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Will There Be Another Summit of the Americas? A Case for Reform

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About the Hemispheric Think Tank Working Group in Support of the 2009 Summit of the Americas

This paper was produced as part of the Hemispheric Think Tank Working Group in Support of the 2009 Summit of the Americas, a joint project of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) and the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The Working Group brought together researchers and policy analysts from the Western Hemisphere's leading think tanks to engage in intensive debate and dialogue and develop a strong intellectual and policy foundation for preparing and conducting the Summit.

In meetings in Ottawa and Washington, D.C., attended by leading national and multilateral officials, the group explored the critical problems the Summit could address, identified key areas of agreement and disagreement among countries, deeply probed the disagreements, and, where possible, sought to develop pragmatic approaches. These discussions and research have resulted in a series of policy papers that hope to mobilize and raise awareness of the Summit amongst regional governments and civil society.

One of the most important issues to be decided, either openly or by default, at the next Summit of the Americas is whether there will be another one after the April meeting in Trinidad and Tobago and, if yes, what type of Summit it will be. The Summit, the meeting itself, the process of organizing the meeting and the larger framework of hemispheric governance within which it sits, are in dire need of reform. The cobbled-together process by which the Summit is administered, organized and held has become a detriment to its continuation. A serious meeting requires a serious level of financial, human and institutional resources that have been lacking in recent Summits. While the presence of these resources will not guarantee a better meeting, their absence makes the possibility of a successful meeting that much more remote.

It is clearly too late in the day for the April 2009 Trinidad and Tobago Summit to take up the full range of issues involved in its own reform. Yet, the few, most urgent and less controversial issues, those technical, bureaucratic, and organizational reforms and funding, needed immediately to induce or facilitate a country stepping forward to host the next Summit, could quickly and easily be dealt with at the April meeting. The more complex issues, such as the Summit's role in inter-American governance, could be moved for consideration at a later date.

Dealing with the simplest elements of Summit reform though presupposes that the countries of the hemisphere see some future in it; a question that will, to a large degree, be answered in Port of Spain.

Issues for Port of Spain: The Need for Immediate Reforms

The immediate issues that the Summits of the Americas and its processes face are the well-publicized and on-going difficulties in organizing the meeting, an overabundance and concomitant devaluation of mandates, competition from other hemispheric events that also need hosting, and, most notably, the expense and burden placed upon host countries coupled with the fact that the Summit has already run through the richer, better resourced countries in the hemisphere that are capable of bearing the financial and personnel cost involved in hosting.

There appears to be general agreement amongst missions to the Organization of American States (OAS), hemispheric think tanks, research groups and academics on these points. More recently, there also appears to be a convergence of opinion about what steps need be taken to address these issues.

Organizing the Summit of the Americas

The current arrangement has the host country taking responsibility for setting the agenda for the meeting, forging hemispheric consensus, convening ministerial meetings, consulting with civil society and the private sector as well as all logistical details. This is a burden that the current Summit coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago has described as difficult, sub-optimal and something not to

be undertaken again. If the Summit is to continue, then correcting this situation must be the first priority.

While the OAS does have a Summit Coordinating Office, it has neither the mandate nor the resources to carry a significant share of the organizing burden. An agreement and Summit mandate at the April meeting in Port of Spain to strengthen the OAS Summit office would go a long way to addressing these shortcomings.

On the formulation of the agenda and logistical organization of the meeting, a critical reform will be for this work to be done by a dedicated organization with the staffing, resource and experience necessary to carry out the various tasks and provide logistical support to the host government. While there is great benefit from a public diplomacy standpoint in having the Summit take place in countries throughout the hemisphere, there is no concomitant benefit to having these countries organize the meeting and set the agenda. The easiest model to adopt for this process would have some variant of that used by the United Nations (UN) in setting the agenda for the annual General Assembly meetings. Though the goals of the UN's General Assembly and the Summit are different, the general process of setting the agenda by creating a small committee of the larger assembly of members to identify topics based on the work of that body and gain consensus, would serve the Summit well. In the case of the OAS and the Summit, the hosting country could take the chair of the agenda committee with vice-chairs going to the previous and future hosts. The process could, and likely would, be modified by later Summits.

Funding the Summit of the Americas

For the OAS Summit office to take up this role, its budget would have to be increased. A useful benchmark here would be to match roughly the budget of the Secretaría General Iberoamericana (SEGIB). Proper funding for the OAS Summit Secretariat is a make-or-break point. Without adequate resources devoted to its organization and institutionalization, the Summit will continue to stumble and will not be able to compete with other, better-funded, hemispheric summits. Funding a strengthened Summit Secretariat would follow the realities that guide funding for the OAS and the realities or as some wits would describe it, the Marxist precepts that guide the funding of SEGIB, from each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs. In other words, just as Spain and Portugal play a dominant role in funding the Ibero-American Summit process, the United States and Canada, coincidentally the two countries that most benefit from the Summits, would have to take up the burden of funding for an enhanced secretariat.

The cost for this is far from prohibitive. As a back of the envelope calculation as to what would be required in funding, the SEGIB has an annual budget of approximately US\$5.8 million to cover support for an annual Summit. Since the Summit would likely continue as a triennial event one could make a proportionate reduction in the SEGIB budget to arrive at a budget that would

reflect a triennial as opposed to annual meeting. This additional financing would have to come from the United States and Canada, the two countries with both the greatest interest and need to see the Summit continue as well as the financial resources. Even in these troubled economic times, an additional two million dollars a year from the United States and one million from Canada should not be difficult.

