

Enhancing the Dialogue between Canadians and Government on Inter-American Issues

Summary of Inter-Departmental Discussions Held with Civil Society November 26, 2004

On November 26, 2004, a small group of [participants](#) from Foreign Affairs Canada, other government departments and civil society organizations with a common interest in the Organization of American States and Summit of the Americas process met at the Lester B. Pearson Building, in Ottawa. Our objective was to gather suggestions from stakeholders on methods to inform and consult civil society in the development of Canadian positions in the context of the Inter-American system. The meeting produced a series of ideas, some of which - including a regular newsletter aimed at informing civil society on hemispheric cooperation and Summit of the Americas - are subsequently being implemented.

1. Best information exchange practices: what works and for whom?

According to some Government representatives, civil society organizations are more likely to have an influence on Government's positions when their recommendations are presented in the form of **short lists of concrete ideas**, which are easier to digest than long complex documents.

From a civil society perspective, producing such lists requires considerable resources and time, and even then, influence on Government's positions is not always evident. FAC undertook to provide clearer feedback. Some civil society participants suggested that **providing funds to support civil society participation** would be a good investment for the Government, and some felt that Government should also consider offering to help civil society organizations to **write documents in "government-friendly" language** to increase the impact of their recommendations. In response, Government participants offered assurances that concrete recommendations would be given consideration and, as appropriate, would be re-stated as required in declaratory or other styles as required by the context.

It is difficult for civil society based outside of Ottawa to follow the Government's agenda in the hemisphere. The recommended solution was the publication of a [regular newsletter](#).

Although consultations prior to an event are important, **post-mortem meetings**, where civil society representatives have an opportunity to follow-up on issues of interest are equally important. The post-mortem after the Special Summit was held up as an excellent example. FAC offered to hold post-mortem meetings in follow-up to meetings of the [Summit Implementation Review Group](#) (SIRG), beginning with the one to be held 9-10 March 2005.

2. Better focussing civil society engagement

Government and civil society representatives agreed that they should **work on specific themes**. Once themes are identified, interested stakeholders can work in smaller groups, with increased

efficiency. In addition to the importance of organizing thematic consultations on specific issues, civil society raised the importance of ensuring that **consultations are sustainable**.

Although trade-related issues - such as corporate social responsibility, corruption, and small and medium enterprises - are often discussed at the OAS and Summits, International Trade Canada has its own consultation process on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Civil society was encouraged to pursue its interest in providing input on the FTAA through that process.

3. Expanding the dialogue

In the lead-up to the Fourth Summit of the Americas, which will focus on the theme “Creating jobs to fight poverty and strengthen democratic governance”, the Government of Canada would like to encourage the **involvement of the business sector**. Canadian business is mainly interested in investment, opening markets and having a predictable climate in which to do business. The Government is more likely to get them involved by approaching them on those issues as they relate to the Summit theme. An approach that has proven effective in the past was to provide funding to an umbrella organization such as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce to gather input through a series of cross-Canada roundtables.

The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) also announced its **intention to organize regular meetings for Canadian civil society** and possibly some Washington-based organizations in preparation for the Summit.

4. Channels of Communications

FAC shares regularly updated information on its **website** www.americascanada.org, to which a “Countdown to the Summit” section will soon be added. Following requests from civil society, FAC advised that sectoral meetings would be flagged and that links to ITCan sites would be added for FTAA information. The official Government of Canada response to the Argentine concept paper on the Summit theme is now available on the Summit Secretariat website. Comments from Civil Society can be submitted to the Secretariat office and copied to the Argentine chair.

Given the human resources needs involved, a FAC website “chat box” is not feasible. However, the idea of a **newsletter** supported by many civil society representatives and mentioned in section 1 of this report is now being implemented. A **protected website** for Canadian eyes only was recommended as a means to share information and is being explored. **Face to face meetings as well as more regular contact** by telephone and email, it was agreed, are also important, and the suggestion was made that such meetings could be co-sponsored to share the financial burden. Civil society could share mailing lists to help expand the communications network.

5. Two-way communication

Hemispheric cooperation is happening not only at the government level, and the Government would welcome being kept informed of civil society’s activities in this regard. Civil society representatives confirmed that they were active in the hemisphere; initiatives by the Indigenous

Bar Association and Rights and Democracy were mentioned. Civil society representatives also stressed that their foreign partners often lack resources and information to be fully involved in the hemispheric cooperation process, and have little access to their Governments.