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THEMES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

INTRODUCTION

The current political and social context in most communities of the Americas provides the opportunity to create favourable conditions for increased dialogue and cooperation. The efforts made since the first Summit of the Americas have contributed to gradually increasing the awareness of the populations and of their leaders concerning the new challenges of greater hemispheric integration. By reexamining national policies from a new perspective, by comparing them more frequently with those of neighbouring countries and by accentuating regional dialogue, all who participate in this exercise of coordination made necessary by the proposed hemispheric integration have helped move the process forward. Bit by bit, the partners have improved their understanding of the problems to be solved, have discovered or better familiarized themselves with the legislation and regulations existing elsewhere, have participated actively in exchanges of experience and of viewpoints and have multiplied the forms of bilateral, sub-regional and multilateral technical cooperation. Without leading in every case to new formal alliances, this habit of concrete partnership, enhanced by the rapid development of communications technologies, increases mutual trust and reinforces the existing inter-American network.

The outlook for hemispheric integration also strengthens the sub-regional links, although without erasing national specificities. As the circle of partnerships grows, common obstacles to development also appear, which it is essential for all parliamentarians of the Americas to deal with together, in a coordinated manner. This is the case with poverty, for example, which arises from non-universal access to education, from the economic deficit that is caused by the negative effects of corruption on the equitable distribution of development, and that is worsened by crime and by the social ills associated with rapidly expanding drug trafficking. Given these major interrelated problems faced by the populations that they represent, the parliamentarians of the Americas must increase their efforts, since the devastating effects of each of these problems amplify one another and are felt everywhere, in each of our societies. In contrast, despite the scale of the challenge, any improvement to one or another of the aspects also has positive effects on all of the factors upon which are based the economic development and human development of all citizens.

The interrelation between the obstacles identified and their cross-border nature also reflects the increasingly apparent interdependence of the populations of the Americas in the era of globalization. It is precisely in this context that parliamentarians must combine their energy to eliminate, together, these stumbling blocks to hemispheric development that poverty, corruption and drug trafficking have come to represent, and to raise education for all to its true dimension as an essential lever of collective well-being.

Plenary Session I
Eradicating Poverty for a Fair and Prosperous Community of the Americas

*What then is the difference between an environmental catastrophe and poverty?
Poverty is always caused by man.*

Alongside the opening of markets, recent years have seen the emergence of economic and technological progress offering previously unseen opportunities for social advancement and the elimination of poverty. The impressive economic growth in certain countries and the technological innovations in the area of communications raise hopes of significant advances, particularly in the areas of health and education. Yet, while prosperity is expanding for some groups around the world, others face increasing poverty. This trend, to which the Americas are no exception, constitutes one of the central current issues, since it threatens to limit social progress, the functioning of democratic institutions and, paradoxically, economic productivity. Indeed, the climate of profound dissatisfaction and injustice that results from this growing exclusion contributes to increasing violence, crime and social tensions, which seriously threaten political stability and cohesion, while endangering the security of individuals. These phenomena reflect the need for democratic institutions and the persons who embody them to focus even more on articulating the expectations and social aspirations of citizens, to see to their well-being, and to their social protection and non-discrimination.

In the Santiago Declaration of 1998, the Heads of State and Government reminded us that overcoming poverty continues to be the greatest challenge confronted by our Hemisphere. They arrived at this conclusion of the necessity to act on a priority basis to reduce poverty, since statistics show that despite the progress accomplished in certain sectors, the positive economic spinoffs are still too inadequately distributed. Thus, in Latin American and the Caribbean alone, there are some 220 million poor, of whom 100 million live in abject misery. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) reports that the strong concentration of wealth that predominated in Latin America in 1990 had still not diminished in 1997, and had even increased in more than half of the countries in the hemisphere, despite a decrease in the level of poverty during the same period. Canada, which ranks first in the human development index, nevertheless has 11.7% of its population, including 20% children, living below the poverty line. In the United States of America, despite a relatively low unemployment rate, some 2 million persons are homeless and 19.1% of the population, including one child out of four, is living in poverty. In its *1999 Human Development Report*, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) indicates to us that the income gap, which stood at 30 to 1 between the richest and poorest countries in 1960, has now reached the incredible proportions of 74 to 1. The gap has thus more than doubled in forty years, to the point that one billion human beings are still unable to satisfy their basic needs, which refer, according to the generally accepted definition, to access to drinking water, sufficient daily food, and adequate health-care and education services. According to the UN data, one fifth of the world's population living in the richest countries now absorb 82% of exports and 68% of direct foreign investment, versus barely 1% for the fifth of the population at the bottom of the scale.

It is observed that these gaps exist both between social groups and between countries, some of which are simply excluded from the race for competitiveness. The UN estimates that the consequences of these gaps are such that they threaten to persist long after the achievement of the projected economic prosperity. Is humanity so obsessed by economic development that it has forgotten “solidarity, the invisible heart of human development” along the way?

