

Adapting to a New Playing Field? Civil Society Inclusion in the Hemisphere's Multilateral Processes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 1990s a new manifestation of the trend toward democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean has been the increased civil society involvement in policy-making at national, regional, and multilateral levels. At various presidential summits and meetings since 1994, hemispheric leaders have made commitments to involve civil society organizations in policy-making and have approved new mechanisms to implement this goal. Nevertheless, governments' records on consulting with civil society on the broader hemispheric agenda are patchy due to such problems as scarce resources, fears of chaos, uncertainties about the criteria for access and accountability of civil society organizations, and the inability or unwillingness to satisfy civil society's demands. In some cases governments simply lack the political will to consult with civil society.

As host of the 2001 Summit of the Americas, Canada is making civil society inclusion a major hemispheric policy issue. Indeed, the Canada Summit could represent an unprecedented opportunity for civil society organizations to make a substantive contribution toward the implementation of initiatives in the economic, political, and social development of the hemisphere. First however, strong leadership is needed from the Organization of American States (OAS) with support of the Canadian government to strengthen the relationship between hemispheric governments and civil society organizations. This will involve consolidating and publicizing the existence of the new mechanisms for inclusion, facilitating domestic civil society consultations in each member state on the Summit agenda, encouraging civil society organizations to participate in the Summit of the Americas process, and making the information available for them to do so.

This paper deals with civil society inclusion in the hemisphere's multilateral processes and suggests a few ways of making this new engagement more constructive for both civil society and government actors. The suggestions and analysis in the paper are based on the premise that active, vibrant civil society organizations often play a valuable role in deepening democracy, particularly in countries where democratic institutions and traditions are still new. As policy-making in the hemisphere extends from national to multilateral levels, civil society organizations increasingly function to foster democracy by ensuring that policy-makers at the multilateral level take citizens' interests seriously. In the year before the 2001 Canada Summit, a proliferation of civil society initiatives is certain. In itself, this trend demonstrates the widening of the space for policy-making in the hemisphere and the engagement with new actors in processes that were previously closed to citizens of the Americas.

RESUMÉ

La participation grandissante de la société civile à l'élaboration des politiques aux niveaux national, régional et multilatéral dans les années 1990 a constitué une nouvelle marque de la tendance vers l'affirmation de la démocratie en Amérique latine et les Caraïbes. Au cours de plusieurs sommets et réunions de chefs d'état depuis 1994, les dirigeants des Amériques se sont engagés à faire participer les organismes de la société civile à l'élaboration des politiques, et se sont dotés de nouveaux mécanismes pour y parvenir. Néanmoins, il faut bien reconnaître que le bilan des consultations de la société civile sur les grands dossiers hémisphériques est très inégal en raison de problèmes comme la pénurie de ressources, la peur du chaos, les incertitudes quant aux critères d'accès et de responsabilisation des organismes de la société civile, ainsi que l'incapacité ou l'absence de volonté de faire droit aux demandes de la société civile. Dans certains cas, les gouvernements n'ont tout simplement pas la volonté politique de demander l'avis de la société civile.

continued on page 2



FOCAL

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

En tant qu'hôte du Sommet des Amériques en 2001, le Canada fait de l'inclusion de la société civile l'une des questions politiques les plus importantes de l'hémisphère. En effet, le Sommet qui se tiendra au Canada pourrait représenter une occasion sans précédent pour les organismes de la société civile de contribuer substantiellement à la mise en oeuvre d'initiatives de développement économique, politique et social dans l'hémisphère. Toutefois, il faut d'abord un leadership fort de la part de l'Organisation des États américains (OÉA) appuyé par le gouvernement du Canada si l'on veut renforcer les rapports entre les gouvernements des Amériques et les organismes de la société civile. Pour cela il faudra consolider et faire connaître l'existence de nouveaux mécanismes d'inclusion, faciliter les consultations domestiques de la société civile dans chacun des États membres au sujet des points à l'ordre du jour du Sommet, encourager les organismes de la société civile à participer au mécanisme du Sommet des Amériques et leur fournir l'information disponible pour ce faire.

