



VIRTUAL PLATFORM OF THE SUMMITS OF THE AMERICAS



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PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

(Report of the Virtual Forum held from November 17 to 26, 2008)

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I. Introduction

In September 2008, the Summits of the Americas Secretariat launched the Summits of the Americas Virtual Platform, in coordination with the OAS/SEDI Department of Human Development, through the Educational Portal of the Americas, and with the support of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas / International Development Research Centre (IDRC/ICA). In preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas, the Summits Secretariat is organizing a series of virtual fora on the main topics addressed by the Draft Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain.

The main objective of the virtual fora is to open a space to promote the participation of different social actors in the Summits Process by using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The results of the fora are presented for the consideration of the National Secretariat, National Coordinators and Permanent Missions during the negotiation of the text of the Declaration to be undertaken in the framework of the Summit Implementation Review Group (SIRG) meetings. In addition, the results will be published online and will be utilized as reference material by the social actors that participate in the face-to-face meetings that are being coordinated by the Summits Secretariat.

This report summarizes the main comments and recommendations from the forum on “Promoting Environmental Sustainability,” held from November 17 to 26, 2008. The information in this report has been divided into subtopics and, to the extent possible, has been classified into the following categories: (i) priorities for social actors in this area, (ii) proposed action strategies, (iii) main comments on the Declaration, and (iv) suggestions on the language and text of the Declaration.

II. Main Comments and Recommendations

During the Virtual Forum’s exchange period, three subtopics related to environmental sustainability were discussed: climate change, natural disasters, and environmental governance. The following paragraphs highlight the main comments and recommendations that emerged.

- The participants emphasized the need to specify in the Declaration of Commitment, the kind of actions that the governments are to take to promote environmental sustainability, and to indicate who are the main players that will be involved. Several participants agreed that while the governments had, a number of years ago, recognized the environmental sustainability challenges facing the region, little progress has been made in the areas of disaster mitigation and environmental legislation, and even less in the enforcement thereof.
- There were repeated calls for the governments to be more insistent in promoting environmental awareness among social actors. Proposals were made for communication campaigns, education efforts, and citizen participation in the design and implementation of environmental programs and laws.
- A recurring concern related to climate change and natural disasters was the urgency of mitigating the impact those phenomena have on the most vulnerable segments of the population. The possible solutions included prevention mechanisms (vs. reactive measures), since the former are considered more effective in reducing the socioeconomic impact of natural disasters. The proposed methods included strengthening risk management, early warnings, education on environmental topics, and planning and zoning practices to prevent human settlements from being established in vulnerable areas.

The following section highlights comments made during the virtual forum on subthemes addressed in specific paragraphs of the Draft Declaration:

1. Climate change (Paragraphs 39-40)

- Priorities for social actors in this area: The forum’s participants stressed the need for increased coherence between the commitments assumed by governments and the actions they undertake. For instance, on the topic of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, the participants said that although the governments recognized the negative effects these phenomena have on their citizens, and at various international forums they had agreed to reduce them, no effective strategy for stabilizing emissions of those gases has yet emerged.

They also spoke of the importance of adopting measures to ensure the security of vulnerable populations in the region, the majority of whom are minorities of Afro-descendant or indigenous origin. Concerns were also expressed about the displacement of populations by climate change which, according to the participants’ comments, tend to be irreversible cases.

Finally, the participants said it was important to define the role that social actors are being called on to play, since their actions can have an impact on the climate change already detectable today in the world. They therefore proposed different mechanisms for increasing education and awareness about climate change and its causes.

“It is very important that we address and discuss issues relating to climate change. However, what are we as citizens doing to address these concerns?”

*Andy Paul, Trinidad and Tobago
Department Head, Mayaro Government Primary School*

- Proposed strategies for action: During the forum, the participants suggested several strategies that the region could adopt to tackle climate change.

First of all, they stressed the need for social actors to assume responsibility for their own energy, food, and space demands. To achieve that, they said, awareness campaigns should be created: for instance, the actions carried out by UNESCO through its Sandwatch Project, which was mentioned by name on several occasions by more than one participant. This project promotes actions including the use of a range of cultural and communications tools to increase public awareness about climate change, such as storytellers, drama productions, the internet, and videos.

A second proposal related to the impact of communications on social behaviour, and it is thus suggested to promote the grassroots construction and design of communications strategies within the communities themselves. Governments could facilitate the multiplication effect of such local strategies in various places and venues: for example, through a virtual forum, so that other actors could also develop communications efforts adapted to the different social dynamics prevailing in each region.

