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Civil Society in the Promotion and Strengthening of Democracy in the Americas: A Vision for the Future

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**CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROMOTION AND STRENGTHENING OF DEMOCRACY IN
THE AMERICAS: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

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CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROMOTION AND STRENGTHENING OF DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Conference Report

In the last 15 years, civil society organizations (CSOs) have worked throughout the Americas to support democracy and democratic governance. CSOs have been active in promoting participation, advocating for transparency and accountability and defending human rights, working together with governments and the international community. Governments and citizens have made progress. With few exceptions in the last 15 years the region has experienced regular, uninterrupted cycles of democratic elections and the reform of key institutions. Yet democracies remain fragile and traditional challenges have been compounded by emerging manifestations that threaten the stability of the region. These new trends not only underscore the necessity of sustained civil society activity, but also bring added complexity to the work of CSOs and call for a reflection on experiences and approaches to date.

On March 1 and 2, 2006 in Ottawa, Canada, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) held a strategic working session followed by a public conference to take stock of civil society initiatives in the Americas in light of evolving political realities and the status of multilateral efforts. Civil society practitioners and academics from the region, international donors, Canadian government officials, the Organization of American States (OAS) attended, as well as members of Ottawa's civil society, diplomatic and policy community. The goals of the sessions were to: A) Identify the internal and external challenges currently facing CSOs; B) Reach common ground on key goals and priorities, and identify innovative models and practical strategies for future initiatives; and C) Explore how CSOs can work effectively with other international actors (the OAS, governments, donors and political parties).¹

During the two-day session, participants exchanged experiences and perspectives on democracy and civil society. Given the breadth and complexity of the issues, time constraints and the varying perspectives of participants, the sessions did not generate clear consensus or definitive prescriptions for the future. They did, however, provide insights into current challenges and highlight particular areas of action and possible future strategies. Discussions allowed participants to identify areas of convergence and divergence of opinion, relationships that should be nurtured, and good ideas that may provide the seed for future initiatives.

The following report provides a synthesis of the main threads of the discussion, highlighting new ideas, priorities and recommendations. The report seeks to support CSOs in their work and inform donors, governments and international institutions about how they can work collaboratively and productively with CSOs in the pursuit of common goals. FOCAL hopes that the sessions, and this report, will reinvigorate discussion of CSOs' role and reposition collaborative action in the area of democracy promotion and defence in the Americas.

¹ Two papers were commissioned by FOCAL to provide a point of departure for the discussions. *Bridging Divides, Breaking Impasses* by Thomas Legler, and *Civil Society and the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas* by Rodolfo Albán Guevara are available at www.focal.ca.



Background: Regional Democracy Promotion and Protection Efforts and the Rise of Civil Society

The 1990s witnessed the spread of democracy and economic growth in the Americas. This coincided with a post-Cold War focus on multilateralism, exemplified by the gathering of the hemisphere's heads of state at the first Summit of the Americas in 1994. This meeting signalled convergence around shared ideals of democracy and a collective interest in advancing regional free trade. In the years that followed the First Summit of the Americas, common political and economic objectives were formalized in a host of inter-American declarations and resolutions. The high point of this regional consensus came in 2001 with the final declaration of the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, and the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter later that year.

The Charter provides a theoretical and practical framework for democracy protection in the Americas, as well as general definitions and guidelines for national and regional bodies in the event of democratic ruptures. Article 3 of the Charter outlines the essential elements of representative democracy, going beyond basic free and fair elections to include respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, a pluralistic system of political parties, the separation of powers and independent branches of government.² Article 4 describes the minimum conditions required for the successful exercise of democracy, including transparency in government activities, probity, responsible public administration, respect for social rights, freedom of expression and of the press. The Charter also recognizes the interdependence of social and economic development and democracy (Art.11). Finally, the Charter underscores the important role of CSOs in the strengthening and protection of democracy and commits the OAS to take into account CSOs' contributions in carrying out programs and activities (Art. 26 and 27).

Over the past 15 years, groups of citizens have taken advantage of increased personal and political freedoms and come together to give voice to their concerns and advocate for greater inclusion in national and international affairs.³ At the national level CSOs and citizens have become increasingly active in local issues and national politics, demanding accountability, promoting transparency and access to information, as well as providing basic services to the population. CSOs have also become active at the international level and in Inter-American affairs, with the OAS and the high profile of the summits being venues of choice for participation in regional policy and decision-making processes. Ongoing engagement has led to recognition of civil society's contribution, accompanied by incremental increases in access and greater CSO inclusion in inter-American affairs, particularly at the OAS.

