



CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN THE SUMMITS
OF THE AMERICAS PROCESS
Sub Regional Civil Society Forum
October 30 - 31, 2008
Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

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PRESENTATION BY THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAS
AMBASSADOR ALBERT R. RAMDIN - CARIBBEAN SUB-REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY
FORUM IN PREPARATION FOR THE FIFTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

(October 31, 2008 - Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago)

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Honorable Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Trinidad and Tobago,

Ms. Hazel Brown, Coordinator of the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women,

Ms. Racquel Smith, Representative of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, better known as FOCAL,

Distinguished Representatives from Civil Society Organizations, with a special word of welcome to those who have travelled from other Caribbean countries,

Mr. David Morris, Director of the Summits of the Americas Secretariat in the Organization of American States,

Mr. Arthur Gray, Representative of the National Secretariat of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago,

Dr Riyad Insanally, Representative of the OAS in Trinidad and Tobago,

Mrs. Irene Klinger, Director of International Affairs of the OAS,

Distinguished Representatives of the Corps Diplomatique,

Distinguished Representatives of International and Regional Organizations,

Colleagues from the OAS,

Specially Invited Guests,

Representatives of the media,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure to join you today on this second day of the Caribbean Sub-Regional Civil Society Forum. I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to be here with representatives of civil society and I thank the organizers for inviting me to share with you my thoughts on this important matter of engaging civil society.

I am also grateful for the many youth participants that participated this Wednesday in YABT's consultation meeting with Caribbean youth, who also joined this Forum yesterday, and I am pleased to see many youthful faces among the participants gathered here today as well.

In this regard, I believe it is worth mentioning that following the Declaration of Medellín on “*Youth and Democratic Values*” the OAS has now adopted the policy that youth should be a cross-cutting issue in all the policies and programs of the Organization. We have also institutionalized the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Youth which I have the honor to chair and which continues to meet on a regular basis and which will be expanded soon to include other inter-American institutions. Our focus on youth is in four areas: consultation, capacity building, technical assistance and partnerships. At our recent meeting of the Inter-Departmental Working Group we appointed a Focal Point on Youth in the OAS.

In my view, the role of civil society is often misunderstood in society, because you represent such a variety of interests and activities.

The way I see it is that Governments –elected representatives and executive authorities- alone are not capable of mobilizing the necessary forces and resources to facilitate a process of peace, stability and prosperity. For society to be able to function and create the conditions for these three fundamental objectives, it is important to engage, involve, consult and built bridges with the other actors in society, whether they be academia, media, private sector, trade unions, religious organizations, social and cultural groups, or development-oriented grass-roots organizations - in short, civil society at large.

Not only does civil society contribute to enriching policy dialogue by bringing different, sometimes challenging, perspectives to policy debates and public accountability, but, as development actors and change agents, CSOs play a key role in the conceptualization and delivery of development cooperation efforts. This is an extremely valuable contribution to establishing and implementing a hemispheric agenda for cooperation.

Modern governance implies building strategic partnerships on the basis of the specific roles, responsibilities and obligations of the different actors.

The OAS leadership and the General Secretariat are committed to structurally engaging social actors on policy making and implementing processes, through inclusive, open, and transparent approaches.

Let us remind ourselves that in the end we aim to achieve the same objectives: peace, stability, security and prosperity. To facilitate such an engagement the OAS has established institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue, consultation, and participation, such as the virtual portal for “real time” debate. I call on all of you to make good use of these channels of communication and dialogue.

Working in partnership with Governments, development cooperation agencies, international financial institutions, multilateral organizations, the private sector and philanthropic foundations, you contribute to ensuring that development efforts are appropriately targeted, drawing attention to the identification of priorities, to the critical importance of short and long term results, and to identifying and exchanging lessons of "best practices" based on your accumulated experience.

My presence today is a demonstration of the OAS’ commitment to engage with social actors in a meaningful way and, although not the objective of this forum, I remain available to discuss in a frank and open manner our views on this.

This Forum is also indicative of the desire of the host government and all our member states to give civil society the opportunity to share perspectives and priorities pertaining to the contents of the draft Declaration. While there can be no assurances that everything expressed by participants will find its way into the Declaration that our leaders will adopt in April, this Forum is a demonstration of the interest and commitment of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago - made manifest by the presence this morning of the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs – as well as that of the Member States of the OAS and the OAS General Secretariat to engage with civil society in moving towards a successful Fifth Summit of the Americas. It is by no means a token effort and there will be a series of follow-up activities to reinforce this commitment.

Your own commitment to discussing frankly and constructively the most pressing issues of our region is a demonstration of the true spirit of openness and transparency. As you know the Western Hemisphere is going through a fundamental and, in my view, historic process of political, economic and social transition, a transition which I would say is a logical next step in the democratization process started in the eighties of the last century. It is a transition that holds promises, but also possible threats.

The member states of the Organization of American States are facing critical challenges in the areas of food security, energy and the environment, and now we are confronted with a financial and economic crisis! The draft document, *“Securing our Citizens’ Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability”* represents an attempt to address these challenges. For if these problems are not addressed in a timely and adequate manner, then I am afraid that they will have far reaching consequences for the very fabric of our societies and will erode the gains achieved so far.

Here I would like to state that, as we all know, we have adopted several documents reflecting hundreds of mandates, programs and initiatives. In my view, it is important to focus on:

1. Coordination of the roles and responsibilities of the different actors in this process (Governments, international organizations, financing institutions, national agencies, civil society etc.)
2. Implementation – allocation of resources, translation of mandates in national planning, etc.
3. Financing – allocation of specific Summit mandates to special windows in the IDB and the sub-regional banks
4. Institutionalizing the process in the already existing dialogue architecture, for instance in the OAS.

You are an integral part of this process of transformation in the Americas. Through your participation in this preparatory process you, as representatives of the civil society, have a unique channel to influence this direction and become part of the solution. Through your partnership in this process, you can share ownership of the platform of concrete initiatives to address some of these challenges.

Your independence, your advocacy and monitoring roles, your close connections with the poor, marginalized and vulnerable populations, your role as channels for delivery of development cooperation projects, all make you important and distinctive contributors to the overall effectiveness of development efforts and procedures.

I want to place on record my appreciation for the collective efforts of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, in particular the National Secretariat, the OAS Summits of the Americas Secretariat, the OAS Department of International Affairs, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, and the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women. The collaborative work carried out by these diverse groups to organize this Forum is truly remarkable and a positive indication of things to come as we prepare for our hemisphere's next Summit.

It would be remiss of me not to recognize and thank the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), USAID, and the Inter-American Foundation, whose generous support enabled the holding of this Forum. It goes without saying that I look forward to the continued support and engagement of these institutions in the continuing process of consultation as we build momentum towards the Fifth Summit, which will be held here, in less than 6 months.

The OAS has been honored to provide support to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in supporting the vision expressed on many occasions of achieving a Summit that responds to the needs of the citizens of the hemisphere. This Forum is one initiative among a series of ongoing activities being carried out by the OAS and its partners in order to ensure that citizens are given an opportunity to reflect on the theme and objectives of the Fifth Summit "Securing our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability".

We at the OAS believe that it is important to guarantee an adequate space for civil society to express their points of view and desires, not only to Governments but to the public at large. At the same time civil society engagement in the preparation of such critical encounters as the Fifth Summit of the Americas cannot be a "one off" activity; this engagement should be continuous one, structured and well defined, and even beyond the Fifth Summit of the Americas. Civil society engagement is not a gesture, it is an obligation.

I thank you for your kind attention and for allowing me to address you. I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations.