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ESQUEL GROUP FOUNDATION PRIORITIES FOR THE 2001 SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

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INTRODUCTION

The Summits of the Americas have taken the lead in the consideration of the role of civil society in the life of the nations of this hemisphere. For all those working on civil society—civil society organizations, the private sector on the various countries, and public and private donors—the Summits have made a significant contribution by identifying issues that will benefit from citizen participation. The next Summit of the Americas, scheduled to take place during April 2001 in Quebec City, should seek to continue that tradition by updating the priorities that should be addressed.

The document prepared by the Government of Canada highlights the need for the Declaration and Plan of Action of the next Summit to “make explicit a fundamental commitment to creating conditions to sustain democracy and promote prosperity and social equity to the benefit of all citizens of the Americas.” In this context, it is important to highlight Canada’s civic tradition and the deep commitment of its democratic institutions to citizen participation, which makes it particularly suited to promote civic engagement as an essential building block of democratic and prosperous societies. Efforts to strengthen civil society in the Hemisphere during the last decade have accomplished significant advances. However, they have not been accompanied by similar efforts to support the development of a culture of civic engagement suited for the citizen of today’s world. The Quebec City Summit provides a unique opportunity to cover this important gap.

The Esquel Group Foundation submits this document to Summit authorities and civil society organizations for their consideration in drafting the Declaration and Plan of Action. The document is the product of a systematic analysis of the issues relative to the development of civil society based on its sixteen years of experience and that of its partner organizations throughout the region.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND TRUST-BUILDING IN LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America and the Caribbean, growing participation by organizations of what many call the “Third Sector” might be seen as indicative of an active civil society – and certainly much assistance has been directed to such organizations by national and international development programs. However, in retrospect we realize that something significant is usually missing, which we choose to call a culture of civic engagement, and we suggest that this new greatly increased organizational involvement cannot by itself be said to form a civil society. In fact, we make the distinction between citizens’ *engagement* and their mere *participation*. For a while the latter has increased as governments increasingly seek the help of non-governmental actors in implementing public programs and those actors become clients or contractors of governments. Engaged citizens instead understand and contribute to setting public priorities and work *with* their government in addressing them.

Active participation of citizens in public life has been a norm in the United States and Canada for much of their histories, manifested through a proliferation of affinity groups, organizations and associations of citizens with common interests. This collection of entities mediating between the individual and the state is loosely termed “civil society.” In current development thinking, strengthening “it” is a necessary complement to both enhancing government performance and supporting the emergence of an independent, entrepreneurial spirit. In this context, nevertheless, “strengthening civil society” has been equated just with supporting the non-profit sector, whether by improving the legal environment in which it functions or by increasing its operational capacity. The underlying assumption is that through the externally promoted proliferation and consolidation of the non-profit sector, citizens are made more capable of civic participation.

But it has not been this way in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the words of government and non-government leaders gathered by the Inter-American Dialogue:

Skepticism is growing about whether democratic rule and market economic policies will ever be able to satisfy the demands of Latin America’s citizens for good government, steady economic advance, social justice, and personal security...these efforts will endure and prosper only if Latin America’s governments are able to produce better results and recapture the confidence of ordinary citizens. Democracy is under strain in Latin America.¹

We firmly believe that good governance and sustainable development in the Americas demand the active involvement of its citizens. But we also suggest that the increased participation and relevance of so-called civil society organizations has not necessarily brought about increased civic engagement on the part of the ordinary citizen. In fact, it has created a disconnect between civil society and the political institutions. Confusion reigns as the relationship between the citizen and the state is altered. There has been little reflection on the consequences of such confusion upon the citizen and society. Leading political figures in some of the countries have expressed their belief that the strengthening of civil society organizations undermines representative

¹ Inter-American Dialogue, *The Americas at the Millennium: A Time of Testing*, report from the Sol M. Linowitz Forum (Washington, DC: November 11, 1999).



democratic institutions. We suggest that the reality is that the actions of some such civil society organizations as well as of some governmental bodies in the absence of a culture of civic engagement can be erosive of democratic life.