Despite progress, the development and consolidation of civil society in countries across the Americas has been uneven. In some countries civil society has established strong roots and productive working relationships with governments, while in other countries this has not been the case and CSOs remain excluded by suspicious and uncooperative governments. However, now more than

² The Inter-American Democratic Charter can be accessed at http://www.oas.org/main/main.asp?sLang=E&sLink=http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democratic_Charter.htm

³ Civil society has been defined in many ways. For the sessions civil society was defined broadly to include non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations, as well as the media, labour unions, students, and academics.



ever there is a recognition that the existence of an active, diverse and inclusive civil society is an integral component and important indicator of a mature democratic society. It is acknowledged that CSOs contribute to democratic consolidation by strengthening governance mechanisms and promoting open and transparent decision-making processes. Regionally, CSOs play a key role in monitoring elections, advocacy and providing input on the content, implementation and monitoring of important agreements, including the Democratic Charter, Summit Declarations and the Inter-American Convention against Corruption.

The Current Democratic Landscape: An Assessment

In spite of progress in the consolidation of democracy, the evolution of norms and international mechanisms and the development of civil society, many countries in the hemisphere still face serious governance challenges. Institutions central to the exercise of democracy continue to be weak, lack transparency and suffer from low credibility. The management of social demands is largely inefficient and myriad social problems persist despite economic growth. Large segments of the citizenry remain alienated from decision-making, often the purview of a small elite. In many places, protest and instability are a constant threat to peace and security. Meanwhile, previously un-encountered circumstances are emerging to provide new threats to democratic stability, as traditional military coups have given way to neo-populist forces, increased pressure from non-state actors and paralyzing executive-legislative gridlock. Furthermore, the regional cohesiveness in place in 2001 has since deteriorated and the current international context presents citizens and governments with new constraints and challenges.

Structural Challenges

Before making strategic recommendations about future civil society initiatives, participants began by examining some of these existing and emerging challenges. In discussing persisting problems and their new manifestations participants concurred that the challenges to democracy today find a common origin in the extreme poverty and inequality that continue to grip the region. Indeed, expectations that democratization would improve material conditions by redistributing power and resources remain largely unfulfilled, and economic marginalization and discrimination persist for the majority of citizens. Participants noted that these circumstances endure because the negotiation process that established democratic regimes left out large segments of the population in a majority of countries, resulting in a lack of a broad consensus on rules and long-term national objectives. While the democratic structures and institutions have been put in place, many systems continue to work according to old social arrangements and rules centred on exclusion and control that favour the interests of a narrow elite.

As a result, electoral democracies are not democracies of citizens. Despite regularly exercising the vote, citizens' concerns are often not reflected or their rights protected by elected officials in policy-making and governance decisions. The states' failure to respond to citizens' needs despite economic growth has created disillusionment with democracy. Oft-cited Latinobarómetro polls and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) analyses demonstrate that while a majority of Latin Americans believe that democracy is the best form of government, they are disenchanted with the performance of their democracies, particularly their ability to combat poverty and maintain public security.



Emerging Concerns

As the effects of these historical and structural problems continue to manifest themselves and the “third wave” of democratization yields new challenges, these must be dealt with by current national and regional actors, including civil society. Participants highlighted the following as the most significant concerns for citizens, governments and regional institutions today.

Abuse of Power by Incumbents

Abuse of executive power by incumbent leaders is not a new phenomenon. However, unlike in the past when leaders captured levers of power outright, today the concern has shifted to scenarios where elected officials, under the auspices of a free and fairly elections, use the legislature, courts, and other state apparatus to increase executive power and influence to their advantage. Further, conflicts within different branches of the government have also besieged effective governance and democratic principles. Legislatures, motivated by intra-elite antagonism and infighting, openly jockey for power while effectively destroying the executive’s ability to govern. This is epitomized by recent instances of executive-legislative gridlock in Ecuador and Nicaragua. Attempts to manipulate the judiciary have also been a feature of such struggles.