Repeated mention was also made of the Natural Disaster Youth Summit (NDYS) of 2008, which was recently organized by UNICEF and iEARNTnT in Trinidad and Tobago, as an example of an initiative supported by the international community and intended to raise awareness among young students in the region. Worthy of note is the following statement made by the students at that event:

Natural Disaster Youth Summit (NDYS) 2008:

“That as a Global Village we must resolve to create an awareness to disasters, risk management and the adaptation to global climate change, by forging strong ties between youths and professionals and integrating all countries in an international partnership for this common purpose: One Village; One Effort, THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW.”

*Abraham Fergusson, Trinidad and Tobago
Youth Ambassador, Natural Disasters
Environmental “Warrior” Agent – National Award for Advocacy*

It was suggested that the Port of Spain commitments should work for the education and organization of the most vulnerable population segments as a specific action to prevent and mitigate the effects of natural phenomena arising as a result of climate change. The participants also proposed that the governments adopt early-warning and prevention systems for natural phenomena threatening those population groups.

Finally, they suggested that to reduce pollution from greenhouse gases, the countries should agree to harmonize the maximum permissible limits for environmental contaminants in the region, using the guidelines established by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a reference point.

- Regarding the Declaration: The participants said it would be better for the Declaration to address sustainable development comprehensively, including the parallel promotion of a healthy environment, social justice, and economic growth. In connection with this, they stressed the question of social justice, which is not prominent within the text of the Declaration.

Similarly, with specific reference to paragraph 39, some participants questioned the effectiveness of acquiring and repeatedly reiterating commitments that do not establish clear, specific lines of action.

“I wonder how long our governments will continue to reiterate their commitments. How much time has passed since the Rio Summit of 1992, since the Declaration of Santa Cruz of 2006? How much have relations between humankind and the environment improved? What do the statistics say? I think I know the answer, as do you all. And so the time has come for our governments to set clear, precise goals, with actions that will lead to true sustainable development.”

*Richard Mauricio Maquera, Peru
Administrator, MegaInternet*

- Suggestions to the language and text of the Declaration: The participants proposed a series of changes to the text of the Draft Declaration, emphasizing sustainable development as a comprehensive topic and suggesting a number of guidelines that could be incorporated into the text to conduct the governments in meeting the commitments they assume.

Paragraph 39. All fair and sustainable social and economic development depends on the continuous conservation, stewardship, and protection of the environment, starting at the local level and rising to the global level. We therefore reaffirm our strong commitment to sustainable development, as set out in the World Summits on Sustainable Development in Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002, the Declaration of Santa Cruz de la Sierra of 1996, the Declaration of Santa Cruz +10 of 2006, and the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations.

Paragraph 40. The OAS member states commit to collaborate in the development and application of the necessary strategies and technologies to ensure the eventual stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will not incur a risk of serious changes in the Earth’s climate and weather systems and that will ensure that all peoples can attain a just and sustainable standard of living.

2. Natural Disasters (Paragraphs 41-43)

- Priorities for social actors in this area: One of the participants’ recurring concerns, also expressed in the discussion on climate change, was the impact of natural disasters, particularly on disadvantaged communities. This situation is critical because those communities are generally located in high-risk areas and largely pursue a subsistence economy based on the exploitation of local natural resources and ecosystems, which leads to a vicious cycle of “poverty–disasters–environmental degradation–greater poverty,” and breaking that cycle must be a priority.

“Warning systems for potential natural disasters are mentioned. There should be a paragraph on the need to support communities located in those vulnerable areas, which are generally inhabited by Afro-descendants or indigenous peoples, who lack information and training.”

*Jeanneth Cooper, Costa Rica
Project Coordinator, Afro-Costa-Rican Women’s Center*

The participants also spoke of the importance of changing the region’s traditional approach to natural disasters, which is focused on response coordination and on relief programs when disasters occur and, in many cases, ignores disaster prevention. They also underscored the usefulness of exchanges of information among the countries on disaster response matters and spoke of the role the OAS could play in the region.

“I applaud the intent of para 41-43. Moreso para 43. However, as history has taught us there needs to be more action than words!! This intent has been on the cards for some time now and many countries have not yet found a way to successfully achieve this. In the Caribbean it has been a particular challenge.”

*Paul Saunders, Trinidad and Tobago
Disaster Management Consultant, Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management*

- Proposed strategies for action: Some participants suggested that the vicious cycle described above should be tackled directly by addressing what they called the root of the problem: poverty. On the one hand, settlements in areas vulnerable to natural disasters would be reduced, and, on the other, the negative impact they have on the environment would be mitigated.

