

Focal at the OAS General Assembly

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Summary

Invited by the Organization of American States (OAS), the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) attended the annual General Assembly meeting in Guatemala City in June. This was a first for FOCAL and for most of the other Canadian NGOs participating. It represents a further opening by the OAS to engage more actively with NGOs in the hemisphere. Although there has been significant forward movement, opinion remains divided on this issue in the hemisphere. Canada and other partners are working to develop an agreed framework for civil society interaction with all sectors of the OAS. The official Canadian Delegation to the General Assembly, led by David Kilgour, Secretary of State for Latin America and Africa, was vigorous on this and other issues including human security, inter-American drug policy, the finances of the Organization (arrears by member states), and reform of the cumbersome process by which the General Assembly does its business. The high level of Canadian engagement at the meeting in Guatemala also relates to the fact that the hemispheric spotlight is moving to Canada. The Trade Ministers will meet in Toronto in November to continue negotiations on the Free Trade Area of the Americas. The next General Assembly of the OAS will be held in Windsor in June, 2000. This series culminates with the Hemispheric Summit of Presidents and Prime Ministers in Quebec City in 2001.

Résumé

À l'invitation de l'Organisation des États Américains (OÉA), la Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques (FOCAL) a pris part à l'Assemblée générale annuelle tenue en juin dernier dans la capitale du Guatemala. Il s'agissait d'une première pour FOCAL, ainsi que pour la plupart des autres ONG canadiennes qui y ont également participé. Cette participation démontre une plus grande ouverture de l'OÉA qui souhaite s'engager plus activement aux côtés des ONG dans l'hémisphère. Bien que plusieurs efforts aient été déployés pour améliorer la participation de la société civile au sein du système interaméricain, les opinions divergent toujours sur cette question entre les pays de la région. Le Canada et d'autres partenaires s'emploient à concevoir un cadre commun d'interaction de la société civile avec tous les secteurs de l'OÉA. La délégation officielle du Canada à l'Assemblée générale, menée par David Kilgour, secrétaire d'État pour l'Amérique latine et l'Afrique, a contribué à mettre cette question au centre de l'ordre du jour de l'Assemblée générale ainsi que celles concernant la sécurité humaine, la politique inter-américaine de lutte contre la drogue, les finances de l'OÉA (soit les arriérés dus par certains États membres), ainsi que la réforme des procédures de l'Assemblée générale. La participation du gouvernement canadien à un haut niveau lors de l'Assemblée générale de Guatemala traduit également le fait que graduellement le projecteur hémisphérique se braque sur le Canada. Les ministres du Commerce vont se réunir à Toronto en novembre prochain pour poursuivre les négociations sur la Zone de libre-échange des Amériques (ZLÉA). La prochaine Assemblée générale de l'OÉA aura lieu à Windsor en juin 2000. Cette série de réunions culminera par le Sommet des chefs d'État de l'hémisphère qui aura lieu à Québec en 2001.

Sumario

Atendiendo a una invitación de la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA), la Fundación Canadiense para las Américas (FOCAL) asistió a la Asamblea General del organismo continental celebrada en la Ciudad de Guatemala. Se trata de la primera vez que FOCAL, al igual que muchas otras ONG canadienses, participa en este encuentro. Esta invitación representa una nueva apertura de la OEA para relacionarse más activamente con las ONG del hemisferio. Aunque el gesto ha significado un progreso importante, las opiniones sobre el tema continúan divididas en el continente. Canadá y otros socios están trabajando para desarrollar un sistema conjunto para la interacción de la sociedad civil con todos los sectores de la OEA. La delegación oficial de Canadá ante la Asamblea General, presidida por David Kilgour, Secretario de Estado para América Latina y África, fue enfática en éste y otros asuntos, como la seguridad ciudadana, la política interamericana para las drogas, las finanzas de la organización (deudas de los países miembros), y la necesidad de reformar el engorroso proceso del funcionamiento de la Asamblea General. El elevado nivel del compromiso canadiense en la reunión de Guatemala, también tiene que ver con el hecho de que el protagonismo hemisférico se está trasladando a Canadá. En noviembre de este año, los ministros de Comercio se reunirán en Toronto para continuar las negociaciones sobre el Área de Libre Comercio para las Américas. La próxima Asamblea General de la OEA se llevará a cabo en Windsor, en junio del 2000. Estos eventos culminarán con la Cumbre Hemisférica de Presidentes y Jefes de Estado a celebrarse en la ciudad de Quebec en el 2001.



FOCAL

Canadian Foundation for the Americas
Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques
Fundación Canadiense para las Américas
Fundação Canadense para as Américas

What was said?

