

## **Argentina @ the Wilson Center**

Virtual Forum • *Foro Virtual*

No. 1. Civil Society and the Economic Crisis

### **Will the Expansion and Mobilization of Civil Society Help Solve the Argentine Crisis?**

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Implicit in Enrique Peruzzotti's thoughtful essay "Civic Engagement in Argentina: From the Human Rights Movement to the 'Cacerolazos'" is the assumption that the current expansion and mobilization of civil society will contribute to a solution to the current crisis in Argentina. It has been argued that democracy is enhanced by a high degree of associational or horizontal linkages within civil society together with effective vertical linkages to the state and political elites. However, Peruzzotti argues that in Argentina there is "a crisis of representation of dramatic proportions in which all links between civil and political society seemed to have been severed." This raises the question of whether or not the current mobilization of civil society in Argentina will have major impact on the present crisis. To suggest an answer, it is useful to explore some (not all) of the prerequisites for extensive societal change resulting, in part, from the actions of civil society, as well as some of the impediments to such change.

#### **Prerequisites:**

1. There needs not only to exist a high level of horizontal linkages within society, but these linkages must generate that level of cooperation and trust necessary for collective action in support of a consensual agenda. The proliferation of civil society organizations and activities does not necessarily reflect a strong consensus around strategies and programs for change.
2. There must be agreement on tactics and the rules by which all will play.
3. There must be a certain level of respect for the rule of law and a reasonably credible judiciary.
4. The state must have the leadership capacity and material resources to implement any consensual agenda for change.
5. In order to achieve substantial change there needs to be effective mechanisms for broad based citizen participation.
6. There must be within civil society, as well as the state, a critical mass of experts to generate and implement the necessary public program and policies.
7. A successful agenda for change requires broad based public support which requires extensive cooperation among groups and organizations that are not necessarily open to such collaboration.
8. If civil society is to be a prime motor of change it must have a capacity to generate recommendations well-adapted to the complexities of the existing problems.

### **Impediments:**

1. Socioeconomic disparities tend to militate against extensive civil society cooperation and socioeconomic cleavages have widened substantially in Argentina in recent years.
2. Studies of civil society have suggested that the expansion of organized civil society can stimulate factionalism thereby reducing civil society's capacity to generate a consensual agenda for change.
3. Historically in Argentina there have been high levels of distrust and factionalism within and between such instruments of political expression as political parties and labor unions. Civil society organizations today reflect some of the same characteristics.
4. To make civil society more effective both traditional and new mechanisms of political participation need to be strengthened, but to date efforts to do so have not been particularly successful.
5. Argentina's federal system militates against a national consensual agenda for change.
6. Civil society leaders at all levels suffer from "burn out" and, at times, resist building a consensual agenda.
7. The absence of a consensual agenda rooted in recommendations reflecting the complexities of the problems to be dealt with have contributed to ad hoc particularistic responses by the government to civil society pressures rather than the building of state-society cooperation.
8. Without greater internal democratization the capacity of civil society to promote more generalized democratization is limited.
9. Civil society in Argentina has positioned itself in opposition to the state and evinced little interest in building links with it. This could encourage extrasystemic movements and leaders whose "agendas" are relatively simplistic and do not adequately confront the complexities of the existing crisis.