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BEYOND THE ABSENCE OF WAR: PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE AMERICAS OF THE 21ST CENTURY AMERICAS PROJECT 2009

INTRODUCTION

The Americas face a combination of new and old threats to the well-being and security of their inhabitants and the ability to coexist. These pressures extend beyond the development of armed conflicts, resulting in significant ideological divisions and movement toward strong unilateral governments.

Given its history of military dictatorships, the region is still trying to reconcile its past with the present. There are some 30 unresolved border disputes, and some governments, like those of Mexico and Venezuela, have adopted an almost military-like response to quell sporadic or structured attempts to destabilize the system.

In the 1970s, most of the governments in the region were at a crossroads: democracy or dictatorship. The attempts to reject decades of internal wars and confrontations in favor of democracy resulted in a generalized return to the republican form of government in the 1980s. In the most recent decade, regions have struggled to participate in the global economy while going through very different processes regarding political institutions. Although some countries have reaffirmed their commitment to democracy by transferring power to constitutionally elected presidents, other nations show signs of significant steps backward, consolidating what have been called “imperfect democracies.” The new century will be characterized by a great challenge: sustaining and promoting the democracies created by political and institutional processes in the 1980s.

In reference to the new threats, countries have not been able to prevent the violence that results from high volumes of different types of contraband

and organized crime operations, revealing a lack of real control over their territories, migration policies, and regulation of commerce, as well as the use of weapons, drug trafficking, and legitimization of capital, among other issues. Today the threats to national security originate from within the states. The capacity of these states—and quality of their democracies—is undermined by terrorism, drug trafficking, mafia-like organizations, and the deterioration of the environment.

These variables are exacerbated by the disorganized urban development of the region’s big cities, corruption, retail drug trafficking, rapid proliferation of firearms, social inequality and exclusion, and governments that offer inadequate channels for social demands. The ensuing increase in violence affects the well-being of communities, damaging the social fabric and social capital while constituting a threat to human rights.

According to The World Bank’s *World Development Report 2006*, Latin America heads the list of regions of the world with the highest income disparity, second only to sub-Saharan Africa. Nations with high indexes of economic development and growing military power coexist with others that have not yet consolidated a minimal capacity for an adequately functioning state, due to the fragility of their democratic institutions and the rule of law itself.

The challenge for the fellows of the 2009 Americas Project, “Beyond the Absence of War: Peace and Stability in the Americas of the 21st Century,” was to examine some of these new menaces to hemispheric security that threaten peaceful coexistence among and within countries.

The fellows analyzed and discussed current policies adopted by national governments and

international organizations, with the goal of identifying actions that civil society, national governments, and international organizations could take to overcome these multidimensional security challenges. The symposium provided the stage for fellows to hear firsthand about different countries' experiences, to exchange and debate ideas, and to propose recommendations. Below is the summary of the fellows' discussions on the role of international organizations, government, and civil society in promoting and maintaining peace.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, SPECIFICALLY THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES, IN SUPPORTING AND SAFEGUARDING PEACE IN THE HEMISPHERE

The Organization of American States (OAS) is the premier regional forum for political dialogue and consensus. Therefore our discussion on the role of international organizations in promoting and building peace focuses on the OAS.

In the Americas, the OAS embodies the idea of a regional unity for common purposes, particularly regarding democracy and peace. This goal, which has been the *raison d'être* of the OAS since its creation, has existed since the nineteenth century. As concepts of democracy and peace have shifted over time, the OAS has worked toward strengthening institutions that support democracy and promote sustainable peace in the region through respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The fundamental democratic principles promoted by OAS include: access to and exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law; the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people; a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations; the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government; and transparency in government activities. Finally, governments must also be responsible public administrators while respecting social rights and freedoms of expression and of the press; the constitutional subordination of all state institutions to the legally constituted civilian authority; and respect for the rule of law on the part of all institutions and sectors of society.

Currently, the OAS can be described as a forum for political dialogue mainly centered on democracy and peace. The organization uses various resources to promote democracy in the region. These include: electoral observation missions (http://www.oas.org/sap/english/cpo_cooperacion_observacion.asp); the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption (<http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/b-58.html>); strengthening the legislative branches and political parties; and protecting democratic institutions by identifying and analyzing potential or existing risks to democracy. The OAS also helps member countries prevent, manage, or resolve crises, as well as overcome disruptions in democratic practices. The OAS Peace Fund facilitates the peaceful settlement of disputes. A specific example of a highly successful effort in this area is the current OAS-sponsored discussions underway between Belize and Guatemala regarding disputed territory.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the OAS

Overall, the OAS is recognized for favoring peaceful means of resolving conflicts and controversies, as well as for its work promoting and enhancing democracy. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that OAS electoral observers have become a legitimate tool for maintaining democracy throughout the region.