Crisis of Political Parties

Political parties are indispensable to the workings of democratic governance, which relies on them to fulfill the classic roles of recruiting candidates for political office, structuring public political support around identifiable sets of policy programs, socioeconomic interests and values, and forming government and legislative policy agreements. Unfortunately political parties throughout the region are in crisis. A weak democratic culture and the competition for the benefits associated with the state have contributed to their failure to effectively articulate coherent positions and respond to popular interests. Parties are charged, often correctly, with corruption, lack of transparency, weak internal party democracy, clientelistic practices and the incapacity to promote new leaders.⁴ Further, they are increasingly challenged by the complex social and political transformations emerging as a result of globalization and structural adjustment. Unable to present innovative and responsive governance and policy options, they are viewed with widespread distrust, reinforcing divisions and disillusionment instead of fostering the informed dialogue and representing citizens’ interest needed for further democratic consolidation.

Neo-Populist Trends

The breakdown of political parties and their inability to represent citizens has contributed to another potentially problematic trend: the rise of anti-system leaders who exhibit neo-populist tendencies. Often in reaction to poverty, inequality and social divisions, populist leaders promise solutions that offer material gain to the poor and under-represented. While contemporary neo-populism often shares a common discourse with classical populism—the strong anti-establishment “us versus

⁴ Wilhelm Hofmeister, “Democracy building in Latin America: The Role of Political Parties and Civil Society”, presented March 2, 2006 at FOCAL conference, Strengthening the Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas



them” political dynamic that pits the underprivileged against the powerful elite establishment—neo-populism introduces a new twist, presenting not just an attack on the oligarchy, but on the entire political class. It aims to discredit or circumvent existing political and social institutions and establish direct links between the executive and the masses.⁵

Tom Legler and other participants flagged these tendencies as a cause for concern that risk undermining pluralism and endangering the long-term prospects for democracy and development. While populist regimes often give an impression of greater inclusiveness, power remains in the hands of the executive. In addition, populist leaders can cause further social and political degradation by discrediting, bypassing and altering democratic institutions—or a combination of the three—instead of strengthening them as required for long-term democratic stability. Populism feeds on and exacerbates existing class racial, ethnic and rural-urban divides and often incites conflict rather than curtailing it. The resulting polarization reduces communication and respect for difference, thereby inhibiting consensus building and identification of common goals.

Activity of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors are increasingly exerting destabilizing effects. Civilian violence and criminal elements, including gang activity and trafficking, negatively affect the lives of citizens and create insecurity, often rendering sections of cities or swaths of national territory ungovernable. In some cases, these elements are exerting increasing pressure and influence in official political process.

Civil society and citizen activism has also been a significant source of upheaval in recent years. Several countries in the region have experienced civil society “coups” or mass street demonstrations that have forced elected leaders out of office. Again a reaction of unmet needs and the failure of democratic institutions to channel the legitimate demands of citizens, these mobilizations are a destabilizing force incompatible with the rule of law and democratic procedure. It is acknowledged that peaceful manifestation remains an inalienable democratic right, and that active citizen engagement is a positive sign of a conscious citizenship and an expression of popular involvement in political affairs. However civil society must be conscious of its responsibility to foster and protect stability and peace while working for change.

Regional Challenges: Limits to Collective Action

In addition to national dynamics, participants also identified weaknesses in the existing collective democracy promotion and protection architecture. Established to address emerging democratic threats and preclude full-blown crisis, the mechanisms have their limits and shortcomings. Since its signing in 2001 the Democratic Charter has been implemented less frequently and successfully than originally hoped. Designed to deal with flagrant abuses, new and unforeseen situations have put into stark relief the Charter’s limitations. The lack of definition of what constitutes an alteration or interruption in the democratic order and the absence of accompanying monitoring and automatic response mechanisms have rendered preventative application of the Charter difficult, relying instead on the political will of member states to apply it when they consider it appropriate. Moreover, many governments consider the Charter a punitive tool rather than as a supportive

⁵ Thomas Legler, “*Bridging Divides, Breaking Impasses*”, FOCAL Policy Paper, www.focal.ca.



document and are reluctant to use it. This, coupled with states' strong adherence to principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention, further prevents the Charter's application to prevent or resolve democratic crisis without an explicit invitation from the endangered state. Shifting regional dynamics and a breakdown in the consensus present at the Charter's signing have created further impediments to strengthening the Charter.

A Response to Democratic Challenges: Harnessing CSO Strengths

The core problems of poverty, lack of representation and inequality, and attendant violence, corruption and polarization require complex and long-term solutions, which must be based on strengthening fundamental elements and principles in societies across the region. Among these elements is the need for information and ideas that provide citizens, politicians and policy-makers with a common basis for informed discussion and decision-making. Second, is the need for pluralism and respect for difference of opinion. Third, is the need for consensus-building techniques that allow citizens to reach agreement and identify common objectives for national life at the local and national level. Finally, there is a need for heightened transparency and accountability in government activity to ensure that these shared visions are being implemented by elected officials.

Given these fundamental priorities, CSOs possess a number of characteristics and strengths that put them in a position to undertake activities in a way that will support democratic values and promote pluralism, consensus building and accountability.

Diverse

In the first place, civil society organizations represent a host of issues, interests and groups, while their objectives, organizational structures and activities vary to include single-issue grassroots organizations, national movements, think tanks and academics institutions alike. The diversity of CSOs means that they offer solutions to a variety of issues, bringing the perspectives and needs of various sectors of society. The articulation and sharing of ideas not only increases the options available to deal with a situation or solve a problem, but also contributes to pluralism and compromise. Civil society action can be useful in protesting injustice on the street and working with governments and multilateral officials to improve national and regional governance structures.

Flexible

Because they do not depend on votes or large bureaucracies and are not beholden to the norms of multilateralism, CSOs enjoy a freedom of action that governments or regional institutions do not. In the area of democracy defence, CSOs can use their networks and local knowledge to collaborate with a wide range of actors, engage in a rapid course of action to promptly alert others to impending crises, not being bound by consensus requirements or violation of sovereignty concerns. This makes them a valuable ally to governments and international organizations. Though traditional diplomacy sometimes fears non-state actors, viewing them as a "non-representative" threat, their flexibility is valuable and the potential synergistic effects of CSO and government/inter-American collaboration must continue to be explored.



Innovative

CSOs have great potential for innovation. Due to their structure (often small with multi-skilled staff), the nature of their work (education, research) and their largely autonomous nature (not beholden to constituents, bureaucracies or customers), CSOs are able to be dynamic and responsive to new situations. While sometimes constrained by donor expectations, CSOs are free to explore new ideas, generate alternative proposals and initiate action. The need to connect with like-minded organizations locally and nationally promotes the sharing of ideas and best practices, with organizations modifying and improving the ideas of another.

Despite these strengths, CSOs are not without their limitations and internal challenges. Like other organization, they can suffer from non-democratic governance practices, capture by outside interests, corruption and other problems. Further, asymmetries among organizations exist, as some groups maintain privileged access to resources and influence, while other organizations remain marginalized. Civil society has shortcomings that cannot be ignored and must be taken into account when setting expectations about what civil society alone can achieve. In response to this CSOs must maintain high standards and incorporate democratic principles of transparency, accountability, pluralism, justice and collaboration into their own work.

Priority Activities: Civil Society Strongholds

Thinking about the elements needed for strengthened democracy, and civil societies' strengths and limitations, participants highlighted activities considered key CSOs strongholds—areas where civil society can have a particularly positive impact. In most cases CSOs across the region are already undertaking a number of these activities. Some areas, however, will require learning on the part of organizations, and may necessitate a refocusing of objectives, partners and methodologies.

Promote Dialogue

In discussing challenges to democracy, including a lack of broad-based consensus on basic national principles, polarization and marginalization, the need to create spaces for debate and dialogue was underscored. Such spaces bring people together and provide an opportunity to discuss issues and share different points of view, which is essential in reaching compromise and a shared direction. An autonomous and moderate civil society can help bridge divides between groups and work to build social and political consensus, while contributing to pluralism and promoting tolerance. To do this, they must engage a broad range of society on a wide array of issues at the local and national level. CSOs throughout the Americas must do much more to foster productive dialogue, building understanding and a strengthening a tolerant middle ground.

Give Voice to Disenfranchised Groups

Given that current unproductive political forces challenging democracy are fuelled by marginalization and under-representation, CSOs must continue to play a critical role in articulating the needs and rights of all citizens. Civil society must present alternative methods for citizens to obtain a voice. They must demand access to information, transparency and consultation in decision-making processes, ensuring that the perspectives and interests of those currently excluded are coherently presented and incorporated by decision-makers. Further, crucial to achieving a more equal distribution of power and resources CSOs must support communities in autonomous and participatory local development, promoting initiatives and policies that generate improved living



standards and provide opportunities for communities. Such work would in turn help build the social fabric of democracy at the grassroots.

Undertake Analysis and Develop Policy Options

Closely connected to the need for dialogue and citizen inclusion in decision-making, participants emphasized the need for CSOs to undertake thorough analysis and develop well-articulated and feasible policy and program ideas. Many CSO efforts to date have focused on accessing decision-makers. However, CSOs have expertise that is valuable to governments and international bodies and must take better advantage of their knowledge and present stakeholders with coherent proposals. The work of analysis and advocacy was flagged as a weak area for many CSOs who, for lack of capacity or information about political processes, do not always advocate productively. Discussions underscored the importance of a constructive attitude, careful research and the need for a better understanding of the appropriate lobbying channels and methods. Presenting a transparent and concrete agenda is a basis for productive cooperation and adds to organizations' credibility and legitimacy.

Educate

For a number of reasons many citizens lack the knowledge or information necessary to be active participants in their democracies. Hand in hand with research and policy development, CSOs must continue to educate the public about their rights and responsibilities, their national government and how proposed policies and decisions will affect their lives. Similarly, where appropriate, CSOs should provide more public education about regional issues and institutions, as well as information about the international agreements, treaties and conventions that their governments have signed. Ongoing dissemination of and education about the Democratic Charter, its provisions and the rights and responsibilities it contains was repeatedly underscored as a priority in the promotion and protection of democracy.

Monitoring the Inter-American Democratic Charter

Given the sessions' focus on the promotion and protection of democracy, the idea of an independent civil society initiative that would use the Democratic Charter as a basis for monitoring democracy in the hemisphere was discussed on several occasions. Such a Charter monitoring mechanism would consist of a network of CSOs and academics working together across national boundaries. As part of such an initiative local organizations and scholars would assess changes and progress in the democratic situation in countries across the region and provide periodic country reports, flagging emerging situations and providing early alerts based a series of predetermined indicators. These reports and bulletins would be a source of updated, independent and locally generated information that would be valuable to governments and international organizations when planning their policies and action.

Monitor and Follow-up on National and International Commitments

As independent organizations, CSOs have a critical role to play in monitoring and following up on governments' domestic and international commitments. A necessary activity in ensuring accountability, these commitments provide a baseline against which to measure progress in key areas (i.e. human rights, corruption, democratic governance), while monitoring ensures that appropriate public policies are being implemented and adhered to. Beyond monitoring, organizations must become effective at publicly disseminating the results through country and issue-based reports.



Such reports put successes and failures in the spotlight and keep governments accountable through public opinion and international pressure. With a better understanding of existing accords, CSOs would also contribute to the formulation and drafting of future agreements.

Develop Conflict Prevention Skills

Finally, the need for CSOs to develop and help impart practical conflict resolution skills was also flagged as an important and emerging area of concentration. Given growing insecurity, polarization and protest, organizations and citizens equipped with dialogue, negotiation and consensus building skills are well placed to reduce tension and division between individuals and groups, promoting moderation and communication.

The Need for Alliances: Strengthening Key Partnerships

While CSOs do have useful skills and flexibility of action, it was clear in the discussion that CSOs cannot generate pluralism, consensus, constructive policy reform and transparency on their own. Participants concluded that to reach these goals CSOs must build collaborative relationships with key actors, including political parties, governments, multilateral organizations and international donors, so that all can work together towards common solutions. For such partnerships to develop players must agree to reduce the mutual mistrust that has characterized relationships and prevented previous collaboration. It was suggested that past approaches on both sides must be re-evaluated and that the rapport between CSOs and formal institutions must shift from a confrontational to a constructive stance. For their part, CSOs must present a transparent agenda and be willing to cooperate with institutions and other CSOs, balancing their criticisms with concrete alternative proposals wherever possible. Institutions, particularly political parties and governments, must also be willing to cooperate, share information and recognize the potential of civil society's contribution to effective governance.

Working Collaboratively – Networks and Inclusiveness

As a first step, CSOs must respect each other's views and work together where possible. Civil society is by no means homogenous. CSOs often have disparate agendas and work at different levels, from the grassroots to engagement with regional institutions. The multitude of issues and means to address them can lead to a discord and competition between organizations. In the spirit of pluralism and respect there must be an acknowledgment that all organizations, in their own way, can make a positive contribution. It is with a diverse civil society that we are able to hold governments accountable.