The forum said that efforts must be made to ensure correct ecological zoning and sound territorial organization, to establish poles for development that would be sustainable over time and in space, thereby assuring the coexistence of humankind and nature.

In addition, several participants spoke of the benefits of incorporating risk management into the planning and development of policies for natural disaster mitigation, and they emphasized the importance of strengthening the role played by prevention over that played by response efforts. Several participants underscored risk management as a more effective mechanism for reducing the socioeconomic impact of natural disasters.

“Paragraphs 41 – 43. Natural disasters, or the scale on which they occur nowadays, is a result of climate change. When I think of climate change, I use an analogy with disease: a lot of money is spent looking for a cure, but little is invested in prevention... the question of prevention must be addressed.”

*Olivia Ferris, Costa Rica
International Cooperative Alliance (ACI-Américas)*

The forum also noted the usefulness of facilitating exchanges of information, an undertaking in which some participants stressed the role that the OAS could play. Specific proposals included the creation of a database covering the disasters of the last decade in the region, to provide reliable statistics so that each country’s competent agencies can design security plans for given disasters using proven methods and answers.

- Regarding the Declaration: The forum debated the need for the Declaration to address, under the “natural disasters” heading, the problem of land degradation. While some participants agreed with this suggestion, others held that this was not a topic that the Declaration should cover.

“I would like to underscore what I consider the omission of some important topics from the text of the Declaration: for instance, those matters decided upon within the framework of the Forum of Environment Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, or the question of land degradation, in light of its close relationship with sustainable rural development and such other topics as food security, rural poverty, biofuels, etc., or climate change.”

*Francisco Brzovic, Chile
Regional Advisor, Global Mechanism - UNCCD*

With specific reference to one phrase in paragraph 43 (“We will introduce stronger planning and zoning measures to ensure that any future residential, commercial or industrial developments are not located in vulnerable areas”), emphasis was placed on the need to provide relief, in the present, to people who have already suffered or who are at risk from the effects of such disasters, and not to limit the strategies to future developments.

“A great percentage of the population of the Americas lives in high-risk areas; as such, these planning and zoning measures should not only aim for future developments but should also be agreed/coordinated with the private sector through “public-private partnerships” which would allow these families to be re-inserted into socioeconomic activity, and not just the provision of mortgages or agriculture loans which become hard to pay back for most of these families.”

*Wilkferg Vanegas
Consultant, Department of Sustainable Development, SEDI/OAS*

Finally, reference was made to paragraph 44, dealing with the coordination mechanism for the Americas proposed for the year 2011. In this regard, the participants suggested that, if possible, new agencies, networks, or websites should not be created and that instead, the existing tools should be strengthened. Specific mention was made of the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM), which was recognized by the OAS General Assembly in 2007 as the permanent hemispheric mechanism for strengthening practical cooperation among intergovernmental agencies in the area of disaster mitigation.

- Suggestions to the language and text of the Declaration: A number of suggestions on the text were made: in particular, to include the problem of droughts, and to make various other language-related proposals.

Paragraph 41. We will strengthen our mechanisms for the sharing of early warning information on periods of drought and natural disasters, for disaster planning and preparedness, and for managing and coordinating response and relief programmes following a prolonged drought or a disaster.

**Although droughts are not necessarily a disaster, participants called for their consideration as they have serious economic and social consequences.*

Paragraph 42. We instruct Ministers and High Level Authorities responsible for Sustainable Development, in collaboration with the specialised national and regional disaster and drought organizations, to develop, by 2011, a cooperation system within the Americas through which they can collaborate, share information, and ascertain which areas of human settlement, both urban and rural, and sections of essential industrial and general infrastructure that are at risk, and to then ensure that they are either protected or, when appropriate, relocated.

Paragraph 43. Change the reference to “poor people” to “people with low incomes.”

3. Environmental governance (Paragraphs 44 - 47)

- Priorities for social actors in this area: Regarding environmental governance, the participants said it was vitally important that the governments promote meaningful public participation in decision making, to improve levels of transparency and to provide civil society with access to more and better information.

In addition, while they noted the significant progress made in environmental protection and education, they said the Declaration should enshrine a culture of ecology and continue to promote it within society through education.

They also spoke of the role that the governments should play in promoting and supporting the development of new technologies to enhance their countries' ability to attain appropriate levels of environmental sustainability.