Cette étude traite de la tendance à l'inclusion de la société civile dans les mécanismes multilatéraux de l'hémisphère, et propose différentes façons de faire en sorte que ce nouvel engagement soit plus constructif tant pour les acteurs de la société civile que pour ceux des gouvernements. Les propositions et analyses que l'on trouve dans cette étude reposent sur l'idée que des organismes de la société civile actifs et dynamiques jouent souvent un rôle très utile pour enraciner la démocratie, particulièrement dans les pays où les institutions et traditions démocratiques sont encore récentes. À mesure que l'élaboration des politiques dans l'hémisphère évolue du plan national aux niveaux multilatéraux, les organismes de la société civile servent de plus à plus à asseoir la démocratie en s'assurant que les décideurs politiques au niveau multilatéral prennent au sérieux les intérêts des citoyens. Dans l'année qui précédera le Sommet du Canada en 2001, nous assisterons certainement à une prolifération d'initiatives de la société civile. En soi, cette tendance démontre l'élargissement d'un champ d'action du processus de prise de décision dans l'hémisphère et l'engagement auprès de nouveaux acteurs dans les processus qui, auparavant, étaient inaccessibles aux citoyens des Amériques.

RESUMEN

El auge en la participación de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil en los procesos de elaboración de políticas a nivel nacional, regional y multilateral mostró la tendencia democrática en América Latina y el Caribe en los años de 1990. En diversos encuentros y cumbres presidenciales que se han celebrado desde 1994, los líderes del hemisferio se han comprometido a dar participación a la sociedad civil en los procesos de toma de decisiones y se han aprobado mecanismos nuevos para implementar tal compromiso. Sin embargo, la realidad muestra que los esfuerzos de los gobiernos por incluir a la sociedad civil en los temas hemisféricos más generales han sido incompletos debido a la falta de recursos, el temor de que se cree el caos, la incertidumbre sobre qué criterios tomar en cuenta para dar acceso a una organización en particular y qué grado de responsabilidad y representatividad tienen, así como la incapacidad o falta de voluntad de satisfacer las demandas de la sociedad civil. En algunos casos, los gobiernos sencillamente carecen de voluntad política para dar participación a estas organizaciones.

Como anfitrión de la Cumbre de las Américas de 2001, Canadá está brindando un importante espacio al tema de la participación de la sociedad civil en la agenda hemisférica. Esta cumbre podría servir de marco sin precedente para que las organizaciones de la sociedad civil hagan un aporte sustancial a la implementación de iniciativas importantes tanto en la esfera económica y política como en el desarrollo social del hemisferio. No obstante, primero será necesario que la Organización de Estados Americanos asuma un rol de liderazgo con el apoyo del gobierno canadienses en aras de fortalecer la relación entre las organizaciones de la sociedad civil y los distintos gobiernos. En este sentido, habrá que consolidar y dar a conocer más ampliamente los mecanismos de participación existentes, facilitar la realización de consultas nacionales en cada estado miembro acerca de la agenda de la Cumbre, promover la participación de estas organizaciones en el proceso de las cumbres de las américas, y brindarles la información necesaria para que puedan realizar estas actividades.

El presente trabajo trata sobre la tendencia hacia la inclusión de dar participación a la sociedad civil en los procesos multilaterales hemisféricos, y hace algunas recomendaciones sobre como hacer de esta nueva alianza una oportunidad provechosa tanto para las organizaciones de la sociedad civil como para los gobiernos. Las recomendaciones de este trabajo se basan en la premisa de que al jugar un papel más activo y dinámico las organizaciones de la sociedad civil generalmente contribuyen a la profundización de los procesos democráticos, especialmente en aquellos países en que las tradiciones e instituciones democráticas son aún incipientes. Al tiempo que la elaboración de políticas trasciende las fronteras nacionales y pasan al plano multilateral, las organizaciones de la sociedad civil tienen cada vez más una función de fomento democrático al velar por que los intereses de los ciudadanos sean tomados seriamente en el ámbito multilateral. Es evidente que en vísperas de la Cumbre de 2001 en Canadá, se multiplicarán las iniciativas de los grupos de la sociedad civil. Esto muestra la existencia de espacios más amplios para el proceso de elaboración de políticas en el hemisferio y la inclusión de nuevos actores en asuntos en que los ciudadanos de las américas solían ser excluidos.

WORDS VERSUS ACTION: ARE GOVERNMENTS OF THE HEMISPHERE REALLY COMMITTED TO CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION?

