Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 11
Issue 6 *June Roundtable: Human Rights in Central America*

Article 3

6-1-2011

# Generic Wish-Lists for State-Centric Policies

Edzia Carvalho
*University of Mannheim, Germany*

# Generic Wish-Lists for State-Centric Policies


## Abstract

The Central America depicted in the article under review resembles a region visited by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—colonial Conquest, civil War, Famine and other natural disasters, and poverty, disease and Death. Added to this list of woes are the recent drug-fueled conflict, democratic instability, weak state capacity, and the socio-economic fallout of the economic recession in the United States. While the first half of the article records these problems, the author shifts gears in the second half and provides an array of responses to these challenges, with a forceful recommendation that states in the region focus their efforts on correcting course on their policies. However, missing from this assessment of the state of Central America are three elements: the impracticalities of an "everything but the kitchen sink" approach to complex issues; the limitations of state-centric solutions; and the role of domestic and international actors in assisting with the direction and implementation of such solutions.



## Keywords

Human rights, Central America, Economics, Policy, Education, Infrastructure, Democracy

## Generic Wish-lists for State-centric Policies

**by Edzia Carvalho**

The Central America depicted in the article under review resembles a region visited by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—colonial **Conquest**, civil **War**, **Famine** and other natural disasters, and poverty, disease and **Death**. Added to this list of woes are the recent drug-fuelled conflict, democratic instability, weak state capacity, and the socio-economic fallout of the economic recession in the United States. While the first half of the article records these problems, the author shifts gears in the second half and provides an array of responses to these challenges, with a forceful recommendation that states in the region focus their efforts on correcting course on their policies. However, missing from this assessment of the state of Central America are three elements: the impracticalities of an "everything but the kitchen sink" approach to complex issues; the limitations of state-centric solutions; and the role of domestic and international actors in assisting with the direction and implementation of such solutions.

The remedies suggested in the article are state-centric measures requiring progress in the following arenas: access and quality of education, job provision in the formal and informal sectors, domestic law enforcement, basic infrastructure, bureaucratic efficiency to increase trade and decrease economic dependency, and democratic consolidation. This is a well-meaning wish-list for states that may have to contend with smaller levels of economic resources and wealth (which the author of the piece also recognizes) and structural constraints on policy-making and implementation. The list does not necessarily help states prioritize spending at minimum cost and maximum benefit. The limited success of Costa Rica as recounted in the article might counsel education and democratic consolidation as the first two priorities for countries in Central America to get on the path to recovery. However, strategic and economic ties to the United States have enabled successive Costa Rican governments to invest in the human development of their citizens. Most of the other countries in this region do not enjoy a similar level of access or investment.

Moreover, even if we were able to highlight a clear road ahead, such state-centric solutions would not matter much if we were confronted with governments that were unwilling to change. If there is one thing that has emerged from the "Arab spring," it is that even regimes that have successfully manipulated the international community to their exclusive advantage are susceptible to organized expressions of discontent from their populations. While this manifestation of "people power" may be short-lived, it is still a potent challenge to entrenched authoritarian or anocratic regimes.

Therefore, the absence of "civil society organizations" from *the Economist's* assessment (except in passing in the introduction) is quite striking. This is particularly noticeable as a large section of the article recounts the problems created by their "uncivil society" counterparts. The role of the state apparatus in administering the rule of law and providing physical security cannot be denied. However, many of the solutions proposed in the article such as education, employment, trade and entrepreneurship, and even democratic stability require a vibrant sphere of peaceful non-state activity and endeavors. For example, some of the lesser burdens of the domestic law enforcement in these countries could be relieved through community policing as introduced in Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai, as a small but effective alternative

Also missing from the review is the international community. While the United States is acknowledged as the main player in the region, no other state or inter-state institution is recognized as having any role in the efforts to change the situation described in the article. For example, World Bank and IMF-imposed constraints and policy direction through Structural Adjustment Programs and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper initiatives, as well as the political and economic policy recommendations by donor aid agencies are conspicuous by their absence. While it is easy to advocate that national governments implement policies to improve the living conditions of their populations, it is equally easy to forget that most national governments do not have the economic capacity or the international influence to do so without constraints imposed by the community of states of which they are members.

These omissions can be traced back to the general lack of clarity in the wider research and policy community about who should do what, and when. An impressive exception is the approach advocated by Esther Duflo and her colleagues, who suggest breaking down the "big" questions into smaller issues that can be tackled better using evidence-based policy. Generic wish-lists do make for good reading, but also for bad policy.

---

*Edzia Carvalho is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Political Science at the Chair on Politics and International Relations in the University of Mannheim, Germany. She completed her Ph.D. in Government from the University of Essex in 2010. Her thesis was on degrees of democracy and public health expenditure in the Indian provinces. She has an MA in Human Rights (Essex 2007), and an MA in Politics (Mumbai 2003). She has worked for the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, India and as research assistant on projects for the UNDP and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on human rights indicators and democracy assessment. Her recent publications include Measuring Human Rights (with Todd Landman, Routledge, 2010) and contributions to the Essex Internet Encyclopedia of Human Rights and the International Journal of Children's Rights. She is currently collaborating with Kristi Winters (Birkbeck College) on research on the Qualitative British Election Study (QES Britain) and foreign aid and human rights (with Laura Seelkopf, University of Essex). Her research interests revolve around human rights and democratization..*