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The Summit of the Americas in Focus

First Meeting: Civil Society in the Summit Process

FOCAL Boardroom
1 Nicholas St, Ottawa
January 18, 2005, 2-3:30pm

Laurie Cole (FOCAL) opened the meeting thanking participants for attending the first of the Summit in Focus meetings, modeled on the Civil Society Task Force (CSTF) that has been meeting in Washington D.C. for the past 10 years. The goal of this gathering is to bring together government actors engaged in the Summit process with civil society groups as a point of exchange and a “clearing house for information” with a flexible, participant driven agenda. While discussions over the next year will focus on preparations for the IV Summit of the Americas, to take place in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in November 2005, the agenda will be open and deal with issues relevant to the wider inter-American system. John Graham (FOCAL, Board of Directors) introduced the two speakers:

Ramón Daubón, Vice President for Programs, Inter-American Foundation (Director of the Civil Society Task Force at the Esquel Foundation, Washington, D.C.).

Renata Wielgosz, Director, Inter-American Affairs Division, Foreign Affairs Canada.

Ramón Daubón began by commenting on the Summit process and its potential outputs. He described the intense peak in energy and ideas that happen at a Summit, but fade unless political will and funding are secured to drive change and implement commitments at the national level. This reality is linked to the structure and nature of Summits, which are meetings of governments and executive leaders (not legislators), that do not necessarily gain the necessary commitment or will of the implementing government bureaucracy. Daubón noted that over multiple Summits, and as agendas have become clearer and contained key specific initiatives, a noticeable “residue” of successful outputs and goals is accumulating. For example, gains have been made in civil society participation, the Democratic Charter is increasingly well known, etc.

Referring to the theme chosen for the IV Summit—creating employment—Daubón noted that it allows national governments to focus on the contributions that they can make in creating the infrastructure necessary for development at the local level. In Daubón’s view, it is development at the local level that is critical to spurring citizens’ demand for good governance and accountability, with this demand being a fundamental step in fostering long-term, permanent change in the region. Daubón argued that poverty and inequality are the symptoms of an unequal distribution of power, a reality that can be altered only by an engaged citizenry and development at the local level.

Renata Wielgosz began her comments with a specific reference to the contribution civil society groups have made to the Quebec City Summit and Summit process itself. She noted the potential of the Summits in Focus to generate views and positions that compliment the role of Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC). She explained that the goal of the Government of Canada is to produce a “balanced agenda” that includes initiatives related democratic governance, prosperity and a social agenda. Specific priorities and issues include:

- Ensure that governments broadly engage public sector participation.
- Focus on the implementation of mandates and the feasibility of future commitments, ensuring that there are satisfactory reporting mechanisms in place—an area of potential activity for civil society.
- Enhance the relevance of the Summit process in the daily lives of the region's citizens, and tackle issues such as transparency and corruption.

To reach these goals, the focus of the Canadian government is to streamline the reporting process on the implementation of Summit mandates and establish deadlines. Mandates much address the root issues of poverty and widening gap between the rich and the poor. The role of government is to provide a framework of regulations—the infrastructure or building blocks—required for job creation. In preparation for the Summit in Argentina, FAC will initiate a series of community-wide consultations (including the public sector, domestic interests and civil society) to examine how regulatory frameworks can help people to improve their lives. In tandem with the Summit preparation, FAC is initiating a newsletter to disseminate information and generate dialogue.

The presentations were followed by a question and answer period. An initial question touched on the participation of civil society in the Summit process, noting that civil society engagement in the 1994 Summit was both radical and successful. The response acknowledged “glimmers” of success, but stressed the need to engage civil society broadly and well in advance, rather than relying on the voice of those civil society representatives who attend the Summit. It was noted that civil society input has been provided in the later drafting stages of previous Summit documents, however input has been dependent on the receptivity of the host government, which can be problematic.

Further comments were made on the stakeholders, process and goals of the Summit.

- Ideally, the Summit process should be of relevance to the communities of the Americas, reaching civil society and reflecting the democratic process.
- A balanced agenda should include local governments and municipalities as key players, a level of government that is frequently overlooked in national and international discussions. Regarding employment generation, the local level has advice and contributions to offer on how governments, in collaboration with civil society and business, can generate employment.
- Summit Themes: While job creation is the main theme of the Summit, the focus must also include poverty alleviation, democratic governance and enabling conditions created by government. For this Summit, the emphasis of government is “concrete and measurable actions”, a trend initiated by the 2004 Special Summit in Monterrey.
- Canadian Response to the Concept Paper: Evidence of public/private partnerships includes training and programs designed to move resources from the national level to the local level, the “engine” in development. Successful public/private initiatives mentioned include remittances, SME's and a focus on connectivity.
- Millennium Development Goals (MDG's): An argument was made for better integrating the MDG's into the Summit goals and commitments, taking advantage of existing measurable indicators. Successful implementation of the MDG's will provide the basis for a productive society, capable of producing jobs and opportunities. Operationalizing the goals remains the challenge for governments.

Background documents: Fourth Summit of the Americas Conceptual Document “Creating Employment to Confront Poverty and Strengthen Democratic Governance”, Canadian Comments on the Conceptual Document

Meeting Handouts: Calendar of Summit-Related Events, Strengthening Civil Society Participation in the Summit of the Americas and the OAS General Assembly

The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 pm.