reaching a wider public is among CIEN's priorities in this new project. To date most of its efforts have been cen-

tered in the Guatemala City area. Now, it will be paying increased attention to those at the regional and local level outside the capital. Ultimately, achieving change through democratic processes depends on the extent to which voters support the reform agenda.

One large audience it hopes to touch is Guatemala's Indian population—living mostly in the rural highlands and urban slums—which includes 22 linguistic groups and represents two-thirds of the population. Despite its size, the indigenous population has been marginalized in education, employment, health services, as well as participation in Guatemala's economy and democracy. For lasting peace and stable democracy to take root, it will be essential to bring the indigenous population into full economic and political participation. Because most Indians do not speak Spanish and many are illiterate, CIEN is considering preparing a summary of decentralization recommendations in the three main Mayan languages and getting the word out via local radio stations. 🌐📻

*CIEN's decentralization projects were recently evaluated by Geoffrey Geurts, CIPE's evaluation officer. The assessment concluded that CIEN's program has contributed significantly to the building of participatory democracy in Guatemala. CIEN's success in getting policies implemented could be enhanced by building more widespread support among the general citizenry. The details of this evaluation and its recommendations are available on CIPE's Web site at [www.cipe.org](http://www.cipe.org).*