In cases where organizations have similar goals and expertise, participants emphasized the need for increased coordination and collaboration through networks. Groups can share information, best practices and build coalitions to promote shared agendas at the national and regional levels. Networks allow for an efficient division of labour, allowing organizations to use their expertise to do what they do best, while benefiting from the knowledge and activities of others. However, participants recognized that networks are not always a necessity, and must be formed when there is a clear need and value added. In cases where they are appropriate, a well-funded and well-staffed secretariat, sufficient infrastructure and technology are essential to efficiently maintain a network



and provide the services required by its members.

Political Parties

In recent years, and with few exceptions, political parties have been largely discredited in the eyes of citizens across the region, often in reaction to the perception that parties are ineffective, self-interested and unable to promote social and economic development. Further, while there are exceptions, collaboration between CSOs and political parties is rare and often confrontational. Political parties often reject civil society as non-representative, while civil society wages criticisms of corruption and incompetence. There is also sometimes rivalry between the two, as CSOs are charged with trying to compete with or replace parties.

However, political parties are indispensable to democracy as the formal mechanism of political representation and participation. Participants reaffirmed the integral role of parties despite their current state, and one participant pointed out that constant criticism and rejection of parties will not provoke positive change or reform, but conversely further reduce citizen's faith in the democratic process. Rather, they urged civil society to engage with parties wherever possible, agreeing that CSOs can make a positive contribution to internal party discussion on specific ideas and the formation of coherent platforms and programmatic commitments. Participants suggested that creating spaces for dialogue and exchange between CSOs and parties would be a first step toward a more productive relationship, and the diversity of ideas and proposals will in time support a more fruitful national policy dialogue. In the spirit of strengthening competent parties and fostering political institutions CSOs must resist the urge to reject all politicians as corrupt and incompetent, but rather provide constructive feedback and acknowledge and support party advancements and promising candidates. Participants underscored that in this process civil society must be careful not to be co-opted by parties, but nevertheless believed that strengthening the collaboration between non-elected and elected sectors would have the positive effect of increasing the credibility of both sides, essential for the long-term viability of the democratic process.

Relations with Donors

Many CSOs in the region rely on external organizations for funding, often unable to count on domestic public or private funds to support their activities. As such, CSO-donor relationships are important and to a certain degree can determine the scope and direction of CSO activity. Given this critical relationship, participants discussed how the donor-CSO relationship could be improved to better support democracy promotion and strengthening.

Stability is vital for CSO effectiveness, allowing organizations to construct agendas that look beyond daily crisis. However, it was noted that donors' preference to fund activities over core institutional costs often prevent CSOs from establishing viable organizational infrastructure and limit their long-term planning and permanent engagement in a given area. This is compounded by the sometimes narrow and shifting agendas of donors as they respond to new situations and their own priorities. As a result, organizations sometime have to accept projects that are determined by outside forces and do not allow them to focus on their areas of interest. Described as a "paternalistic", this relationship can limit innovation and contribute to the perception that CSO priorities are donor-driven, fuelling concerns about Northern bias and conditional support for Southern CSOs. One



participant hypothesized that the current complexity and politicization of international cooperation is perhaps exacerbated by some donors' tendencies to invest in projects rather than provide longer-term funding that allows organizations leeway to set their own priorities. There was agreement that donors must help CSOs overcome limited access to structural funds in order to provide them with increased continuity and independence. Not only would this support organizations' success, it would also increase their effectiveness, expertise and, ultimately, their legitimacy.

Conversely, participants recognized the conflicting demands placed on donors. Donors must achieve their own goals and priorities, but are also asked to remain flexible, embrace innovative ideas, and be alert to the needs and agendas of the organizations they support. In light of these requirements, participants suggested that candid exchanges between donors and CSOs about their goals, challenges, successes and failures would be helpful to all. Likewise, while a diversity of donor interests and priorities is beneficial, it was noted that donor coordination would facilitate donor work, help orient CSOs and contribute to overall organizational and programmatic stability in the region. Coordination does not mean prioritizing one approach or theme over others, as best results are achieved through a combination of top down and bottom up, national and local level work, domestic and international initiatives.

