Indigenous Summits and the Summit of the Americas: Towards Continental Integration

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In the context of Inter-American relations, it is not only heads of government that convene meetings to discuss subjects of interest to the hemisphere. Indigenous Peoples have held continental fora since 1990. The Summits of the Americas process and the Indigenous Summits, each from their own perspective, are trying to develop a collective agenda to achieve harmony and peace, and to improve the quality of life of 800 million people, ten percent of which are Indigenous. The theme of this year’s Summit of the Americas, “Creating Jobs to Fight Poverty and Strengthen Democratic Governance”, is closely related to the perspective of the Indigenous Summits, which seeks a commitment from the heads of state that recognizes Indigenous land and resource rights, self-determination and their greater participation in decision-making processes.

In the Americas, the gathering of Indigenous organizations has been a common activity for the past two decades. In the north, particularly in Canada, Indigenous Peoples and First Nations frequently hold talks at conferences and round tables among themselves, as well as with private corporations and government. In the south, the number of meetings has intensified since the nineties when the ancestral territories were seriously threatened by the economic policies of the new development model.

Indigenous People’s rejection of trade liberalization, the privatization of water and the oil industry, and the degradation of the environment has been echoed by other social movements. It is obvious that the Indigenous struggle throughout the Americas is focused on land claims from a holistic point of view: that is, to truly include Indigenous Peoples in society, profound changes are required beyond adjustments to social assistance. The fora have gained strength since the first continental meetings and summits were held (see table).

Relations between Indigenous Summits and State Summits

Although since 1994 the mandates of the Summits of the Americas have pursued the strengthening of democracy and governance and sought to address poverty in the hemisphere, the results have not been satisfactory for the Indigenous Peoples. Proof of this is found in the fact that even though the Summits were held during the first Decade of the Indigenous Peoples (1994-2004) and in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, Patrinos and Hall show that indigenous poverty (in terms of income) has not been substantially reduced (Indigenous People, Poverty, and Human Development in Latin America – 1994-2004, World Bank, 2005). For example, the study reveals that in Bolivia the percentage of change in the rate of poverty between 1997 and 2002 in the non-Indigenous population was 8%, while the percentage of change in the Indigenous population was below 0.1%. Moreover, the competition for resources in ancestral lands (oil, lumber and minerals) has displaced communities with a blatant infringement on human rights, and particularly on Indigenous rights.

Despite the fact that all countries in the region, with the exception of Cuba, have democratic systems in place, there has not been a substantial improvement in the relations between states and Indigenous Peoples. The rights recognized in some constitutions cannot be exercised—in the final analysis the culture of the “other” has not been accepted and incorporated into national life and, consequently, people are treated as if the country were culturally homogeneous.
Indigenous movements have gained strength and achieved continental integration, setting forth proposals on land claims, self-determination and participation in the democratic processes. These voices have been channelled through the Indigenous Summits, and heard at the Summits of the Americas since 2001 (Quebec). In this scenario, heads of government are expected to generate political will and establish mechanisms that provide for real inclusion of the Indigenous Peoples in society, based on the recognition of collective rights.

However, talks held at the Indigenous Summits and at the Summits of the Americas could be a futile exercise if no significant progress is made on governance mechanisms. In Latin America Indigenous Peoples as well as many other civil society organizations are demanding greater spaces where they can participate, be represented and demand greater accountability from governments. The Indigenous resistance is undertaking a struggle to gain the place it has been denied for over five hundred years. Pro-autonomy movements have become radicalized in Central America, the Andean region (five countries) and in the south of Chile. The experiences in Mexico (Chiapas), Nicaragua, Panama, Canada, Chile (Easter Island) and Colombia (Nasa people), each with different characteristics, prove there is a capacity and potential for self-government. However, dialogue, not confrontation, is the preferred strategy of Indigenous Peoples.

Consequently, the Indigenous Summits are a key element in identifying the issues relevant to First Nations that must be included in the mandate and the operational plan of the Summit of the Americas. The American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—the subject of negotiations at the Organization of American States (OAS) for the past five years—is a fundamental element. Although the Declaration is not binding for the states, it harmonizes the criteria that must be introduced by countries into their national legislations on Indigenous affairs and on relations between the state and the indigenous peoples.

The direct participation of the Indigenous Peoples would be a good option: as Óscar A. Rodríguez, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, said at an Inter-American Development Bank conference, “elections are not enough; democracy is a way of life, not just a right to cast a vote”.

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