At various presidential summits and meetings in recent years, hemispheric leaders have made commitments to involve civil society in decision-making processes. All 34 Member States of the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed to action items at the Miami and Santiago Summits of the Americas that encourage governments of the hemisphere to consult with civil society organizations on important policy issues.

In 1994, the Miami Summit called for a review of the regulatory framework for non-governmental actors, in order to facilitate their operations and improve their ability to receive funding for their activities. It also called for steps to improve the participation of traditionally marginalized groups in society. In 1998, the Santiago Summit emphasized the need for institutional frameworks to stimulate the formation of responsible, transparent civil society organizations, and it called on governments to promote increased civil society participation in public issues. Further commitments were made at the 1996 Santa Cruz, Bolivia Summit on Sustainable Development, the 1999 European Union-Latin America & Caribbean (Rio) Summit, and the annual meetings of Heads of State of CARICOM, MERCOSUR, and the Andean Community Presidential Councils.

In reality, however, governments of the hemisphere have a mixed record of consulting with their own civil society organizations. Some governments allow considerable access for civil society to participate in internal and multilateral processes, while others jealously guard their prerogative as elected officials who act alone in their country's interest. Suspicions and uncertainties abound. Governments often worry about the legitimacy of civil society actors, asking:

- who do these self-appointed groups really represent, and how are they held accountable?;
- and
- are these groups merely acting as a Trojan Horse for powerful North American interests?

However, the Seattle Round of the WTO and the January 2000 indigenous uprising in Ecuador, to cite only two examples, show that civil society concerns can no longer be ignored. These two cases illustrate that there are legitimate concerns about the broader social impact of economic

decisions taken by governments in closed-door meetings. The indigenous groups in Ecuador, for example, are concerned about the social consequences of the dollarization of their economy. When they were not given legitimized access to the early stages of policy-making, they vividly demonstrated that they are capable of bringing down a government.

MECHANISMS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION

The existing mechanisms for the inclusion of non-governmental voices in the multilateral processes of the Americas are explained below. Further information on each mechanism can be found by accessing the respective websites cited at the end of each paragraph.

The OAS — Consultative Status for Hemispheric Civil Society Organizations

Hemispheric civil society organizations have been seeking better access to the decision-making processes of the OAS for many years. In practice, many groups have worked with the various agencies, units and bodies of the Organization on an as-needed basis (usually in implementing programs of the OAS), but until very recently, no formal mechanism for their involvement in the political discussions of the OAS existed. Anticipating the need to engage new partners in the OAS, key governments, including Canada, took the initiative to develop formal procedures and rules for civil society participation in OAS activities. After an 18 month process of negotiation and consensus-building on language related to the criteria for access, the "Guidelines for the Participation of Civil Society in OAS Activities" were approved in December 1999. A number of

hemispheric civil society organizations actively monitored this process from early on, and provided comments on successive drafts. (www.civil-society.oas.org)

The OAS — Inter-American Strategy for Public Participation (ISP)

The ISP pre-dates and is separate from the OAS Guidelines. The strategy promotes effective and responsible public participation in projects and policy discussions at the OAS, as well as at national and sub-national levels. It focuses particularly on environmental and sustainable development decision-making. The ISP contains a Policy Framework and a set of recommendations for Action. The Policy Framework sets out the principles under which civil society consultation should take place, including inclusiveness, responsibility, comprehensiveness, access to information, and transparency. It highlights the need for legal frameworks, better communication mechanisms, and funding for participation, as the necessary first steps to

... the Seattle Round of the WTO and the recent indigenous uprising in Ecuador, to cite only two examples, show that civil society concerns cannot be ignored, ... illustrat[ing] that the broader social impact of economic decisions taken by governments in closed-door meetings can no longer be overlooked.

turning the principles into action. The OAS Unit for Sustainable Development and Environment developed the ISP in response to the 1996 Santa Cruz, Bolivia Summit on Sustainable Development mandate. The strategy was adopted by the OAS Permanent Executive Committee of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CEPCIDI) in December 1999. To date however, the principles of the ISP have not been applied to the overall initiatives for civil society participation in the OAS or in the Summit of the Americas processes. (www.ispnet.org)