While not a panacea, coordination, transparency and regular evaluation would be useful to all players. Donors must trust their partners, support their potential for innovation and be willing to be bold and take risks with the initiatives they choose to fund; CSOs must in turn be conscientious, transparent and honest with their funders about their successes and constraints. Finally, the need for long-term engagement and patience was underscored, specifically in matters of democracy promotion and defence as the consolidation—and deterioration—of democracy is often a lengthy and gradual process.

The Organization of American States

Institutions and mechanisms of the Inter-American system provide the framework for the regional democracy promotion and defence regime, with the OAS serving as the hub of coordinated hemispheric action. Since the late 1990s the OAS has incrementally opened its doors to CSOs. While there are now formal participation mechanisms in place there is a perception that these spaces remain ornamental and have not translated into increased influence or sustained collaboration between CSOs and the OAS on key issues. However, it was underscored that while participation is limited, existing mechanisms do offer great potential to CSOs if utilized productively. Given the current and emerging opportunities for engagement there are several steps that the OAS, as well as member states and CSOs, can undertake to give live life to these formal arrangements.

Provide Information and Educate

The OAS has done a commendable job in the last 5 years in producing and circulating information about its processes, decisions, meetings and activities. However, participants agreed that misconceptions about the nature and scope of the OAS mandate persist. Providing CSOs and citizens a clear understanding of what the organization does—and what it does not do—as well as its strengths and limitations may reduce misgivings in the region about OAS activities and build confidence in the organization. The OAS should provide this information via in-country



workshops and written material, paying particular attention to the organization's structure and the points of access for civil society to impact decision-making.

Improve Consultations and Information Sharing

In the recent past, with the support of international donors, the OAS has made efforts to ensure that diverse CSOs from across the region attend Summit and OAS civil society consultations. While CSOs acknowledge and welcome these efforts, there are changes that can make the time and resources currently being applied more productive.⁷ In the first instance, time constraints and the broad focus of session agendas often prevent substantive debate and exchange. It was suggested that it would be more productive to structure discussions around issue areas, encouraging CSO representatives to present concerns and proposals for discussion with officials and other CSOs with interest and expertise in the area. Moreover, while CSOs appreciate having the opportunity to discuss pertinent issues with their colleagues from other countries, future consultations should include member state representativeness, as well as relevant OAS specialists and OAS special committee members for the duration of the discussion, not just for the opening and closing sessions.

CSO-OAS consultations should also take advantage of civil society presence at these consultations and encourage ad hoc reports by CSOs to special OAS committees or even to the Permanent Council, particularly in the event of a domestic situation or hemispheric incident that requires attention. In cases where CSOs are not in a position to make such presentations, every effort should be made to disseminate reports and information produced by CSOs on critical situations affecting democratic stability in the region. OAS representatives and member states should consider this input when formulating agreements and future action. By being courageous in its policies and practices regarding transparency and participation the OAS has the opportunity to strengthen democratic governance practices and set an example for governments and stakeholders throughout the region.

Further Institutionalization

Structural and political openings around democratic governance issues at the OAS do continue to be created. As this evolution continues it must be acknowledged that discrepancies in access and rules for different gatherings and branches of the OAS remain. The rules of participation must be harmonized across the organization and applied evenly regardless of institutional the body and the type of event taking place.

Openness of Member States

Underpinning a productive OAS-CSO relationship is collaboration from member states that make up the organization and ultimately determine the rules of the game. At home, member states have the responsibility to ensure that CSOs enjoy freedom of expression and are protected by laws recognizing their natural independence from the state and their right to receive funding from international entities. States should also establish two-way channels for government-CSO consultations on domestic and international affairs, and where possible provide funding to enable

⁷ A coalition of CSOs engaged in the OAS and Summits process has generated a series of specific recommendations to improve OAS-CSO consultation in the short and long run. Please see www.partners.net for more information.



the work of CSOs. Special attention should be given to local and grassroots organizations and networks.

