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FOCAL'S PARTICIPATION IN PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES IN THE LEAD UP TO THE SPECIAL SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

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I would like to provide a brief review of some of the national and regional level civil society consultations that FOCAL has participated in in preparation for the upcoming Special Summit. These most recent activities build on FOCAL's ongoing engagement in the Summit process and our efforts, often in collaboration with regional partners, to open and strengthen the official institutional spaces that are available to civil society within the inter-American system. I will discuss 3 distinct activities, the civil society follow-up strategy on the summit; the Civil Society regional forum and recent web-based consultations that FOCAL is undertaking.

“Civil Society Follow-Up Strategy on the Quebec City Plan of Action”

The first initiative is the “Civil Society Follow-up Strategy on the Quebec City Plan of Action” which FOCAL has been involved in for the past year. This is a project implemented by civil society organizations in 20 countries throughout the Americas, which aims to educate citizens about the Summit of the Americas, and follow-up on the commitments made by governments during this process.

The project is being managed by a network of partner organizations from across the region, led by Corporación PARTICIPA of Chile, with the collaboration of FOCAL, the University of the Andes from Colombia, FLACSO Chile, the Regional Coordinator for Economic and Social Research (CRIES) and the Inter-American Democracy Network (IADN)

The project has received funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, United States Agency for International Development, Partners of the Americas and the Inter-American Democracy Network, the Inter American Development Bank and the OSI Development Foundation. The project has recently been approved funding by FEM CIDI of the Organization of American States

The aim of the project is to measure the degree of implementation of five summit mandates related to the strengthening of democracy. Information on the current legal/regulatory state of mandates in theory and practice has been collected via a structured questionnaire using both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The five mandates being examined are: Access to

Information, Freedom of Expression, Strengthening of Civil Society, Access to Justice and Independence of the Judiciary, and Decentralization and Strengthening of Local Governments.

The findings generated from these questionnaires provide a baseline for future evaluation of the five summit mandates and allow for comparison of results between countries. Between August and November of this year civil society organizations applied the questionnaires in their respective countries and we have compiled the preliminary results from this first phase, and generated recommendations for governments and multilateral bodies based on the identified priorities. The proposals generated for all five mandates are presented in a document that has been circulated here today.

The questionnaires will be applied again in approximately 12-14 months in preparation for the Argentine Summit, and results from the second round compared with findings from the first application.

Of the mandates evaluated we consider three areas – Access to Information, Freedom of Expression and Strengthening Civil Society – the most salient given the focus of the Special Summit, and it is these topics that have been emphasized in meetings with national governments and summit organizers.

I would like to briefly highlight a couple of the key priorities in each of the three themes.

With regards to **ACCESS TO INFORMATION**, findings reveal the need to:

- 1.1 Ensure the creation of laws that guarantee access to information in those countries where they do not exist. In countries where such laws exist, perfect their application so that citizens have effective and convenient access to information. Basic components of well functioning access to info laws and systems must include: standardized exceptions for access to information, the existence of an autonomous oversight agency that is granted sufficient power to ensure compliance, as well as the establishment of effective sanctions for officials that do not comply with the regulations.

In the area of **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION** governments, with the support of multilateral organizations must:

- 2.1 Ensure that national legislation concerning freedom of expression is in line with international standards. Specifically, eliminating all forms of censorship, respecting the mandates established by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.
- 2.2 Secondly, promote reform of the legal structure/frameworks to limit media monopolies, ensuring that media ownership is not concentrated in the hands of the few.

Finally, in terms of **STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY** there is a need to:

- 3.1 Establish a legal framework that responds to the diverse characteristics of civil society organizations and guarantees the existence of different spaces for participation at the local,

national, and international levels. Governments must supply domestic resources to support these activities and standardized mechanisms should be set up to facilitate transfer of these resources.

National reports from each of the 20 countries participating in this project will be completed and circulated to national governments and organizations involved in Summit implementation in January 2004. Based on the national reports, four regional reports (North America, Caribbean & Central America, Andean Region and Mercosur) will be compiled and circulated in February 2004.

