

live in poverty and inequalities are more pronounced in Latin America than any other region of the world.¹ The poorest forty percent of the population receives just ten percent of total income, while roughly sixty percent of income goes to the wealthiest twenty percent.²

Such extreme inequality is a formidable obstacle to democracy. With highly skewed distributions of income and wealth, it is relatively easy for a narrow elite to dominate political affairs regardless of the formal institutions of governance.³ These people have the educational backgrounds, financial resources, and personal connections necessary to advance their interests in the political system while the poor and working class are largely excluded from meaningful participation in public affairs. To create truly inclusionary and participatory political systems it will be important to reduce the vast imbalances in the region. While the work of the OAS is laudable in many respects, political democracy will remain a distant aspiration in the absence of greater economic equality.

Notes

¹ Inequalities in Latin America are reflected in Gini coefficients which range from .45 to .64. See Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2001.

² In countries with the greatest inequality, such as Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the income of the wealthiest twenty percent of the population is nearly thirty times that of the poorest twenty percent.

³ It should thus come as little surprise that the most rigidly stratified sub-regions, such as Central America and the Andes, have traditionally had the least representative political systems.

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