



FOCAL

Canadian Foundation for the Americas
Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques
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FOCAL and the Summit of the Americas

What is the Summit of the Americas?

If the Organization of American States (OAS) is the house of the Western Hemisphere, then the Summit of the Americas is the family reunion. First convened in Miami in 1994 by U.S. President Bill Clinton, the Summit of the Americas brings the democratically-elected leaders of 34 countries in the Americas together to discuss common social, economic and political concerns. The host country sets the agenda for each Summit, which is held every three to four years. On April 17-19, 2009, the Fifth Summit of the Americas will be hosted by Trinidad & Tobago, which has chosen to have the agenda address human prosperity, energy security, and environmental sustainability. Previous Summit hosts were Chile (1998), Canada (2001), and Argentina (2005). Two Special Summits were hosted by Bolivia (1996) and Mexico (2004).

At each Summit, the governments jointly announce a Declaration and Plan of Action, These Declarations are the work of more than a year of negotiations conducted by ministers and diplomats at periodic meetings of the Summit Implementation Review Group (SIRG). The final declaration is the result of a consensus decision and signed by the heads of states at the Summit. Summit commitments are non-binding, meaning they do not have legal force, but their mandates do shape the thematic emphases of hemispheric cooperation and programming within the Inter-American institution for many years.

Why is the Summit Important to Canada?

The Summits of the Americas are especially important to Canada and the United States as they are the only one of the many regional summits to include them. The Summits provide an opportunity for Canada to advance and influence a hemispheric agenda to address the many challenges that are hemispheric in scope, but must be addressed both regionally and nationally. Since joining the OAS in 1990, Canada has worked through the OAS and the Summits process to strengthen democratic governance in the region. The Inter-American Democratic Charter, considered a crowning achievement of the Inter-American system, stemmed from a mandate of the Third Summit of the Americas hosted by Canada in Quebec City in 2001. The Democratic Charter is a political tool for members of the OAS to take joint action to protect and promote democracy in the Americas.

Civil Society Wins a Voice at the Summits of the Americas

The Quebec City summit was also a watershed moment for the institutionalization of civil society participation in OAS and Summit processes. Before 2001, consultations with civil society on issues on the Summit agenda were informal and *ad hoc*, at best. FOCAL and partners, Corporación Participa of Chile and the ESQUEL network took the initiative of organizing consultations with over 900 civil society representatives in 18 countries in the months leading up to the Québec City Summit, and these civil society contributions were taken seriously. More than half of the 243 civil society recommendations generated by these consultations were included in the Quebec City Plan of Action. These early consultations organized by FOCAL and its partners paved the way for today's formal civil society consultation mechanisms at the OAS, which help to ensure that the summits respond to the vital concerns of citizens of the Americas. Civil society organizations can now apply for accreditation, which is managed by dedicated units within the Summit Secretariat and Department of External Relations of the OAS. Once registered, civil society organizations receive information and invitations to attend meetings and submit contributions on issues being deliberated by governments, including the Summit Declarations.

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While the institutionalization of civil society participation in the Summits process and the OAS is an important achievement, FOCAL and its civil society partners continue to push the OAS and its member governments to do more, to be more transparent, efficient and effective on Summit follow-up. FOCAL continues to dedicate substantial effort to keep track of and inform our networks in Canada and throughout the region of developments relating to the Summit. We do this because we understand that the Summit is not a one-off event, and because we believe that the agenda and action plans of the Summits can make a significant contribution to improving the quality of the lives of the citizens of this hemisphere.

Out of this conviction grew the *Active Democracy Network* of leading civil society organizations in 23 countries of the Americas. The network has developed a unique and tested method to track the implementation of Summit mandates and has done so for nearly a decade. In addition to tracking Summit follow-up, the Network is creating and identifying the specialized civil society expertise that can provide recommendations to help governments work toward fulfilling Summit mandates. Across the hemisphere, the Network works with over 100 civil society organizations and spreads awareness to many more.

Civil Society and the Fifth Summit of the Americas

FOCAL is on the hemispheric coordination team of *Active Democracy* and also acts as regional coordinator for the Caribbean. This role allowed FOCAL to collate and share lessons learned at the Caribbean Region Civil Society Consultation on October 31, 2008 in Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago. With the partnerships of the OAS and the government of Trinidad & Tobago, FOCAL convened nearly 200 representatives of civil society for consultations on the Fifth Summit themes. Subsequent sub-regional civil society consultations in Central and South America in December 2008 and February 2009 respectively, followed that model. FOCAL's partners then presented the recommendations generated at these consultations at SIRG meetings, one of the final frontiers for civil society participation in the Summit process.

What Next?

As the coordinator for *Active Democracy-Canada*, FOCAL is advancing the Network's strategy one step further by organizing *Canada's National Alliance for the Implementation of Summit Mandates*. The goal of the National Alliance is to catalyze concrete action and channel national expertise to strengthen democratic governance in Canada and in the hemisphere. The National Alliance is a voluntary association of government and civil society experts that will generate unique Canadian experiences and perspectives on Summit themes. National Alliance meetings will be held in various locations across Canada in the spring of 2009.

For more information on FOCAL's Inter-American Governance and Civil Society programming, contact Project Manager Racquel Smith at 613-562-0005 ext. 227 or by email rsmith@focal.ca or visit FOCAL's web site www.focal.ca.