The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) Mailbox

Despite the highly technical and closed nature of FTAA negotiations, hemispheric civil society organizations have expressed a strong and fervent interest in influencing these trade talks. These groups are concerned about the potential impact of the trade agreement on development, democracy, the environment, health, human rights, labour rights, and the rights of women and marginalized sectors of society. In response, the governments involved in FTAA negotiations established a Committee of Government Representatives on the Participation of Civil Society in 1998. Unfortunately, the Committee did not provide opportunities for real interaction with civil society organizations. Instead, it developed a “mailbox”, whereby civil society organizations were invited to send written submissions to Trade Ministers outlining their concerns on FTAA negotiations. The report on the small number of submissions received was presented at the FTAA Trade Ministers’ meeting in November 1999, with no assessment of the policy implications of the positions of the civil society submissions, nor any recommendations for further follow-up or dialogue. (www.state.gov/www/issues/economic/ftaa/0599_ftaa_exec.html), new invitation for civil society submissions: (www.ftaa-alca.org/SOC2_S.ASP)

From the point of view of government officials, increasing civil society involvement in policy-making at both national and multilateral levels may create a chaotic process.

The Summit of the Americas — An Ad Hoc Strategy

There is no official mechanism for civil society participation in Summit of the Americas discussions and negotiations. Increasingly, the OAS is playing a critical role in the institutionalization of the Summit of the Americas process. The Organization holds sector-specific meetings and consults with groups from across the hemisphere to contribute to policy development for the summits. The unstated, but presumed, intention is that the OAS Guidelines could allow civil society access and participation in the Summit of the Americas process. Civil society groups are encouraged to express their views by participating in open meetings of the OAS Special Committee on Inter-American Summits Management. In 1999, this Committee began to hold open meetings on a regular basis to hear the views of interested experts, academics, and civil society organizations. In addition, non-governmental actors at regional, sub-regional, and national levels are monitoring

the implementation of action items from previous Summits of the Americas. They are also involved in consultation processes on priority actions for the agenda of the 2001 Canada Summit of the Americas. (www.summit-americas.org)

Domestic Consultations

With the 2001 Canada Summit of the Americas only one year away, the priority for hemispheric civil society organizations at this point is to influence the negotiating positions of their national governments in preparation for Summit commitments. Domestic consultations for Quebec City are now beginning. In Chile, the non-governmental organization *Corporación Participa* has drafted a working proposal to secure funding for a consultation process. These consultations are being planned for a number of Latin American and Caribbean nations, as well as a final hemisphere-wide encounter to coordinate concrete proposals and to bring them forward to the official Summit negotiations. In Canada, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development is organizing issue-specific conferences and roundtables in a number of Canadian cities.

THE POLICY PROBLEM THAT WON’T GO AWAY: KEY CONCERNS SURROUNDING CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUSION

A preliminary analysis of these multi-layered processes for civil society inclusion reveals that governments have:

- consistently used positive declaratory language on civil society access;
- committed themselves in writing to concrete action on this issue; and
- approved actual mechanisms for civil society participation, in some cases with civil society input.

So why does civil society access still constitute such a difficult policy issue?

Government Reluctance

From the point of view of government officials, increasing civil society involvement in policy-making at both national and multilateral levels may create a chaotic process. Government representatives, particularly from the smaller countries of the hemisphere, do not have the resources, the information, or sometimes even the capacity to understand the wider consequences of the narrow decisions they are being asked to make. It is difficult for these government officials to make the links between such issues as investment, labour, environment, and human rights. Governments do not always have specific funds set aside for early domestic consultation on any policy issue. In certain cases, the political will simply is not there to consult with civil society. The problem can go deeper still when some

governments lack the understanding of and the commitment to the value of public consultation, and an engaged citizenry.

Definition Questions

Despite (or perhaps because of) an abundance of literature and discussion on the subject, it is difficult to explain what the concept of civil society means. The broadest and most neutral definition of civil society is:

the arena of organizations and associations which, in large measure are autonomous from the state.

A more limited definition is:

*the arena of organizations and associations existing outside the state **and** the market.*

It is not clear whether the private sector considers itself to be part of civil society; nor is it clear whether civil society organizations will allow the private sector to be included. There is also a common tendency to exclude labour from the myriad of civil society organizations. The civil society debate has gained particular momentum because the international proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has led some to believe that civil society consists solely of NGOs. The definition is narrowed further when advocacy NGOs are regarded as civil society, as opposed to NGOs that function as think tanks or research centres. Others believe civil society consists only of social movements.