Informed and Responsible CSOs

Finally, CSOs have a critical role to play in making CSO-OAS interaction as productive as possible. CSOs must make the effort to learn about the role the OAS as the hemisphere's main political body, understanding its structure and constraints. Organizations must assume responsibility for using existing participation mechanisms to their full extent; identifying key bodies and individuals, learning how to lobby and communicate effectively at the international level, and keeping up to date on issues, resolutions and committee work. CSOs should regularly accompany their presentations with written contributions that can be shared with CSO colleagues and submitted, according to current OAS guidelines, to OAS staff and member states for consideration. CSOs must begin to look to the OAS as a resource. They should seize the opportunity to work with the organization to strengthen democracies in their countries— providing their information, collaboration and expertise. The OAS must reciprocate. Lastly, CSOs must continue to push for further institutional reforms, pressing regional and national leaders to listen to and consider citizens' concerns and suggestions regarding their countries' democratic progress.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The Americas continues to face poverty, inequality, corruption and weak institutions, while emerging situations further test democratic principles and collective mechanisms to support democracy. In reaction to these challenges fed by marginalization and under-representation, efforts must be made on many fronts to reduce inequality, promote pluralism and strengthen political institutions. The meeting held in Ottawa in March 2006 set out to determine how civil society can best help reach these goals. Participants concluded that civil society, while not without its limitations, is diverse, flexible and innovative, characteristics that lend themselves to activity in some critical areas. These CSO strongholds, while not exhaustive, include dialogue promotion, constructive policy reform and consensus building, and will do much to strengthen values and structures critical to democracy. CSOs are currently involved in some or all of these areas. The Ottawa gathering reconfirmed the essential nature of these activities given the current regional context, stressing particular areas of action and innovative applications of old methodologies. Relationship building was also stressed, as CSOs' constructive engagement will strengthen the fabric of democracy, while aggregating the forces working towards an equal, just and democratic hemisphere.

The ideas and suggestions in this report are a guide for CSOs as they plan future engagement and actions. At the local and national level the practical applications must be based on collaboration and discussion, in keeping with the national context, needs and capacities. At the regional level it is imperative that civil society continue to work together to forward the key recommendations contained here, particularly those related to using the regional mechanisms to protect democracy at the national level. The following recommendations were identified as the core priorities for civil society and other actors as they proceed with this work. FOCAL hopes that the report and these recommendations will foster productive collaboration and contribute to the efforts of CSOs, donors, governments and international institutions as they forge ahead to collectively promote and strengthen democracies in the Americas.



Civil Society must:

- Lead the strengthening and protection of democracy by embodying democratic principles and exercising democratic values of pluralism, compromise and consensus building in its engagement with all stakeholders, from citizens to multilateral bodies.
- Act as a bridge between divided groups. By promoting spaces for open discussion and debate CSOs can build consensus and strengthen the moderate middle ground.
- Harness its strengths and use its knowledge, unique position and flexibility to bring the issues and concerns of citizens to the forefront in a productive manner.
- Take full advantage of existing spaces for consultation and collaboration with national and multilateral organization, presenting concrete and well-researched reports and policy options.
- Strengthen key partnerships and engage stakeholders in a productive and responsible manner. Adopt a constructive approach to other domestic and international actors working to forge more collaborative relationships.

A Word to Partners

Political Parties

- Recognize CSOs as a valid interlocutor and acknowledge their contribution as specialized non-elected entities, viewing them as a valuable source of information and policy options. This would not only improve parties' capacity, but would also a first step in regaining society's trust.

Donors

- Increase funding for CSOs' organizational infrastructure and programmatic development, allowing them to deepen their expertise and make them more effective in achieving long-term goals.
- Be bold and willing to support civil society's capacity for flexibility and innovation.

Organization of American States

- As the central actor in regional promotion of democracy efforts the OAS must embody democratic values and practices and set regional standards for information sharing, dialogue promotion and respect for the opinions of all citizens in the democratic process.
- Recognize the expertise and value of CSOs as independent actors in the collection and provision of timely, on-the-ground information when reviewing democratic progress or dealing with crisis situations. Valuable work has been done by CSOs on standards and indicators of democracy that could serve as a resource by OAS bodies and member states.



Civil Society and Democracy: A Vision for the Future

- Improve information dissemination about the OAS, its roles, responsibilities and mandates to citizens of the hemisphere, making dissemination and promotion of the Democratic Charter a priority.
- Institutionalize access to the OAS through clear and harmonized rules of participation, with open and productive channels for dialogue available to all CSOs in the region.

National Governments

- Create a legal, political and fiscal environment that facilitates CSO development, protecting CSOs right to information, free speech and freedom of action.
- Establish channels for dialogue between local and national governments and CSOs.
- Recognize the value of civil society's expertise and flexibility as complementary and useful in a variety of areas, from rapid action, policy making and service provision.

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