

PRESENTATION

Security is far from a theoretical discussion. It is a vital necessity, a primary feeling that contextualizes our decisions, hopes, challenges, possibilities and difficulties. It is not a question for disputes between political factions, or a favor bestowed by political representatives, it is a policy that the State designs and sustains in order to legitimize its own existence as the guarantor of the social contract that unites citizens below a single political form. Security permits the exercise of the right to live in peace, to create and make use of opportunities to develop one's life and those of loved ones. An environment of insecurity removes that right and interrupts essential development.

Various discussions of security and insecurity in a large number of countries in the Latin American region are explained by the weakness of understandings regarding the State and the rights of citizens. The State is the political representation, not the owner of aspirations, feelings, and projects; political representatives do not own the State, but instead occupy it transitionally. The energized debates and responses, and citizen demands (or their negation, as is observed in the common misrepresentations of public opinion as "perceptions that don't consider the facts") display a confused understanding of the role of representation. A change in the way in which representatives see themselves and in how citizens

see them or the power that they actually have would bolster the democratic regime.

In the formation of a secure living environment, and wherever a State exists, institutions play a key role. It is in them that the State lives, and through them that policies and legal frameworks are developed and laws that affect all of us applied. The strengths and weaknesses of these institutions have a wide-ranging effect on the development of a secure environment.

It is this very security environment that occupies the worries and hopes of the inhabitants of a great part of Latin America, especially in the last decade with the rising rates of criminality. It is a central theme on the agenda, related with the alternatives to the construction of democratic regimes and institutions.

The *Public Security Index* directly addresses this institutional problematic and the foundation of State capacities to provide security in the region. It advances from the premise that institutions should be incorporated into security-development analysis. A pending issue was the field of policy formulation, of capacities to manage the security sector, of the indicators of how to construct a State apparatus that, in collaboration with civil society, faces up to security problems. It is a program born from RESDAL's commitment to work towards the construction of demo-

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cratic institutions, combining the capacities of those that work within the State, with those from academia and civil society, and also from the objective of providing useful tools for discussions, analysis and decision-making.

This publication is dedicated to six Central American countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Each one has its own particular reality and wealth, and should avoid the temptation to embrace realities that are different, and it is for this motive that each is treated separately. For a better understanding and analysis, the coverage of the cases also presents transversal axis that contribute to the security environment, such as economic resources, the institutional problematic, cross-border people flows, the collaboration of the armed forces with the police, and the role of private security.

The project has received the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an institution to which we thank for the confidence they invested. A program was thus constructed based upon a premise: beyond short-term policies and statistics, a democratic base needs to construct (or reconstruct) institutions. It requires information that sustains the discussion (the absence of statistical series in the region, for example, is notorious), with cross-referenced information on police structures and capacities. State actors, policy formulators and analysts need to be interviewed in order to unravel and gather what they can contribute through their daily practice.

The research published is based in a large part on fieldwork carried out in each of the six countries, involving interviews with the main actors in each case.

There was an enormous collaboration on behalf of all sectors. Ministries, police, congresses, civil organizations, prosecutors, ombudsman, international cooperation agencies and armed forces all opened their doors to discuss their program and express their visions.

The form in which the information is presented responds to the issue that has been most worrying since the beginning of the project: how security is linked to a political, historical and economic context, with diverse actors interacting and different interests coming into play at the time of programs and funds that either bring horizons together or make them more distant; the context also of a theme that due to its weight has such a profound impact on electoral possibilities and results. It is an institutional analysis that invites a deeply political reading of the theme within a broad historical perspective and one close to the process of democratic construction.

The information presented displays a sector that has carried out substantial reforms and advances and which, at the same time, faces greater challenges in political and budgetary terms to achieve greater development. We hope that this tool allows decision makers to look at the sector in which they are involved from a distance; that the academic field will find elements for its studies and analysis; and that civil society and international cooperation agencies will find a panorama that collaborates in their strategies. Ultimately, everything that has been done has one principal objective: to illuminate what is a painful but key discussion for the development and health of our societies.

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