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Hemispheric Agenda Aims to Employ Youth, Engage Civil Society

U.S. official discusses need for providing decent jobs for young people

By Eric Green
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Washington — Events aimed at providing decent work for young people and involving civil society in policy decisions are laying the groundwork for the fifth Summit of the Americas, scheduled for April 17-19, 2009, in Trinidad and Tobago.

Charlotte Ponticelli, the U.S. Labor Department's deputy under secretary for international affairs, will speak November 5 at a panel discussion at the Organization of American States in Washington on "Youth and Decent Work."

Ponticelli told *America.gov* that as much as 50 percent of the populations of many countries in the region are age 15 and younger. This means, she said, that good educational opportunities that teach marketable job skills to young people are the "biggest predictors" for their future success and for their countries' economic development. (See "[Better Education for Youth Cuts Crime in Central America.](#)")

The term "decent work," Ponticelli said, describes productive employment in a safe and healthy workplace where core protections for employees conform to international standards on labor rights.

Ponticelli, who served as the State Department's senior coordinator for international women's issues from 2003 to 2006, followed by a year as State's senior adviser to the assistant secretary for population, refugees and migration, said she and her counterparts in the Americas also are involved in preventing the exploitation of child labor by building a nation's capacity to provide education and employment opportunities in the formal job sector.

Exploitation of child labor is the reverse side of the "opportunity and employment coin," Ponticelli said. The formal job sector, which she called the "desirable and most productive" type of employment, refers to steady jobs that can offer paid benefits such as health insurance. The so-called informal job sector allows core labor principles to be "overlooked or pushed under the table," Ponticelli said.

Offering decent work for young people is critical for Latin America and the Caribbean, where the rate of youth unemployment in the region was 16.6 percent in 2006, according to a report by the International Labour Organization. What adds to the problem, Ponticelli said, is that the region has large, growing populations under the age of 15. Many of these young people attend only 2.5 hours of school per day.

A policy paper published by the Inter-American Development Bank found that increasingly in the Americas, unemployment rates rise as workers' ages decrease. In many Latin American countries, unemployment among youth aged 15-19 is double that of young people aged 20-24, who in turn have significantly higher rates of unemployment than workers over 24.

Ponticelli said there is no single solution to youth unemployment, but a number of hemispheric meetings, including a May "Seminar on Youth Employment" in Brazil, have focused on finding "real-life" solutions.

Another effort that might help abate youth unemployment, Ponticelli said, was a September 24 conference in New York that launched the Pathways to Prosperity Initiative in the Americas to reduce poverty, open economies and strengthen democracies.

Ponticelli said the next big event related to youth employment will be a December 4-5 workshop in Mexico City that will build on the principles laid out in the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation to improve employee working conditions and living standards. The labor cooperation pact was a supplement to the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, signed by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ALSO RECOGNIZED

An October 30-31 forum in Trinidad and Tobago's capital of Port-of-Spain was intended to allow Caribbean civil society organizations to review the Summit of the Americas' draft declaration, entitled "Securing our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability."

Racquel Smith, an official with one of the event's co-sponsors — the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) — told *America.gov* that the meeting offered an opportunity for Caribbean civil society organizations to ensure the summit's draft declaration will reflect citizens' views at the 2009 Trinidad and Tobago gathering of hemispheric leaders.

Smith, FOCAL's manager for inter-American governance and civil society initiatives, said Caribbean civil society groups at the October meeting would highlight their "steady work in promoting the development and democratic governance targets in the draft declaration. This is very important, as the work of Caribbean civil society deserves more recognition and support." (See "[Citizen Involvement in Summit of the Americas Process Expanding](#).")

The goal, she said, is to "spread awareness about the work of Caribbean civil society to others, but also to broaden the awareness" among Caribbean groups that the summit offers a "space for regional cooperation on the promotion of democratic norms, prosperity, security" and other issues.

Connected to the civil society forum was an October 29-30 “Youth Dialogue” in Port-of-Spain that discussed how the summit’s theme can be made relevant to young people and promoted the importance of creating young entrepreneurs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For more information, see the statement on the [Pathways to Prosperity initiative](#) on the White House Web site.

The policy paper on [youth unemployment](#) is available on the Web site of the Inter-American Development Bank, and the [International Labour Organization report](#) is on the organization’s Web site.

More information about the [summit draft declaration and the civil society forum](#) is on the Web site of the National Secretariat for the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

<http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2008/October/200810310928181xeneerg0.7447779.html>