Césaire Gaviria, Secretary General of the Organization of American States, on democracy and civil society:

Our work in this field [consolidation of the democratic process] is increasing, despite the limited resources at our disposal. We have expanded our activities with the legislatures and judiciaries, in addition to strengthening our traditional electoral support and observation programs. With Canada's support, we hope to step up these efforts in the legislative sphere as well. Also on the Organization's initiative, and ... after a prolonged effort the OAS has made itself more open to participation by civil society organizations. We hope that before this year is over we will have guidelines in place to govern their increased participation in our activities.

The Honourable David Kilgour, Secretary Of State (Latin America And Africa), on civil society:

At [the 1998 Second Summit of the Americas in] Santiago, Leaders recognized the positive role that non-state actors can play, and they endorsed greater dialogue between governments and civil society in advancing the hemispheric agenda. Canadians take this commitment seriously. As we prepare for the next Summit of the Americas in 2001 in Quebec City, my government is working to establish a process for wide public consultations aimed at giving civil society a voice.

The Honourable David Kilgour, Secretary Of State (Latin America And Africa) on financial concerns at the OAS:

One well-recognized difficulty constraining all bodies and specialized agencies of the OAS is the deep financial crisis facing the Organization. Core programs are being left unfunded. The implementation of the spate of new mandates flowing from the Summit is even more precarious. The first indispensable step is resolution of the arrears problem.

FOCAL at the OAS General Assembly

César Gaviria, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), invited FOCAL and other NGOs to attend the annual meeting of the General Assembly in Guatemala in June of this year.

This initiative was part of an opening by the OAS to engage more actively with civil society in the hemisphere. It has been vigorously promoted by Canada and a number of other OAS member nations. For FOCAL it was the first opportunity to attend an OAS General Assembly. The FOCAL delegation comprised: John W. Graham (Vice Chair of the Board), Martin Roy and Cristina Warren (FOCAL Policy Analysts). Four other NGO delegations from

Canada attended: Inter-Pares, the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, the International Council on Social Welfare, and the Assembly of First Nations.

Civil Society

Canada is pressing for more effective civil society participation at all working levels of the OAS. The Canadian Mission to the OAS, along with several Latin American and Caribbean allies, has been promoting the development of mechanisms which would engage NGOs, draw from their experiences, and work productively with their skills and their outreach throughout the Americas. The OAS has established the Unit for Sustainable Development and the Environment which is a focal

point for NGOs in these areas. Other, and more embryonic civil society interaction (especially relating to the Summit of the Americas process), is being handled by the OAS Office of Summit Follow-up. Mexico, a traditional opponent of intrusive vigour from the OAS, is cooperating with the civil society initiative. Canada is also promoting similar initiatives for civil society participation in the Summit of the Americas and the Free Trade Area of the Americas – the two other inter-American multilateral processes now underway (Canada currently chairs each of these processes).

Despite these positive developments there are problems and some national apprehensions to be overcome. This anxiety was reflected in the opening speech of President Alvaro Arzu of Guatemala, who was echoing a long standing concern addressed to North Americans countries that – your civil society is our uncivil society – (not his words). Relations between Governments and NGOs have often been bitterly polarized in some member countries. However, a dialogue is well underway and the presence of 33 NGOs at the Guatemalan General Assembly is a sign of vitality.

Equally positive is the adoption of a resolution (introduced by the Dominican Republic) to establish a committee of the Permanent Council on the role of civil society in relation to the OAS. This committee will consider the scope of civil society participation with different sectors of the OAS and propose a mechanism for the accreditation of civil society organizations.

Globalization and Democracy

President Arzu warned that the negative impact of economic globalization on the poor sectors of society is undermining the hard won gains of stable, representative democracy in the Americas. Offering his assessment of the General Assembly, José Vicente Rangel, the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, grumbled about coming to a meeting where there was too much talk and too little action.

Yet the Foreign Ministers succeeded in having focused discussions on items of importance to the region. Despite its rhetoric, slow moving pace and uncertain navigation (vices it shares with the UN), the OAS is achieving useful results. The defence of democracy and civil society are cases in point.

The General Assembly discussed a United States resolution aimed at consolidating democracy by creating the mechanisms intended to forestall perceived threats to constitutional democracy in a member country. This initiative was seen as counter productive by many delegations, who regarded its invasive character as inimical to the existing achievements of hemispheric democracy building. The resolution was diplomatically neutered with a language change. In fact, for the past decade the OAS has been the world pioneer in procedures to defend democratic governments against unconstitutional disruption. The Charter of the OAS makes representative democracy a prerequisite for membership in the organization (currently an impediment for Cuba's return.) Active Canadian support for OAS activities to strengthen democracy, including the creation of the OAS Unit for the Promotion of Democracy, reflects the strength of Canada's ongoing commitment to democracy in the region.