In addition, participants noted that the region still suffers from shortcomings in enforcing environmental laws and pointed to low levels of follow-up and supervision: *Who will guard the guards?*

Finally, the forum spoke briefly of the need for greater regulations and/or commitments to normalize a series of crops that are being promoted in the region as raw materials for producing biofuels, such as sugarcane and African palm. According to some comments made in the forum, this topic is a cause for concern in that it could lead to the disappearance of native species of flora and fauna, to shortages of various foodstuffs, and to rising prices for households.

- Proposed strategies for action: To ensure better environmental governance, the participants suggested that the governments make efforts to involve the public in the design and execution of environmental policies and programs. In this way, the participants hoped that greater civic awareness and responsibility would emerge, strengthening the process and investing it with greater legitimacy.

Regarding the agencies responsible for overseeing the correct management of the environment, the forum said it would be useful to provide them with tools to guarantee transparent procedures. The OAS was named as one possible strategic player in this, capable of promoting agreements and laws applicable to all the OAS member countries and thereby ensuring a significant step forward in regional environmental governance.

"We must create, ground, and establish a definitive plan, a protocol for international environmental policy, based on the social and economic needs of the various nations... and it must be directed collectively toward a mindset that works to defend a true, sound ability and attitude, and it must focus on raising awareness about consumption as it affects environmental issues."

*José A. Gautreau, Dominican Republic
President, Gestión y Trámite Legal*

The forum also emphasized the usefulness of establishing specific, duly grounded commitments regarding the social problems caused by the location or relocation of people who live near water sources. As a proposal for action in this area, they recommended the establishment long-term strategies, and not ad hoc measures that generally target short-term mitigation and fail to resolve the problem, leaving it to persist and grow.

- Regarding the Declaration: It was suggested that the Declaration should promote comprehensive sets of laws covering climate change in the region's countries.

“Encourage our leaders by pushing hard for comprehensive climate change legislation as an essential step in slowing, stopping and/or reversing the catastrophic threats of run-away global warming – this is critical.”

*Gia Gaspard Taylor, Trinidad and Tobago
iEARNtT Project, Secretariat*

In addition, it was requested that one of the paragraphs of the Draft Declaration of Commitment include a note urging the governments to promote the responsible cultivation of biofuel-input crops, thereby minimizing their negative effects on certain segments of the population.

Finally, note was made of the reference to the UNFCCC contained in paragraph 45; according to contributions made during the forum, this should serve to frame the debate on environmental governance, since it is the most advanced instrument that addresses climate change.

- Suggestions to the language and text of the Declaration: As a general comment on the Declaration’s environmental sustainability articles, it was noted that they contained some language that was not gender-inclusive and that this should be revised.

It was also suggested that the text of the Declaration be expanded to include definitions and references to other mechanisms: regional ones such as the Forum of Environment Ministers, and global ones such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

In addition, a number of specific suggestions on the text were made, and the inclusion of a new paragraph on the topic of desertification was proposed.

Paragraph 44. We will also work towards promoting sound environmental governance by strengthening national environmental laws and the environmental regulations arising from those laws, and building institutional capacity to manage environmental resources in accordance with the priorities imposed by sustainable development.

Paragraph 46. We renew our support for the Inter-American Program for Sustainable Development (IAPSD) and for the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development (ILAC) and we instruct the Ministers and all other authorities responsible for sustainable development to gather in 2010... to assess the achievements of the Programme to date, and to propose, where appropriate, new goals for a renewed IAPSD and ILAC, with a particular focus on the integrated management of both domestic and shared water resources, prevention and mitigation of disasters, forest and fisheries management, the sustainable management of land, including conservation and protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, the management of natural resources, sustainable agricultural management and rural development, urban environmental management, and the proper disposal of domestic and industrial refuse and the treatment of hazardous wastes. We will give special attention to the most vulnerable areas, including dry lands that have been degraded or are at risk of degradation, low-lying coastal regions and small island developing states.

Proposed new paragraph: (Francisco Brzovic)

“We also support the dialogue and cooperation that is taking place, at the regional level and within certain regional blocs, under the aegis of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, bearing in mind the commitments assumed by the Environment Ministers and Responsible Environmental Authorities at the 16th Meeting of the Forum of Environment Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Santo Domingo on 27 January to 1 February 2008.”

Finally, the participants said that paragraph 46 contained an extremely long sentence and that it should be redrafted because it mixes the need to adapt to climate change with the question of conventional sustainable development.

