



FOCAL

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

FOCAL Comments to the Special Committee on Inter-American Summits
Management of the Organization for American States
November 7, 2000
(Social Priority Basket)

Summary:

Poverty and income distribution, education, and the health-environment link (namely, wider access to clean air and water) are the immediate social priorities of the hemisphere. With these priorities in mind, FOCAL suggests that Action Items in the Quebec City Summit Agenda should strengthen the ability of the governments of the region to deliver basic social services and improve their social contracts with the citizens of the hemisphere.

Comments:

- From our understanding of the many social challenges in the hemisphere, poverty and income distribution top the list. FOCAL's overriding concern is that the language and commitments in the documents of the Summits of the Americas are still not relaying the urgency of poverty and income distribution.
- The previous two Summits did not place a clear focus on these problems, nor did they present a concrete social agenda overall. The key issue at the Santiago Summit was education, yet the failure of governments and International Financial Institutions to mobilize the resources and political will necessary to deliver on education commitments has led to deep-rooted scepticism in the region about the Summit's capability of addressing fundamental social challenges.
- Strengthening democracies in the hemisphere has been a hotly debated topic amongst the region's leaders in recent months. Yet strengthening democracies has not included discussion about strengthening the role of the state to deliver basic social services or building back the capacity and legitimacy of the state to generate sufficient revenue for social spending. Indeed, debates in both the upcoming U.S. and Canadian elections are revolving around the extent to which governments can play the role of social service deliverers. We believe Canada has historic traditions of social policy models that can

be used throughout the hemisphere to mitigate the harshest effects of economic globalization and the transition to market economies.

- FOCAL maintains strong relationships with NGOs, policy centres, research centres, and think tanks that have vast experience analyzing the social priorities in the hemisphere. In this presentation we endorse the positions of many of these groups.
- It is very difficult for FOCAL to make comments on a Summit basket that we have not seen. We are commenting on a discussion paper on Summit Themes that was written almost six months ago and are dismayed that a more detailed document on the social priorities of the Quebec City Summit has not been put forth for civil society consultation in the hemisphere. For us to give constructive contributions to help build general interest and support for the Summit, we need access to timely, relevant information.
- FOCAL believes that placing Summit priorities such as gender issues, and the environment into “baskets” causes arbitrary divisions of responsibilities that will impede an integrated focus on these items.
- Even though we are unable to attend this important OAS Special Committee for Inter-American Summits Management, we would ask participants at this meeting to pick up copies of the latest edition of our joint Summit Newsletter, which we produce with Florida International University.

Immediate Social Priorities in the Hemisphere:

- *Social Sector Reform*-- We believe that as Summit host Canada should raise issues of social sector reform in the hemisphere: modernizing the region's tax systems (federal, provincial, municipal); pension reform; modernizing labour standards; developing specific measures to deal with the growing informal sectors of the region (i.e. informal workers escape paying taxes and do not receive social services).
- *Education*—At the Quebec City Summit action items on education must go beyond what was committed to in Santiago. A renewed emphasis is needed on the key priorities of access to primary and secondary education with the addition of quantifiable targets. If the Quebec City Summit does nothing more than establish a monitoring group on hemispheric education, then that in itself will be a big step forward.
- *Environment*—We believe that the environment should not be in the Creating Prosperity basket alone. In this hemisphere, the environment is a social priority with social impacts.

- *The Health-Environment Link*-- Though touched on at the Bolivia Sustainable Development Summit, further concrete action items on the link between health and the environment are needed, namely: wide access to clean water, and the reduction of respiratory diseases in children, which is tied to the lack of clean air in urban areas. Focusing on these two issues alone would accomplish a tremendous amount. We believe that the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is doing a very good job implementing past Summit priorities on health in the hemisphere. The health-environment link is a new priority that should be given serious consideration.
- *Connectivity*—FOCAL believes in the power of new technology to help countries progress into the 21st Century. However, the distribution of computers does not constitute an immediate priority. The growth of information technology in the region is happening in any case, often without government intervention. Governmental resources therefore need not be diverted to this initiative. FOCAL is unclear as to whether the connectivity action item will call for the creation of a funding base for information technology. If this is the case, it will divert government attention and financial resources away from ongoing first tier social priorities. If however, the Quebec City Summit is aiming for a declaration on the general usefulness of information technology, then we support the initiative.
- *Cultural Diversity*—Again, FOCAL supports a declaration by Heads of State supporting cultural diversity in the hemisphere. The theme did not exist in past Summits, and new language in the Quebec City Summit is welcome. However, the hemisphere does not need to be reminded of the richness and diversity of its many cultures. It would be unfortunate if this theme attracts attention and resources from other more immediate social priorities.
- Governments of the hemisphere agreed to a focused, results-oriented, relevant Agenda and Plan of Action for the Quebec City Summit. In this respect we remain unclear as to what would be a focused, results-oriented, and relevant action item relating to connectivity or cultural diversity. More importantly, civil society groups and the populations of the hemisphere are not making demands for connectivity or cultural diversity before they are seeking access to quality education, adequate healthcare, personal security and environmental safety.