Finance and Reform

Secretary General Gaviria alerted members to the hazards of the OAS's shrinking financial base: "... the Organization's financial health has been declining precipitously as a direct result of mounting arrears in member state quotas and the decline in 'other revenues.'" Seven countries are seriously in arrears and, of the thirty-four members, only ten (Canada included) are fully paid up. In contrast to its position at the United Nations, the United States is not a major defaulter.

Peter Boehm, Canada's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the OAS, proposed and obtained the establishment of a special group, composed of several member states,

to find a path out of the morass. Boehm then addressed the time consuming and resolution congested modus operandi of the General Assembly itself. "Wouldn't it be better," he suggested, "if the General Assembly focused on ... the priority work of the organization rather than approve work that has not yet been completed?" He proposed that the time of ministers and delegations would be more productive if "competing interests", (the projects or initiatives of individual member states, sub-regions and the Organization) were to be addressed "side by side with existing resources and then prioritized".

Inter-American Conventions: Weapons, the Disabled and Corruption

Member states (including Canada) signed an important Inter-American convention in Guatemala:

- *The Inter-American Convention on Transparency in Conventional Nuclear Weapons Acquisitions* calls on signatory countries to disclose their defense budgets and to report their imports and exports of certain types of weapons, including combat vehicles, fighter jets, attack helicopters and missiles. (For the full text of this Convention, see the OAS web site www.oas.org/areas/csh/english/docconv&treatconvweapons.htm)

In addition Canada appended its name to the list of signatories of the Inter-American Convention on Corruption (1996). (For the full text of this Convention, see the OAS web site www.oas.org/juridico/english/ga-res97/eres1398.html)

Dialogue on Drugs

David Kilgour emphatically stated the Canadian position that inter-American drug policy should be linked to the wide family of governance issues and therefore set within the human security context. The majority of member states welcomed this approach. FOCAL contributed to the content of this

statement with the results of an Expert Group Meeting on Drugs and Human Security held in San José, Costa Rica in March 1999. (FOCAL initiated this meeting in cooperation with the International Centre for Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy, the United Nations Latin American Institute for Crime Prevention and the Treatment of Offenders, the Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized Crime and Corruption, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.) Member States also applauded the accomplishments of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), which has been the first OAS agency to deliver on a Summit commitment to create a multilateral evaluation mechanism for national anti-drug activities.

Re-Election of OAS Secretary General

César Gaviria (former President of Colombia) was re-elected by acclamation for a second term as Secretary General of the OAS (1999-2004).

The Forthcoming Summit Season: Challenges for Canada

From September 29 to October 2 1999 Mme Chrétien will preside at a conference of the First Spouses of the Americas in Ottawa. In November Canada will host the Trade Ministers of the Americas to discuss progress on the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Then, by June 2000, Canada will host the General Assembly in Windsor and many of the decisions there will set the agenda for the Hemispheric Summit of the Heads of Government and Heads of State at Quebec City in 2001. The host government has the opportunity to set its stamp on these meetings. NGO and other civil society representatives are anxious to infuse energy into such issues as economic integration, decentralization, corruption, the declining quality of urban life, impunity of public, police and military officials for human rights abuses, indigenous rights and sustainable development. Civil

society groups throughout the hemisphere will be looking to Canada to advance and consolidate the gains that have been made in accessing hemispheric multilateral processes.

FOCAL at the General Assembly: a Useful Exercise

The General Assembly was an appropriate and enriching

experience for FOCAL. It provided a first hand understanding of the chemistry as well as the mechanics of the OAS executive body at work. With unrestricted access to almost all of the sessions (only the Foreign Ministers' dialogue was *in camera*), FOCAL was able to observe the interaction of issues with countries, sub-regions and civil society. Throughout there were informal and invaluable opportunities for

networking and for specific interaction on subjects of interest. And a word of thanks – although fully stretched with an impressive range of activities and interventions, the Canadian Delegation found time to give FOCAL (and others) pertinent background briefings.

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The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) is an independent, non-governmental organization that fosters informed and timely policy debate and dialogue on issues of importance to decision-makers and opinion leaders in Canada and throughout the Western Hemisphere. Established in 1990, FOCAL's mission is to develop a greater understanding of important hemispheric issues and help to build a stronger community of the Americas.

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