Throughout its existence, the OAS has kept to its primary mission of promoting democracy and peace in the region. Although this is positive in some aspects, it has also created some limitations on the organization's performance. For instance, the principle of nonintervention restricts the possibilities of exercising preventive diplomacy and timing intervention to avoid conflict when countries choose not to ask the OAS for help. In other words, the OAS cannot act or intervene unless the country or countries involved ask the organization to do so.

A key strength of the OAS is the diverse experiences of its member states, including the lessons learned and best practices that can be derived from these experiences. Yet, some of these lessons and best practices have yet to be documented due to a lack of resources—a continuous challenge for the organization.

The OAS' focus on decision making by consensus is both a strength and a weakness. Consensus is desirable because decisions are fully supported by each and every member. However, it is also a

drawback because reaching such an agreement is very challenging. It is a process that demands time and political maneuvering, potentially delaying actions and measures.

Another weakness of the institution is the lack of effective communication with the citizens of its member states. Throughout our discussion, it was apparent there were many differences in perception regarding the leverage of some OAS member countries. In reality, each country, regardless of its size or economic power, has one vote. This misconception of unequal power, as well as others that were present during our symposium, show the lack of widespread knowledge and information outside the organization and among citizens of member states about the role of the OAS.

Even though states are at the core of the OAS, the organization also involves other key players, such as civil society—that is, community groups and other nongovernmental organizations. The OAS has created a space for civil society to respond to critical issues in the inter-American agenda and contribute to the initiatives set forth by the General Assembly. It arranges opportunities for dialogue, as well as mechanisms for civil society participation in political forums, in project execution, in horizontal cooperation, and in partnership program development. It also promotes sharing experiences and information, in an effort to make public policy formulation responsive to the needs and realities of American societies. Yet, the work of the OAS on this front is rarely discussed or known. Therefore, the organization needs to spread more information about its activities and have better outreach mechanisms.

Moving Ahead: Proposals for the OAS in the Future

As discussed earlier, the OAS' nonintervention principle has limited the organization's role, but it need not prevent proactive diplomacy. The OAS might, for instance, focus on preventive diplomacy by developing mechanisms that allow timely and preemptive interventions. Enhancing information management could facilitate early warning systems to both the secretary general of the OAS and to its member countries. Formalizing a crisis response/mediating advisory group of sages/eminent personalities, who could effectively intervene in a timely manner when managing a crisis or mediating

a conflict, is another option, as is the creation of a roster of civilian technical experts for rapid response and deployment for mediation or crisis prevention.

As one of the most prominent forums for political dialogue in the region, the OAS also has significant potential to intervene and enhance political and regional mechanisms for promoting and building peace. The OAS could document and disseminate lessons learned from its experiences and that of other organizations, as well as strengthen the technical expertise of its staff in mediation and negotiation. Similarly, the OAS could provide training activities and share best practices with its member states to promote preventive diplomacy and mediation.

Additionally, the OAS could work with relevant institutions including policy think tanks and universities to commission studies on specific issues that pertain to promoting and building peace in the Americas. This would be the case with thematic studies that go beyond particular countries, as well as controversies and conflicts—for example, lessons learned and best practices regarding civil society collaboration with governments to promote conflict prevention and peace-building in the region.

The OAS might also seek to strengthen and formalize its relationships with other international organizations that work on peace-building in the region — specifically, the United Nations.

Similarly, the OAS might seek to actively engage other key actors, including the private sector, in promoting peace. The OAS could enhance existing initiatives, such as the annual OAS Private Sector Forum, to foster the exchange of ideas and initiatives that pursue the goals of enhanced economic growth, prosperity, and poverty reduction in the hemisphere, and that complement the actions taken by OAS member states and development institutions. Likewise, it should continue to make strides toward increasing its participation in corporate social responsibility-related initiatives, focusing on building local capabilities, and collaborating with multiple groups. Finally, the OAS should continue to focus on supporting policies that increase government accountability and access to public information in order to combat public sector corruption and promote probity in the hemisphere.

In conclusion, strengthening peace and security, preventing conflicts, and resolving disputes are

among the essential purposes of the OAS, as established in its founding charter (http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_A-41_Charter_of_the_Organization_of_American_States.htm). However, threats to peace in the twenty-first century will come in many forms. Beyond promoting friendly relations within the region, the OAS should focus on achieving peaceful and democratic social coexistence by promoting social and material progress; the elimination of inequalities; the proper handling of the problems associated with natural disasters and pandemics; and the containment or eradication of corruption, crime, and violence.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN PROMOTING AND PRESERVING PEACE

Promoting and preserving peace through policies and strategic action are both goals and challenges for many societies in the Western Hemisphere. Resolving internal and interregional conflicts requires cooperation among citizens of these countries, as well as an examination of institutions that provide education, employment, and security. It is particularly important for governments to pay attention to policing practices.

