# Integration vs. Autonomy: Assessing Strategies for Indigenous Political Empowerment in Bolivia and Peru

## Indigenous People's Unequal Access to Public Services

Indigenous peoples in Bolivia and Peru have historically faced significant challenges accessing public goods and services. This persistent marginalization has resulted in stark inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. According to a World Bank report, the poverty rates of indigenous communities in the region are double those of non-indigenous communities. Just 26% of indigenous people in Bolivia have access to electricity (compared to 91% of the non-indigenous population). Similarly, 33% of indigenous people in Peru have electricity (compared to 85% of non-indigenous people).

Recent waves of democratization and decentralization across Latin America have created new opportunities for indigenous groups to seek more equitable distribution of public goods. Both Bolivia and Peru have undergone administrative decentralization while maintaining limited fiscal decentralization. A recent paper by Christopher L. Carter examines two emerging strategies indigenous groups are using to secure recognition of their needs in this context:

- **Autonomy:** This strategy involves replacing state institutions with indigenous-designed governance structures. It would allow communities to exercise more direct control over local affairs but may present new challenges regarding capacity and resources.

- **Representation:** This approach involves indigenous groups seeking positions within existing state institutions. By electing coethnic officials to local government roles, communities aim to influence resource allocation from within the system.

Each approach offers trade-offs in incentives and capacity for local governments to provide public goods to indigenous communities.

## Navigating Autonomy in Bolivia

Bolivia's 2008 constitution introduced the "Native Indigenous Peasant Autonomy" (AIOC) framework, allowing eligible municipalities to replace state institutions with traditional indigenous governance practices. To examine changes in public expenditure under the AIOC model, Carter drew on municipal-level budget data from Chipaya and Charagua – the only municipalities that have fully adopted AIOC. He found autonomy, as currently designed, led to revenue generation and bureaucratic functionality challenges. He noted these two municipalities had low levels of state capacity; however, their differences from other majority-indigenous municipalities prevented generalization.

- **Chipaya**, which became autonomous in 2018, experienced a reduction in revenue after adopting autonomy. Other municipalities in the province rebounded from a general revenue decline in 2017, but Chipaya's budget remained well below its pre-2018 average.

- **Charagua**, which became autonomous in 2017, maintained its revenue levels but faced administrative issues deploying resources for public goods provision. After adopting autonomy, Charagua saw a significant decrease in the ratio of goods and services expenditures to its total budget, a trend not observed in other municipalities in its province.

Both municipalities experienced a decline in public expenditures, particularly on goods and services, following AIOC adoption.

## Increasing Representation in Peru

Indigenous communities in Peru lack formal political autonomy and instead seek representation within existing local government structures. Examining an original survey of over 320 current and former community presidents in Cusco, Peru, Carter found that coethnic political representation can increase indigenous groups' access to essential public goods, particularly those identified as priorities by the communities themselves.

- Community leaders identify having a community member elected to a municipal post as a principal factor in receiving municipal resources.

- Nearly 60% of community leaders listed water access as their community's top priority.

- There was a significant decrease in water-related issues reported by indigenous communities in municipalities where a community member won the mayoral election.

---

**Source:**
Carter Christopher L. (2022). "The Autonomy-Representation Dilemma: Indigenous Groups and Distributive Benefits in the Americas," The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics, 7(2), pp. 294-315. https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2021.25/

**References:**
Díaz-Cayeros, Alberto; Magaloni, Beatriz & Ruiz-Euler, Alexander (2014). "Traditional Governance, Citizen Engagement, and Local Public Goods: Evidence from Mexico," *World Development*, 53, pp 80-93.

The World Bank (2015). *Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

**How to Cite:**
Castaman, Kiara. (2024). "Integration vs. Autonomy: Assessing Strategies for Indigenous Political Empowerment in Bolivia and Peru." Eds. Baxter, Megan K.; Lust, Ellen; and Shaber-Twedt, Rose. *Governance and Local Development Institute*, University of Gothenburg, Policy Brief no. 24, 2024.

## Policy Recommendations

The experiences of Peru and Bolivia offer valuable lessons for others grappling with decentralization, indigenous rights, and equitable governance. To address the autonomy-representation dilemma, policymakers should consider the following approaches:

- Adaptive Integration of Traditional Structures: Explore how traditional indigenous governance structures can be effectively integrated with state institutions. One example can be found in Mexico's usos y costumbres, which Díaz-Cayeros et al. (2014) argue may overcome the above capacity challenges.

- Hybrid Models of Autonomy and Integration: Combine offers of autonomy with greater political integration. This could involve allowing indigenous communities autonomy over resource allocation while maintaining a guaranteed share of municipal or provincial budgets.

- Collaborative Capacity Building: Policymakers should work in collaboration with indigenous communities. A collaborative approach would ensure programs reflect each community's needs, respect and incorporate local cultural practices, and align with traditional governance structures.

- Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish robust systems to monitor the outcomes of both the representation and autonomy approaches. This can help identify best practices, address emerging challenges, and inform future policy decisions.

- Flexible and Adaptive Policies: Recognize that the needs and capacities of indigenous communities may vary widely. Policies should be flexible enough to accommodate these differences, allowing for tailored approaches that can evolve over time.

## About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.

## Subscribe to our newsletter!

Sign up via this link

## Contact

Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg
Box 711, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
Visiting address: Sprängkullsgatan 19, Gothenburg
contact@gld.gu.se
Twitter
LinkedIn
Facebook