

Summary: Is Latin America Becoming More Socially Inclusive?



OAS Secretary for Political Affairs Kevin Casas-Zamora. (Image: Max Taylor)

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Keynote Speaker:

- **Kevin Casas-Zamora**, Secretary for Political Affairs, Organization of American States and non-resident Senior Fellow, Latin America Initiative, Brookings Institution

Panelists:

- **Christopher Sabatini**, Editor-In-Chief, *Americas Quarterly* and Senior Director of Policy, Americas Society/Council of the Americas
- **Alana Tummino**, Senior Editor, *Americas Quarterly* and Director of Policy, Americas Society/Council of the Americas
- **Judith Morrison**, Senior Advisor for the Gender and Diversity Division, Inter-American Development Bank
- **Elizabeth Zechmeister**, Associate Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Vanderbilt University

[Access the full Social Inclusion Index.](#)

Summary

On July 30, *Americas Quarterly* launched the third edition of the [Social Inclusion Index](#) during a luncheon in Washington, D.C. The Index is part of *Americas Quarterly* Summer 2014 issue on [higher education and competitiveness](#).

Keynote speaker Kevin Casas-Zamora from the Organization of American States and the Brookings Institution opened the launch by contextualizing the Index within Latin America's recent history. Panelists presented in-depth data and analysis on the Index, outlining its methodology, results over the past three years, and discussing reactions to the ranking. Participants also gave recommendations for governments to improve social inclusion.

Latin America's Progress on Social Inclusion

Speakers highlighted the achievement of compiling an Index like *AQ*'s. An analysis of social inclusion disaggregated by race and gender would not have been possible 10 or 20 years ago, and the Index demonstrates how far the region has come, they said. AS/COA's Christopher Sabatini described how the Index is the result of positive developments over the last three decades. "The macro-economic reforms of 10 to 20 years ago have largely created, minus a few exceptions, macroeconomic stability in these countries to the point now where we no longer talk about democracy or even economic growth, or even poverty alleviation," he said. "We need to talk now about social inclusion, expanding those rights and thinking about it in a more expansive way."

Casas-Zamora also lauded the improvements in the region, saying "the current generation has in its hands the daunting task of deepening democracy by creating more inclusive societies, without destroying democracy in the process." He added: "The trend is clear: in virtually every variable considered by the Index, Latin America is doing better than in the past. Despite serious problems of poverty, inequality and marginalization, the region is moving in the right direction when it comes to social inclusion."



Index Methodology and Make-up

Social inclusion is “the idea that people have a right to participate in their political systems, to be heard, and that they have a right to access to public and private goods without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation,” said Sabatini. This year’s rankings included two separate indices, one ranking all 17 countries by the 10 variables consistent across all countries, and a second ranking given to nine countries, which had data available for all 21 variables used to measure social inclusion. Only those countries with the data for all variables received score card grades.

In the second year of the Index, LGBT and women’s rights were added to the score card to more accurately quantify social inclusion in the region. According to AS/COA’s Alana Tummino, the addition came as a necessity to more accurately portray women’s rights and to show “that LGBT rights are human rights and crucial for the development of social equality across the region, and for people to feel like they’re part of the development of their own society, regardless of their sexual orientation.” Changes were also made to the 2014 Index as a result of feedback from last year to include two new variables—disability rights and access to justice—which were not included in the score card rankings, but as their own rankings at the end of the Index. Two longer articles titled “Behind the Numbers” were also included as a way to further describe the complexities and nuances on women’s rights, as well as on crime and violence in the region.

Liz Zechmiester presented data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) on personal empowerment and government responsiveness, discussing its contribution as insight into how citizens feel they are included in their governments and in their political systems. The IDB’s Judith Morrison described the Index as “simple, straightforward... extremely collaborative... (and) unique,” and as “exceptionally important for the media and for policy makers.” She said the Index gives “countries a sense of visibility, a sense of pride, [demonstrating] that things are changing and that there’s a level of competition.”

This Year’s Index: The Results

Overall, Uruguay came out on top in both rankings for

See how countries rank in the

the second year in a row. The Northern Triangle countries of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador—also showed consistency at the bottom of the rankings.

The speakers pointed out how a measure of social inclusion means more than just growth. “Important though income inequality is, a fixation with it as a proxy for social inclusion is no better than our old fixation with GDP per capita as a proxy for development,” said Casas-Zamora, pointing out that both can be misleading. “This is the issue that we’re facing today—it isn’t just economic growth, it isn’t just the reduction of poverty, it’s about meeting people’s rising demands,” added Sabatini.

While the region has seen reductions in poverty levels, increases in children’s enrollment in secondary schooling, improvements in access to adequate housing, and greater access to formal employment, pockets of inequality persist. Indigenous and Afro-descendants in the region consistently have less access to goods and services. According to Sabatini, “one of the things that we find in this Index is that across many of the measures there have been populations, mostly designated by ethnicity and race that have lagged behind.”

Women also fell behind their male counterparts in several areas, showing a correlation between women’s rights, women’s sense of personal empowerment, and women’s perception of government responsiveness. These variables ranked at the bottom in the bottom in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—which are also the most violent, and score at the bottom for LGBT rights. Tummino suggested that “social inclusiveness can potentially lead to a less violent society.”

However, not all of the data was intuitive. “There’s often a disjuncture between what governments actually deliver and how included people feel in the political system, so it’s not always the case that where there is high economic performance people feel socially included,” said Zechmiester. “And it’s not always the case that where there’s low economic performance, or performance in other areas, like crime or corruption, that people feel excluded.”

2014 Social Inclusion Index.

Uruguay
Argentina
Costa Rica
United States
Chile
Peru
Ecuador
Brazil
Panama
Bolivia
Colombia
Mexico
Nicaragua
El Salvador
Paraguay
Honduras
Guatemala



Responses and Recommendations

The panelists highlighted the importance of the Index for governments and outlined several ways that countries can improve social inclusion. “We continue to try to push the idea to governments that a more inclusive society will lead to greater gains in social, political, and economic growth,” said Tummino. The Uruguayan and Chilean governments have both addressed the Index and their country’s needs for continued improvements, even at the top of the rankings, while progressive business leaders of FUNDESA in Guatemala are actively addressing the indicators leading to their ranking in last place of the Index.

Speakers pointed to the importance of including race and ethnicity data in censuses in order to better understand a country’s population. “These populations are not populations that are either small or insignificant. They’re populations that when they are excluded they have a tremendous impact on GDP of countries [and] also have a tremendous impact on development,” said Morrison.

Morrison and Casas-Zamora both gave advice on how the Index could be improved, such as weighting variables and analyzing how laws are enforced, not just that they exist. While they disagreed on the frequency of the Index outputs, Casas-Zamora suggested releasing it every two to three years, while Morrison vouched for the importance of its yearly release.