The Police: The Most Visible Government Actor
Caribbean and Latin American countries generally have either a national or a provincial policing system. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. National policing, the more common system in the region, is found in countries like Colombia. The head of the police force, usually the chief, oversees the operations of the police officers and enforces fundamental training. This approach suggests that officers are better monitored and standardized processes and procedures are present. By contrast, provincial policing systems, such as those in Brazil and Argentina, tend to be highly segregated as each province or municipality is managed independently, and, thus, lack standardization of operations throughout the country.

Regardless of the system, many citizens in the region have diminishing confidence and respect for police officials, mostly because of the many corruption scandals they have been associated with. It is critical for citizens to trust their police forces. Therefore, specific initiatives are necessary to regain

the support of, and dependence on, these forces as a source of security.

The remuneration and benefits provided to police should be reevaluated to motivate officers and rectify the imbalance between the job's risks and wages. This would send the message that police, and the policing profession, are valued and worthy of social respect from their citizens. However, to become advocates of the people, governments must also ensure that the police force is equipped with resources to provide citizens with their requests for security and service. El Salvador, for example, faces the challenge of insufficient resources to sustain a creditable police force. Therefore, equipping officers with sufficient resources should also be a priority of the government.

As previously highlighted, the lack of trust for police officers is prevalent in the region. To improve this situation, clear policies are necessary. As discussed above, reevaluating the police force's salaries is crucial. In some places, salaries are so low that many policemen are tempted to ask for bribes. Also, it is critical for police officers to receive adequate training. There have been several incidents of police officers abusing their positions of power and violating human rights. In countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, citizens argue that there is an imbalance in the use of force, and they would like to achieve a more democratic system. As such, human rights should be guaranteed to all citizens, and police officers should be educated to reduce/eliminate the violation of these rights. It is within this atmosphere that dialogue is significant to forge better relationships between citizens and the police forces. In Nicaragua, community model policing has proven to be an effective method by incorporating citizens into the policing initiatives. This approach, in conjunction with forums for discussions with citizens, is essential to increase the awareness of the grievances of citizens and discover possible solutions. In this way, the government and the police force are better able to reduce social conflicts.

The transformation of the criminal justice system is another focal point. The police system cannot be isolated from the entire criminal justice system. It is necessary for governments to ensure that both the judicial and the prison systems are functioning effectively and are appropriately aligned with the police forces. In countries such as Costa Rica,

where private protective services are prevalent, it is important to form alliances with other institutions to ensure a peaceful society.

Other Government Actions

Governments must also aim to educate their own citizens about a culture of peace. Therefore, regional countries need to include a space for education on democracy and human rights. Teachers should also be trained on how to resolve conflicts.

Civil society and government should collaborate and become more proactive in poverty alleviation initiatives. Generally, high unemployment rates result in an upsurge of poverty, which disrupts the stability of a country. In English-speaking Caribbean countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Bahamas, and St. Kitts, as well as some Latin American countries, poverty alleviation is critical to combat rising crime rates. In Argentina, civil society movements play an integral part in providing for low-income persons, managing homeless shelters, and organizing food drives. In countries such as Nicaragua and Canada, civil society promotes peace by incorporating international best practices in national poverty reduction programs, through the advice of allied international organizations. Some of these international organizations include UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Therefore, it is crucial that governments as well as other social actors utilize these initiatives.

Racial discrimination and domestic violence are other examples of social ills that can deter the peace process. It would be beneficial to examine violence from microlevel institutions such as the family. Consequently, a forum that facilitates and encourages an open discussion on these important issues is imperative.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY: PEACE AS A COMMON GOAL

The changes in the nature of conflicts demonstrate that traditional responses based on the national security doctrine are not sufficient anymore. There is need for an articulated response that takes into account the organized expressions of government and society, particularly in regard to preventative efforts to reduce the impact of violence in the daily

lives of citizens, and especially in highly vulnerable populations.

The lack of security, resulting in the loss of lives and property, is one of the problems that affect the quality of life of a nation the most, undermining public life and the rights of its citizens.

The security objectives of the state are better achieved through strengthening networks of democratic coexistence in specific territories, rather than through the conventional enforcement of the power of states. This transformation opens the door for civil society to assume a more significant role in the establishment and consolidation of peace. In Argentina, for example, groups of mothers manage children's dining halls. In Canada, civil organizations play an important role in the operation of food banks and homeless shelters.