“In speaking of impacts, we talk of “adaptation.” This point needs to be clarified because the discussions could overlap. “Adaptation” involves preventive measures to tackle both natural disasters (including funding for early-warning systems) as well as changes in the climate that directly impact populations vulnerable to those changes. Consequently, the correct concept is that of “vulnerability” to variations in weather patterns or to climate change.

“The discussion must therefore be structured around sustainable development in the strictest sense, with adaptation to climate change as one of its subcategories.”

*Álvaro Gabriel Zopatti, Argentina
Unit for International Environmental Affairs
Secretariat for the Environment and Sustainable Development – Leadership of the Cabinet of Ministers*

To see a compilation of all the comments and suggestions offered by the social stakeholders who participated in the forum on Environmental Sustainability, [click here](#)

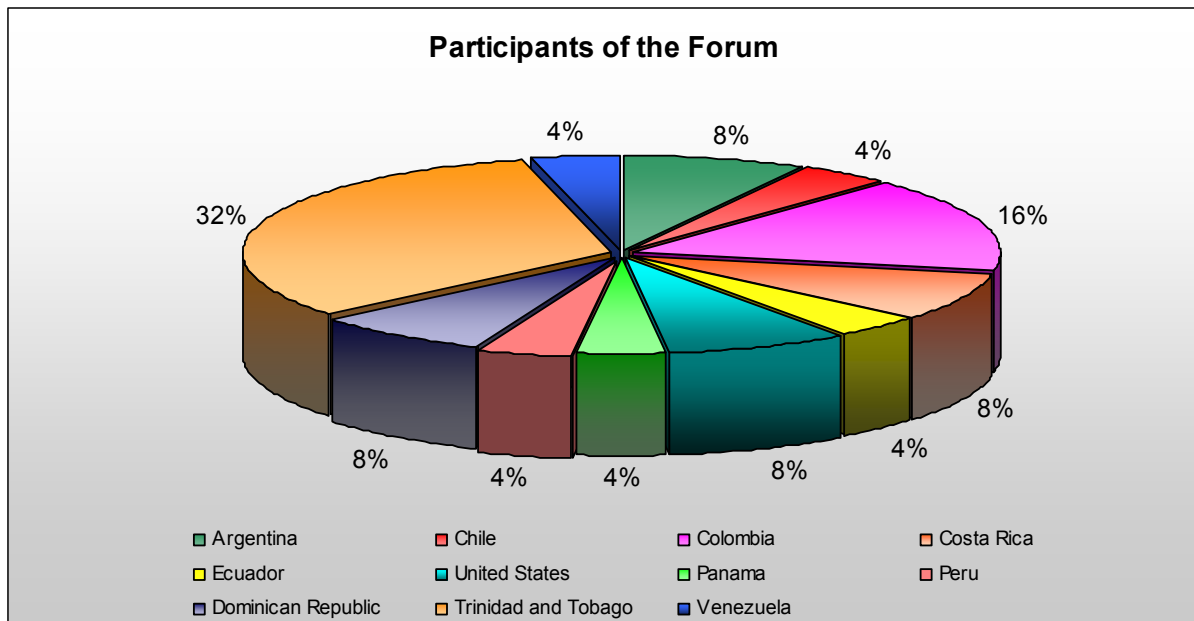
Annexes

A. Forum Participants

The number of registered users of the Summit’s Virtual Platform has risen to 453 since its launch on September 8. During ten days the virtual exchange lasted, a total of 25 users made active contributions to the discussions.

Noteworthy was the active participation in the forum of users from Trinidad and Tobago and, to a lesser extent, from Colombia, Costa Rica, the United States, and the Dominican Republic.

In general, the participants represented civil society organizations and, to a lesser extent, international organizations and the academic world.



B. List of Participants

	País	Nombre	Institución	Cargo	Correo electrónico
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11	United States	Carolina Pena	Department of Sustainable Development SEDI/OAS	Energy Specialist	cpena@oas.org
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14	Peru	Richard Mauricio Maquera	Megainternet	Administrator	librafreejkm@hotmail.com
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25	Venezuela	Isis Marquez	Department of Sustainable Development SEDI/OAS	Environment Specialist	isisvaleska@gmail.com
26	OAS	Claudia Salazar	Summits Virtual Platform Coordinator	Summits of the Americas Secretariat	csalazar@oas.org

C. Reference Documents

The reference documents for the Forum were compiled by the OAS Department of Sustainable Development.

To access the list of documents and reference resources, [click here](#).