The media have also played a role: in many instances, media exposure has served to legitimize the existence of civil society groups and their particular policy positions; in other cases, the media have misrepresented the power or threat of civil society positions- generally lumping all civil society actors together as “NGOs” and ascribing solely anti-globalization, and anti-trade objectives to them. Civil society actors however, represent diverse interests and sectors of any nation, and they rarely hold common positions on any topic, except of course on the importance of inclusion itself.

Accountability

Some countries in the Americas oppose the inclusion of civil society organizations in multilateral policy-making. Their governments contend that, while the legitimacy of government officials is grounded in democratic elections, civil society consists of single-issue, self-selected groups that have no public mandate to engage in bargaining at the international level. Civil society organizations, unlike government officials in democracies, are largely accountable only to their members and their funders. Yet this kind of limited accountability also holds true for the private sector, though business has been given tremendous power to influence policy in the hemisphere.

Accountability is made more complex by the fact that many southern civil society organizations working at the

international level are dependent on the funding of northern “partner” organizations. According to some government officials, such southern organizations are dominated by elite-run groups that have only tenuous ties to the citizens on whose behalf they claim to act. Opponents argue that northern organizations give priority to objectives that many developing countries see as secondary to their own need for economic progress. They fear that allowing civil society access to FTAA negotiations, the OAS General Assembly, or the Summit of the Americas could further bias these multilateral agendas towards the political concerns of the developed countries such as environmental or labour standards. However, this north-south debate may be based on a false dichotomy, since there is enough analysis to prove that environmental and labour issues are intimately tied to other social and human rights issues. Sustained development for developing countries requires an integrated approach to policy-making and a full understanding of the broad social impact of economic decisions.

Responding to Civil Society Demands

Civil society organizations often do play a valuable role in helping to deepen democracy. They do so by both providing important input based on their experiences, and by acting as promoters of new policy initiatives. Problems can arise, however, when weak political institutions are unable to respond to the demands placed on them by non-governmental actors. Furthermore, in more mature democracies, particularly in executive/congressional systems, the spread of non-governmental interest

groups can choke the workings of political institutions and distort policy outcomes in favour of the better-organized (and better-financed) interest groups. Moreover, civil society organizations sometimes work in opposition to their governments. This can cause government officials to become defensive and attempt to block civil society initiatives.

NEXT STEPS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS OF THE HEMISPHERE

Strengthen Political Will

From the point of view of civil society organizations national governments need political will to fulfill their domestic obligations toward civil society. Similarly, hemispheric leaders need to turn the words of their Summit declarations and plans of action into concrete action. Since 1994, every Summit in the Summit of the Americas process, and many sub-regional summits, have paid lip service to the value of civil society participation. However, in the months and years following each Summit, leaders appear to forget about commitments they have made. Their record on consulting with civil society on the broader hemispheric

*From the point of view of
civil society organizations
political will is needed
for national governments
to fulfill their domestic
obligations toward
civil society.*

agenda, as well as on their own domestic policy issues, is patchy at best. Political will, leadership, resources, information and transparent public processes are needed to improve the dialogue between governments and civil society.

Consolidate Mechanisms

As the premiere political forum for the hemisphere, the OAS should also provide greater leadership to rationalize and streamline the various levels of entry available to civil society. The Policy Framework and Recommendations for Action of the ISP, for example, have universal appeal. Yet the drafting process of the OAS Guidelines did not make any reference to the ISP, perhaps because member states viewed the ISP as a small exercise on sustainable development alone. The OAS Guidelines are, in effect, the new rules of the game for the registration of civil society organizations, while the Policy Framework of the ISP defines the larger principles for a fruitful relationship between hemispheric governments and civil society. A direct link between these two mechanisms should be made, and then applied to the Summit of the Americas process for civil society participation in Summit preparations.