The situation is also overwhelming the citizen, who is left with a feeling of abandonment and impotence over the consequences of these rapid changes, which she neither understands nor clearly sees where they will finally lead. In some countries it is manifested as a crisis of trust on the part of citizens with regard to established public institutions and political parties. In most countries, nevertheless, there is rampant cynicism about public institutions and disillusionment with democracy.

CIVIL SOCIETY REVISITED

A new economic and social development strategy paradigm has grown from reflection on the weaknesses of the policies that dominated the previous 50 years, particularly regarding the eradication of poverty. The transformation arose from the realization that, first, sustainable development requires mobilization of resources from within communities and/or countries themselves; and, second, the people of the communities and countries affected by development interventions –the “stakeholders”-- must be heard in the decision-making process. Today’s convictions about the need for active citizen participation grow from these same roots.

A strong and active civil society --one in which the engagement of citizens in public life is routine -- is widely understood to constitute citizen participation and civic engagement at its fullest. An active civil society emerges from, and is a key indicator of a strong civic life in which community solidarity, volunteerism and philanthropy are all important. We seek these qualities from an active civil society.

But the question must be asked: Do these desirable qualities in a community result from civil society activities per se, or do they emanate from some underlying “civicness”? Strong citizen participation is likely to generate an active civil society, but does this mean that an active civil society inevitably leads to increased civic engagement? In fact, the focus on institutions may have just the opposite effect. By realigning allegiances towards the priorities of donors, external efforts to strengthen civil society organizations may have the inadvertent effect of weakening the very civic life that would nourish those organizations under ideal circumstances.

But what are the conditions and processes that generate a sense of “civicness” within a society and result not only in an “active” civil society but also in a social-minded private sector? How do historic norms and patterns of behavior shape the “culture” of a community or a country, either facilitating or hindering civil society activity? None of these questions has simple answers. Today the common citizen of Latin America is not being assisted in defining her opportunities and obligations. We see a large population composed primarily of non-participatory individuals, unversed in – or at best confused about – the rights and responsibilities beyond suffrage that they are supposed to have in a time of democratic political regimes and market oriented economies.



Citizen participation in the many organizations that form civil society becomes effective when it achieves a sense of priorities and direction. The search for this commonality of purpose we conceive of as civic engagement. Only when the civil society and the citizen “know what they want,” contribute to its achievement and trust democratic institutions can the government reach its maximum strength to bring it about.

A CITIZEN FOR TODAY’S WORLD

To address these questions it is essential to take action in the different areas that impact the formation of the citizen and his perceptions of his role in a democratic society. ***The Summit of the Americas can contribute to this endeavor by emphasizing the importance of citizen formation and the development of a culture of civic engagement as a basis for a democratic and economically healthy society.*** It should also highlight the need for governments and regional development organizations to understand this need as a critical complement to the efforts already under way to support democratic governmental and non-governmental institutions, and call upon them to develop initiatives to address it.

The following are general areas of action identified by the Esquel Group Foundation. Specific action items under these key areas are among the many activities that could be pursued for the construction of citizenship and civic engagement and can be developed during future discussions regarding proposals under each one of the Summit baskets:

- (a) Political Society-Civil Society Relationship:** The Millennium Report of the Inter American Dialogue affirms that “democracy is under strain” in Latin Americaⁱⁱ. There has been a notable, increased caution and even negativeness with respect to civil society on the part of some Latin American governments. In high-level fora, the thought has been expressed that “civil society is attempting to usurp functions of democratic institutions”. In general this erroneous concept is prompted by the consequences of a lack of a clear understanding of the rights and roles of the citizen, civil society and the State on the part of all sides.

However in Latin America, an awareness is beginning to emerge of the fact that a civic foundation to democratic life mandates a new relationship of citizens to democratic institutions. This requires a dialogue of citizens with public officials and politicians that is neither advocatorial and confrontational nor supplicant and clientelistic, one in which citizens are civic actors who delegate responsibility for implementing public choices to their governments. To develop practices of constructive engagement for shared identification of priorities and shared commitment of efforts to address them goes far beyond simple advocacy. It requires profound changes in attitudes on the part of both as well as the development of practical mechanisms that can be put in place to exercise it. Governments will be better able to recapture the confidence of ordinary citizens as soon as their dialogue with civil society flows freely.