The second initiative I would like to mention is the **Civil Society Regional Forum held in Mexico City the 24-25th of November**

The results and proposals from the Civil Society Follow-up Strategy were also integrated into discussions at the Civil Society Regional Forum, which was sponsored and organized by the OAS (specifically the Summits Secretariat) and the Mexican government, in collaboration with several regional civil society networks.

The Forum offered an opportunity for civil society organizations, opinion leaders and academics in the region to engage in a dialogue and formulate their contributions for the Special Summit.

The event was attended by members of 58 Organizations from 21 countries. Representatives from the Canadian, Mexican and US governments, international organizations and indigenous communities also participated in the meeting.

Summit Implementation Review Group – Dec 8th Washington D.C.

The recommendations emanating from both of these initiatives were fed into the Summit planning process at the Summit Implementation Review Group meeting at the OAS on December 8th. During this half day session a limited number of civil society organizations had the opportunity to present their input to representatives from the 34 member states and multilateral bodies who are responsible for drafting the political declaration to be signed by the heads of state and government in Monterrey. This was only the 2nd SIRG meeting to be open to the public - of the 33 held to date - and provides an important space for providing input into the content and direction of the Summits.

DFAIT Consultation:

Finally, I would like to briefly mention that FOCAL has been undertaking a web-based consultations on the three themes identified by summit organizers. We wanted to cast a wide net and include organizations that do not normally participate in these discussions. We invited civil society organizations, academics and those interested in the summit process in Canada and across the hemisphere to provide feedback on what they felt governments and multilaterals should focus on at the upcoming Summit. We also asked how these priorities

could best be addressed in the framework of the Summit and in what way or through what institutions or mechanisms governments could pursue these objectives collectively. A summary of the findings of these consultations has been handed out, along with an annex of those that provided feedback.

Key findings from the consultations indicate that:

Primarily, there is very strong support for a Summit Process that better addresses poverty and inequality – even among business respondents, this was the clear priority. In particular, focus on poverty alleviation, target assistance on the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of society including indigenous peoples, the very poor, rural poor, and the disabled.

Respondents also noted:

- The importance of bringing education and health services to the poor.
- Support for a “just” FTAA, which would include access to US agricultural market or debt forgiveness programs for good reformers, and;
- Highlighted was support for continued efforts at improving civil society participation in national and multinational fora

Last but not least was the strong support expressed for the need to limit Summit objectives to a feasible list – complete with a real timetable for implementation, clear measurable goals, provisions to collect reliable data on whether goals are being met – respondents wanted to see a Summit of the Americas with clearly visible results.

Conclusion:

The results of these various activities have been positive, and they have also provided some insight into the process of civil society participation in the Summits, as well as other inter-American fora. To conclude I think it is useful to quickly review some of the lessons learned until now and begin to suggest some next steps – particularly with an eye to preparation for the Argentine summit in 2005.

In terms of Lessons learned:

- There are increasing opportunities for dialogue between civil society groups and those that are setting the inter-American agenda, but there is more to be done to make these spaces permanent, productive and relevant. Dialogue must happen on an ongoing basis.

Canada has played an important role of advocating for and supporting increased participation at the OAS and other fora, and government representatives as well as civil society ourselves must continue to press for further change. A couple of specific suggestions that will help to achieve these goals are:

At the regional level:

- The creation of a permanent Consultative Commission, composed of CSOs and housed within the Summit Secretariat at the OAS, which can facilitate an ongoing dialogue and exchange with governments during the process of preparation and implementation of Summit mandates.
- Additionally, a permanent space for dialogue between foreign ministers and CSOs must be institutionalized on the official summit agenda, and not based on the will of the Summit host country to consult.

At the national level is necessary that:

- Each foreign ministry holds regular, periodic meetings with CSOs to exchange information about the Summit process. National government must also prepare and widely distribute Annual Reports that outline advances and challenges made in implementation, to enable CSO to make an effective and informed contribution.

Finally, as Civil Society we must:

- Continue to play an active role in all phases of the summit, while working with the OAS, Summit organizers and with each other to improve the procedural and institutional aspects of the consultation process, including increasing the timeliness and availability of information, securing regular access to decision making spaces and maintaining ongoing dialogue between summits.
- We must also work to improve the methodology and process of our own civil society consultation, reviewing and redefining our objectives and strategies, as well as our role in and contribution to these processes.