The heterogeneous character of the Americas does not allow for a consensus to be reached regarding what it means to be a civil society that is a stakeholder on issues of peace. The historical processes of development and consolidation of the "nation state," the political regime, and the rule of law make these organizations, by definition, wide-ranging and multifaceted in their interests, resources, partners, mobilization, affiliation, and financing.

Notwithstanding the above, there is agreement that civil society intervenes on issues of promotion of peace, and it does so because of the inability of traditional institutions to solve or adequately confront social and political conflicts that affect the population's well-being. These organizations, which in principle are closer to the realities of their communities, act in compliance with democratic institutions and respect for human rights. Their purpose is to promote awareness, educate, and organize the citizenry to mobilize in order to create safe spaces that are free of violence. They also seek to influence political decision making, and, in some cases, protect and advocate for those people whose freedoms and political and civic rights are being ignored by the state. Thus, in societies that are gravely affected by social disruption, such as those in a post-conflict period, civil society supports mediation and reconciliation efforts to reestablish social peace and governability by creating new spaces for coexistence.

In Colombia, the peace agreements with the M-19, a guerrilla group that demobilized in 1990,

exemplify the inclusion of provisions regarding civil society participation. The creation of the *mesas de trabajo* (working groups), in which different sectors of the Colombian society participated, is an example of the activities in which civil society organizations participated. In the mid- and late-1990s, civil society representatives participated in the process that accompanied attempts to reach a peace agreement with the ELN, a different guerrilla organization that has yet to demobilize. Similarly, attempts to reach a peace agreement with the FARC, another insurgent group, included the participation of civil society representatives during the peace talks.

The issue that activates and justifies the participation of civil society is the need to improve the conditions of coexistence between people in a disorderly “urban war” that thrives on inequality, the loss of identity, the absence of a vision for the future and a life project for youths and a state that does not adequately satisfy the basic needs of the population.

It is in prevention, denunciation, and follow-up that civil society must play its role, and never in the repressive dimension of security. It has to support dialogue and education in conjunction with the work of central and local governments. In El Salvador, civil society was an active player in denouncing human rights violations during the country’s civil war, searching for and offering humanitarian aid to the displaced and the refugees, searching for the missing, demanding justice, building life alternatives for the orphaned and for the victims of the conflict through economic initiatives, counseling, physical support, and education.

Work Areas

One of the chief concerns is the sustainability of the efforts carried out by civil society to keep the peace and assertively channel structural areas of social conflict. In this regard, there have been proposals to institutionalize social participation in all phases of the public policy development process. These efforts promote the adoption of local work strategies when dealing with risk factors such as unemployment, school dropouts, public spaces, the uncontrolled proliferation of firearms, the abuse of alcohol, and the use of psychotropic drugs.

In the case of Nicaragua, civil society organizations have been useful in financing the

construction and administration of a large number of primary education schools in communities the state has not been able to reach. This has also happened with child nutrition programs (e.g., PROCOSAN or Health and Nutrition Community Action Programs), and other outreach efforts such as the Social Protection Network, PAINIM, and the national HIV protection program.

Civil society has been visibly dynamic and proactive in generating diagnoses and input for decision making, as well as finding the necessary keys to articulate a clear, simple, and educational message that results in mobilization.

Networking action is crucial, and it is linked to the process of generating trust. For years Latin American dictatorships sought to dismantle any type of movement, and this resulted in many of society’s actors and community groups working individually and mistrusting each other. Networking promotes understanding, which opens a space to discuss and develop a common agenda. This allows community organizations to deal with issues that might not otherwise be faced openly, such as the sexual exploitation of minors, human trafficking, and drug trafficking.

A successful example of this networking may be found in Costa Rica, where the community has established local committees to promote well-being and security. The committees determine the local security needs and implement appropriate measures using a four-step process:

1. Diagnosis of risk factors and planning
2. Coordination and development of a database
3. Decentralization and sharing of experiences and best practices
4. Dissemination and mobilization through awareness campaigns and bringing together the parties in the conflict

The committees also seek the consolidation of peace through values and cultural changes based on the promotion of the rule of law, education-for-peace programs, and educating the citizenry on their rights and obligations.

In order to establish confidence, civil society must be strengthened as a third sector through the development of partnerships and networks of trust.

Part of the challenge resides also in maintaining the transparency in actions as well as accountability. Some of the suspicions that continue to arise around civil society are based on its financial dependence on the international community, prompting concerns of bias in its activities.

The challenge for civil society is to be perceived as a basis for the consolidation of a stronger democracy, as a source of trust, and as an axis for social integration. There is a close connection between this aspiration—the exercise of citizen’s rights—and development. All of this goes hand in hand with the recognition that the issues of peace and security are crucial for democratic states, as well as for their citizens, who demand these rights.

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