The Summit of the Americas “Democracy” basket can contribute significantly in

ⁱⁱ Ibid.



this area by acknowledging the need for constructive dialogue on the relationship between the broader political society (including political parties) and civil society, and calling upon the OAS to provide a space for this purpose. It is rather urgent to implement activities with this goal in mind as we have seen many indications that efforts need to be made soon to overcome governmental and political misunderstandings about the nature and role of civil society. Specific issues that could be explored include the relationship between civil society and the legislature; citizen participation in the formulation of legislative proposals; the relationship between civil society and public administration: citizen participation in social-service delivery; and the relationship between civil society and political parties. A key opportunity to address this relationship could be the meeting of ministers planned at the OAS as a result of Resolution AG/RES 1760 of 06 June 2000, to “facilitate exchange of experiences and the development of a common frame of reference on public policy for strengthening the process of decentralization and consolidation of local governance and citizen participation at the municipal and community levels.”

- (b) Education for Democracy:** Above it is suggested that a culture of civic engagement is the appropriate environment in which to strengthen governmental as well as non-governmental instruments of democracy. Education—formal and informal—is essential for the long-term development of such a civic culture and thus merits special attention. The Summit’s *Education for Democracy Initiative* provides a good precedent for a call to action in this area and the Quebec City Summit should build on it.

Much work needs to be done in the study of the process of civic learning as it occurs among citizens and the creation of a civic culture. A number of innovative efforts in this area exist in the countries of the Hemisphere, including the United States and Canada, from which important lessons could be learned. ***The Summit Plan of Action, under both the “Democracy” and “Realizing Human Potential” baskets can call upon bilateral and multilateral development agencies to undertake such studies and provide funding for pilot testing innovative programs in the area of citizen formation.***

Similarly, citizens can “learn by doing.” Conversations among citizens form the bedrock of a civic culture. But the needed style of conversation must have several special characteristics. It should be inclusive of all voices in the community, recognize the inherent tensions in every healthy community and accept them as necessary and constructive. It should accept expert advice but recognize that the ultimate judgment will lie with the citizens as they see their needs. It should accept that there will be no “perfect” policy but rather one that best addresses the often conflictive needs of all. Such a civic conversation generates a *public knowledge and understanding* that is not attainable any other way, about the facts behind the issues, about the legitimate differences between citizens, and about the motivating values within each. The *public judgment* arising from such a conversation is the culture medium in which trust for public institutions is built. ***The Summit can call upon governments to recognize its importance and to promote this type of civic conversations within their countries as a key element in the formation of informed and responsible citizens.***



(c) Private Sector Collaboration: In a broader interpretation of corporate citizenship, business has a unique role to play in social and economic development by promoting a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. A culture of civic entrepreneurship is consonant with a culture of business entrepreneurship; both are fed by the same willingness to innovate and take risks in an environment whose structures are predictable. We would like to underline our conviction that the collaboration between the private sector and civil society organizations can play a very important role in the strengthening of civil society and in the development of a culture of philanthropy and volunteerism. We have reasons to believe strongly—based on our experiences from participating in developments of that nature in several Latin American countries—that this special association of civil society organizations with the private sector can greatly enhance the local capacity to sort out basic problems for a strong civil society by combining entrepreneurial drive and social responsibility.

The Summit, in its “Creating Prosperity” basket, can call upon national governments to acknowledge this special role of the private sector in the development of a civic culture and civil society. To achieve this, however, they will need to be supported by development organizations through the study and analysis of the subject and the facilitation of spaces for governments to share their experiences in this area.

CONCLUSION

Fostering a culture of civic engagement and achieving a better understanding of the relationship between civil society and democratic institutions are priorities for governments and civil society alike. This is urgently needed to address the present crisis of confidence of the ordinary citizen in public and private institutions. The Government of Canada and the Heads of State have a unique opportunity in the 2001 Summit of the Americas to recognize that in the promotion of democracy the formation of the citizen is a key building block that we can no longer afford to ignore.