Undertake Domestic Consultation

Domestic consultations with civil society organizations in preparation for the Summits of the Americas have not taken place consistently in the 34 countries. A successful consultation process may depend on a number of factors, as outlined below. Some require government commitments, while others are primarily the responsibility of civil society organizations. Note that many of these factors bear a striking resemblance to the principles and recommendations for action of the ISP:

- a) *Provide Funding:* Governments and international organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), must provide adequate funding to bring civil society actors together. Given the limited accessibility of the internet in the region, it is not sufficient to include only those groups that can afford to physically attend a meeting and to broadcast it over the internet for all the others.
- b) *Consult Broadly:* Civil society does not speak with one voice. Decision-makers and elected officials need to listen to and balance the diverse, and at times contradictory, viewpoints held by civil society organizations. When consultations and meetings are being organized, neither civil society actors nor governments should invite only those groups they want to listen to.

c) *Develop Cogent Strategies:* Civil society organizations need to organize and strategize. It is not enough to pursue civil society access to multilateral processes, without a clear idea of what to do once in the door.

d) *Expand Coalitions:* Different actors approach policy discussions with different aims and ideologies. Not wanting to dilute their message, civil society organizations can, perhaps unknowingly, become exclusionary. This problem is often accentuated by organizations competing for the same baskets of funding. Exclusionary tendencies will, in the end, hinder civil society participation.

e) *Provide Information:* Finally, and most importantly, if civil society organizations are to play an active role in the region's multilateral processes, they need to have access to relevant information. Governments do not always make this information widely accessible, or the information is insufficient or supplied too late. It is also important in the relationship for civil society organizations to use what information exists to develop a deeper understanding of the OAS, the FTAA, and the Summit of the Americas policy processes.

The development of the agenda for the Canada Summit has begun, and the Canadian government is aware that civil society's contribution will be essential to the credibility of this multilateral meeting.

MAPPING THE TERRAIN FOR THE 2001 CANADA SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

Role of the Canadian Government

Consultation with civil society on policy issues, whether in trade, human rights, environment, or other policy areas, is a central approach to public policy-making

in Canada. As host of the April 2001 Summit of the Americas, Canada is making civil society participation in Summit preparations a major hemispheric policy issue. The Summit should be an unprecedented opportunity for civil society organizations to make a substantive contribution toward the implementation of important initiatives in the economic, political, and social development of the hemisphere.

The development of the new agenda for the Canada Summit has now begun, and the Canadian government is aware that civil society's contribution to it will be essential to the credibility of this multilateral meeting. The monitoring of hemispheric Summit agreements and conventions has become a growth industry for non-governmental actors of the region. However, monitoring Summit implementation is not the same as being consulted on the development of the agenda. All parties understand that non-governmental actors will not be negotiating the final text, which will be left to government negotiators to finalize for their leaders.

The Plan of Action of the Canada Summit will most certainly contain an item about the further involvement of civil society in the implementation of hemispheric initiatives. Although this item will likely be a reiteration of existing language, it should make specific reference to the new mechanisms for civil society inclusion. The Canadian government should make the necessary links between these mechanisms for inclusion, and work with the OAS to publicize them to hemispheric governments and civil society organizations in a less technical, more strategic manner. There is no need or room to create yet another separate civil society mechanism for the 2001 Summit. Ideally, those mechanisms already in existence should be streamlined in the interest of effectiveness and efficiency.

Role of Civil Society

The Canadian government can take every possible measure to include civil society in the Summit of the Americas process, but civil society organizations should also make strategic use of the space they have helped create. The mechanisms for inclusion are far from perfect. The OAS Guidelines are too technical, the ISP has not been well publicized, and many consider the FTAA mailbox to be an inadequate form of consultation. At the very least, however, these represent early points of entry into hemispheric processes.

Parallel Summits

Some hemispheric civil society organizations prefer not to engage with existing consultation mechanisms of the OAS or the FTAA, because their demands go beyond what is on the official agenda. These groups opt for a range of “non-official” or alternative initiatives – from parallel events to pre-meeting preparatory sessions to street protests. Given the media exposure and hype around summits, and the emergence of radical NGOs intent on obstructing the actual Summit, governments and civil society will have to expect protests in Quebec City or elsewhere. While these protest movements represent the legitimate voice of dissent, it is unclear whether they have any constructive contribution to make to the Summit agenda itself.

A parallel summit in Quebec City, just as in Santiago is already being planned. The event is likely to be organized by Canadian-based NGOs in collaboration with select hemispheric partners. For these collective groupings of civil society actors, the principal focus has been on regional economic integration and trade, rather than the “non-trade” Summit issues of security, drugs, environment, human

rights, development cooperation, and corruption. To date, their involvement in the Summit of the Americas and OAS processes has not been significant, reflecting the predominant concern of NGOs and civil society actors that globalization and trade liberalization should be the focus of their efforts. However, Canadian officials are seeking policy input on the non-trade agenda as well, acknowledging that although globalization and trade liberalization have been macro-economically beneficial, the processes have aggravated old domestic and hemispheric problems and have caused new ones, most often in the social sectors.