If a host for the next Summit can be found in Port of Spain the assembled heads of state could move that a special commission be created at the OAS, perhaps composed of past Summit and Special Summit hosts, to determine an exact budget and terms of reference for a strengthened Secretariat based on leading, analogous summits. This committee would have strict dead lines for reporting out. Canada and the United States could pledge in advance to cover 80 per cent of the annual budget for the Secretariat up to a set amount (equal to some percentage of SEGIB's annual budget) for a period of three to four years. The OAS committee would then oversee a review of budgets and mandates of other summit secretariats, reconcile these with the current mandate of the Summit Secretariat office, and propose a new mandate and budget. This process should not take long. One possible sticking point will be the relationship between the Secretariat and the OAS Secretary General. The Secretariat will need some degree of autonomy, especially over staffing, to operate effectively and to facilitate American and Canadian investment.

If these steps are taken in Port of Spain there is a much greater chance that future Summits will be better structured and more effective.

Larger Issues of Reform, Questions for 2012

The most basic element behind the Summit is that neighbours who share a hemisphere can benefit for having heads of state sit down together for direct discussions over a limited informal agenda. Yet, the Summit pretends to more than being just another meeting of heads of state of the Americas a la the Rio group or the Caribbean and Latin American Integration Summit (CLAC). The Summit aspires to, and can be, *the* —emphasis on the definite article— Summit of the Americas. The Summit then would seem to face two choices: either adopt an agenda, infrastructure and financing to make it the focal point for hemispheric governance, in other words, the Summit of the Americas, or failing this, adopt a more modest aspiration that fits its current financing and infrastructure, perhaps becoming more modestly the hemispheric meeting at which the American and Canadian heads of state attend. The call above for the Port of Spain Summit to fund a strengthened Secretariat office would create the conditions and platform where a future Summit could debate and decide this issue.

Option A: A More Modest Summit

A more modest Summit would still be of benefit to the hemisphere and of use in inter-American governance as mentioned there is value in having heads of state convene and none of the other hemispheric Summits include Canada and the

United States. A scaled-back Summit would still require funding from the United States and Canada for an effective Summit Secretariat to assist host countries in organizing the event, but the budget for such a Secretariat should be much less. Additionally, the ministerial meetings that accompany the Summit would likely be curtailed as well. The Summit could be appended onto every third OAS general assembly.

Option B: A More Ambitious Summit

Pursuing the more ambitious goal means first and foremost that the summit develop and articulate a clear *raison d'être*; preferably one that separates it from the other hemispheric summits. As in so many other areas for the Summit, opportunity lies in adversity. The plethora of recent hemispheric summits including the rising number of special and extraordinary summits has created a need for both a lens through which to keep track of what is being done and also a vehicle to set an agenda of regional priorities. The two tasks also complement one another in a symbiotic relationship.

Since the first Summit in 1994 demands on heads of state and relevant ministers now include, to name but a few, the Spanish-led Ibero-American Summits, the Brazilian-led Latin American and Caribbean Summit for Integration and Development (CALC) the European Union - Latin America and Caribbean Summits and the boom in sub-regional meetings such as CARICOM, ALBA and UNASUR. In many cases these other Summits have competing agendas, competing ministerial lead up meetings, calls for action and offer access to different resources and implementation schemes, all of which put a severe strain on countries of the hemisphere with limited human and institutional resources.

Under a more ambitious agenda, the Summit would seek to set broad priorities for focus by institutions and other Summits involved in hemispheric governance. Specific actions, implementation items and follow through would be carried out by the plethora of summits, meetings and institutions that comprise the de facto inter-American system. The set of overriding regional priorities set at the Summit should be small; only those items upon which consensus can be achieved.

The Summit would get out of the action item and mandate business to focus on forging coherence on a regional governance agenda, akin to what the recent Santiago meeting of the World Economic Forum accomplished in the development arena. Implementation of this agenda would be left to the various other Summit processes and regional institutional meetings, which already implicate ministers from governments throughout the hemisphere. In essence, the argument is for a division of labour with the Summit taking the mezzo level agenda and coordination role. This would also allow more time for heads of state to interact on the broader themes facing the hemisphere instead of focusing on the micro issues involved in the current mandates and calls for action.

The Summit would have to formally invite participation from the major hemispheric summits —the Ibero-American Summit, the European Union—

Latin American and Caribbean Summit, the Rio Group, the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Unasur) as well as the sub-regional heads of states meetings such as the Caribbean Economic Community meeting. To some degree, the sub-regional summits are already incorporated through participation by the heads of some of the sub-regional development banks in the Joint Summit Working Group under the Summit Secretariat at the Organization of American States. This model may serve as a useful basis upon which to build to incorporate wider participation though more weight would have to be given to accepting input from these organizations into the formulation of the agenda for the Summit.

To strengthen both the acceptance of the Summit mandate and democratic governance the Summit will have to consider direct outreach to political parties. This would engender at a minimum, increased understanding within national political systems, and hopefully more continuity within hemispheric governance. Outreach to opposition parties would follow the model currently used by the OAS to incorporate civil society understanding, involvement and participation in the Summit process. This role, outreach to both political parties and civil society, should be undertaken by the OAS in-country representatives. To some degree OAS resident representatives have begun to take on more of a role in briefing civil society organizations about the Summit process. This should be deepened and expanded to include outreach to political parties. This may require revamping, strengthening or altering the OAS resident representative system. This, however, is the sort of cost-effectiveness change that the Summit would have to demonstrate to engender serious consideration of new funding.

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