



Confronting Social Development Challenges

By Ambassador Luis Alberto Rodríguez

“Democracy and economic and social development are interdependent and are mutually reinforcing,” states the Inter-American Democratic Charter. It is a concept that has been gaining ground in recent years, a recognition that democracy resides not only in the voting booth, but in citizens’ access to a life of dignity.

Overcoming poverty and hunger, eliminating inequality and discrimination, creating new opportunities for education and employment—these are just some of the challenges faced by the countries of the Americas. Last week the region’s governments took an important step toward increasing dialogue and cooperation to address these deep-rooted problems when they convened for the First Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities of Social Development in the framework of the Summit of the Americas process.

The concerns in this area are urgent. Despite several years of economic expansion in the Americas, an estimated 190 million people still live in poverty, 70 million of whom suffer from hunger. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) estimates that the ranks of the region’s poor could increase by 26 million people as the result of price increases for staples such as corn, wheat and rice. The rise in oil prices also affects people’s everyday lives.

Not all problems are strictly economic. Violence and insecurity, vulnerability to disease, the social exclusion of certain segments of society, and shortcomings in educational systems are among the other factors that impede social development. According to the

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International Labor Organization, 22 million young people in the Americas neither study nor work and thus have few options for the future.

In recent years, countries have sought to address these challenges more systematically and institutionally. Since the beginning of this decade, at least six Latin American countries have created government ministries in this area; for example, in 2004 Brazil established the Ministry of Social Development and Combating Hunger, and last year Ecuador created the Ministry of Coordination and Social Development. Argentina, Panama, Peru and Uruguay have created similar ministries since 2002. In other Latin American countries, various ministries or secretariats have been created to coordinate the issue. Many Caribbean countries, meanwhile, have specialized ministries dealing with particular aspects of social development, such as those geared to children, the elderly or people with disabilities.

The regional emphasis on social development has gained ground in part due to the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals; the subject has also received greater attention within the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Summits of the Americas. In fact, the ministerial meeting held in Chile last week responded directly to a mandate from the Fourth Summit of the Americas. The ministerial meeting's conclusions, in turn, will provide critical input to the deliberations of the Fifth Summit of the Americas, which will be held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009.

When the region's presidents and prime ministers convene in Port of Spain, they will tackle a profound and broad-reaching topic: "Securing Our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability." The challenge will be to adopt a series of concrete commitments that establish priority goals

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and specify tangible measures and timeframes in which to reach them. The process of developing these priorities has already begun, with the participation of civil society organizations.

It is worth noting that for the 34 democracies represented at the Summit and at the recent ministerial meeting, social development is not a partisan or ideological issue. A consensus already exists on the link between consolidating democracy and strengthening social development. It is up to each country to establish its own priorities and areas of focus, based on the particular realities and demands of its people. However, it is vital that the countries of the region share their knowledge, experience and best practices so the entire region can work more effectively to secure a better future for our citizens.

Ambassador Luis Alberto Rodríguez is the national coordinator of the Fifth Summit of the Americas, as well as the government of Trinidad and Tobago's special envoy to the Americas.

VSOA-TT 21/2008

About the Summit of the Americas

The Summit of the Americas brings together the 34 democratically elected leaders of the Western Hemisphere to exchange ideas and opinions on the main political, economic, social and security challenges facing the Hemisphere and to develop strategies and solutions to collectively address them.

The Fifth Summit of the Americas will be hosted in Trinidad and Tobago on April 17-19, 2009.

For further information, please contact:

Wesley Gibbings
Coordinator – Communications, Press and Publications
(868) 489-9006