The argument has been made that parallel or alternative summits have succeeded in expanding the space for public consultation.... However, the diversity of civil society actors, with their divergent objectives and methods, will result in some hard choices. Is it preferable to remain on the fringe and protest. Is it more constructive to contribute to policy-making by accepting less-than-ideal mechanisms for consultation?

Parallel summits build hemispheric networks and reinforce solidarity among participants. However, the alternative policy recommendations made by the participants are too often unrelated to the course of negotiations, or come too late to be formally included in the final summit declarations. The argument has been made that parallel or alternative summits have succeeded in expanding the space for public consultation, and the recent acknowledgements by governments and international organizations of civil society concerns (at Seattle and in Washington D.C., for example) is proof of the growing influence of non-governmental actors.

The diversity of civil society actors, with their divergent objectives and methods, will result in some hard choices for civil society groups. Is it preferable to remain on the outside and protest, or will alternative policy approaches made in parallel meetings get adequate and full consideration? Is it more constructive to contribute to policy-making by accepting less-than-ideal mechanisms for consultation with government representatives?

STEPPING ON TO THE PLAYING FIELD OR REMAINING ON THE SIDE LINES?

To affect policy and to effect policy change, civil society organizations would greatly benefit from becoming active players in official processes. Policy-making can benefit from a critical dialogue with non-governmental actors, provided that both sides listen and learn. Becoming a “player” in multilateral processes means that civil society organizations need to make maximum use of existing information and develop a stronger understanding of the hemispheric processes. This also means being strategic about which level of access would be most appropriate for the objective they are trying to attain. For example, some recommendations are more effectively made to state/provincial or national governments, rather than to governments in a multilateral

setting. On the other hand, in some countries where civil society consultation on policy issues has been poor, civil society groups have had no choice but to raise their concerns at a higher level.

In the year before the 2001 Canada Summit, a proliferation of civil society initiatives is certain. In itself, this trend demonstrates the widening of the space for policy-making in the hemisphere and the engagement with new actors in processes which were previously closed to citizens of the Americas. Some groups will plan the parallel summit, others will participate in formal and officially-mandated consultation exercises, others will try to be active in all fora. Many civil society organizations will forge coalitions and alliances amongst each other in order to have a stronger impact. Circumstances are such

that there will always be civil society organizations that join the process and others that remain active on the side lines.

Now that some mechanisms for inclusion are in place, it will be interesting to see how many hemispheric civil society groups take advantage of them to improve the Summit agenda prior to the meeting in Quebec City. Governments of the Americas, and in particular the Canadian host of the Summit, will be faced with enormous, even daunting, challenges of widening their focus, keeping an eye on the sidelines, while engaging with the new players on the field. By doing so, governments will not only strengthen the multilateral fora of the Americas, they will also engage with their own citizenry on issues of key importance for advancing hemispheric economic and social integration.

*In the year before the 2001
Canada Summit, a
proliferation of civil society
initiatives is certain.
Some groups will plan
the parallel summit, others
will participate in formal
and officially-mandated
consultation exercises,
others will try to be
active in all fora.*

May, 2000

ISBN: 1-896301-46-0

Publication mail agreement #1606328

The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) is an independent, non-governmental organization that fosters informed and timely 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.

The lead writer of this paper was Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, Policy Analyst, FOCAL. Other members of the FOCAL team who worked on this publication were Nobina Robinson, Florencia Jubany, James Buchanan and Laurie Chochinov. Editorial services were provided by Brian Cameron, Cameron and Associates. The authors thank Alison Van Rooy of The North-South Institute and Yasmine Shamsie, author of "Engaging with Civil Society – Lessons from the OAS, FTAA and Summits of the Americas", for their assistance on this paper. They also thank Marisol Pagés of the Esquel Group Foundation for her comments. The preparation and printing of this paper has been made possible thanks to support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency.

Additional copies of this paper may be obtained from the FOCAL web site (www.focal.ca)



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

1 Nicholas Street, Suite 720
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 7B7 Canada
Telephone: (613) 562-0005
Fax: (613) 562-2525
E-mail: focal@focal.ca
Web Site: www.focal.ca