In the western hemisphere, poverty is thus everywhere, even if it is not equally visible. Within each of our societies there are too many people who live on the margins of the progress that is made, and whose situation remains precarious. Most visible among the excluded are women, aboriginal communities, racial and ethnic minorities, migrants and their families, and young people who have no access to education, and the handicapped. While it is reassuring to observe that human solidarity is expressed in such a remarkable way as soon as a natural catastrophe strikes a precise zone and endangers the lives of entire populations, is it not disappointing to see this momentum of generosity run out of steam once the catastrophe is no longer in the headlines? Is it not as though the expedition leader at the top of the rope, while climbing a huge mountain, stopped actively collaborating with the people following him? Do social ethics not invite us instead to evaluate the degree of advancement of our societies based on the level reached by all members of the expedition to which we belong? In this sense, the statistics, the images and the various faces of poverty alongside which we live from day to day sound the rallying call to collective order in the Americas, in order to work together more effectively, with a view to the inclusion of all humans without exception.

Despite the budgetary limits, can governments place priority on dealing with the problem of poverty and realistically set an objective of “zero poverty”? When nearly half the population of the hemisphere is still living in poverty, have we not already reached and passed a level that requires urgent corrective measures? Will we see the widespread adoption of laws to set a maximum level never again to be exceeded, that will have been set in each country after obtaining a broad consensus within the population? Should the Americas not accentuate their efforts to concretely guarantee the right to human dignity for all their citizens? Is the population now too concerned with managing its own rights, to the detriment of the management of its duties and of social solidarity? Has the time not come for all parliamentarians of the Americas to take numerous concrete actions to eliminate poverty, since – as was stated by the Heads of State and Government at the Miami Summit – it “is politically intolerable and morally unacceptable that some segments of our populations are marginalized and do not share fully in the benefits of growth”?

A few considerations and actions on the fight against poverty

- “Commitment toward partnership for development and for the fight against extreme poverty” (Resolution adopted by the OAS in 1995)
- Copenhagen Declaration, World Summit for Social Development (1995)
- Human Development Report, 1997 (UN)
- Human Development Report, 1999 (UN)
- “The Equity Gap: a Second Assessment” (Report by ECLAC, May 2000)
- Second World Summit for Social Development (Geneva, June 2000)

Workshop I

Public Policy and the Control of Corruption

Corruption is generally associated with the mafia and dramatic gang killings, with influence peddling, with the payment or acceptance of bribes, with embezzlement, undue and hidden pressures placed on persons or groups in positions of authority, abuse of privileges and immunity connected with a professional responsibility or a public office. Corruption also includes the manipulation of electoral processes, vote buying, the vote of “dead souls”, to use the expression coined by Russian author Nicholas Gogol, collusion between elected officials, enterprises and delinquent individuals with a view to maximizing profits. However, in the reflections that he delivered in 1997, at the first General Assembly of the Parliamentary Conference of the Americas, Mr. Oscar Arias Sánchez, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, encouraged us not to reduce the concept of corruption to only those persons who use political power for their personal enrichment, but to take a more open view of this phenomenon. According to him, corruption must also include duplicitous discourse, the manipulation of information to conceal the truth, the issuance of favourable opinions, the renouncing of the exercise of ones responsibilities and other forms of omission that create a lack of congruence between the commitments made and the acts that result from them.

These different faces of corruption are, moreover, unanimously denounced in the regional forums, international conventions and electoral speeches, which does not prevent the phenomenon from being perpetuated everywhere, in various forms and to varying degrees; while corruption is not a selective bacterium with which some people are infected from birth, it is indeed a virus to which all are susceptible. The level of wealth or development does not make anyone immune to it, since corruption essentially obeys the rules of the market, as does any other product that is the result of a negotiation, and thus flows out of a cost-benefit analysis, whether conscious or otherwise.

In many cases of corruption, representatives of both universes, often the economic and the political ones, exchange money for favours, for favourable opinions, or for access to privileged information which enables them to increase their respective power. Even though it is difficult to define corruption precisely, since it is a constantly evolving phenomenon, it may be associated with any form of diversion of resources and of public decisions, that are normally oriented toward the good of all citizens, for the benefit of private interests or of a small number of persons.

Seen from this angle, corruption appears less damaging than a coup d'état, but its effects may be equally corrosive on governments and institutions. In preference to violence in broad daylight, corruption prefers tactics that operate in the shadows, behind the scenes. It is not only the unmasked acts of corruption that contribute to undermining the trust of the population toward institutions and toward those who must preserve them with integrity, but also the mere perception by citizens that there is the appearance of corruption on the part of their political and economic leaders. It is not unusual for the discourse used to overturn existing regimes to justify itself based on the need to eliminate a corruption that has reached unacceptable levels.

On the socio-political level, corruption thus provokes cynicism and disenchantment among populations toward their representatives, and undermines popular participation in democratic processes. On the economic level, in addition to the shortfall experienced by States as a result of the diversion of financial advantages that thus cannot be redistributed and contribute to development for all citizens, corruption slows the influx of foreign investment, which penalizes the population twofold, driving up the costs they must pay for goods and services. A study by the International Monetary Fund showed that investments in corrupt countries are 5% lower than those in relatively unaffected countries. In addition, the more the economic pressures on citizens intensify, the greater the risk increases that they will in turn succumb to the temptation to twist the social morals and laws to improve, in the immediate term, their situation which has been rendered fragile by the overall climate. Even though it is difficult to quantify the costs of corruption, it is clear that it results in social regression and is, in a sense, the wrench in the spokes of fair and sustainable human development. At a meeting in Vienna in May 2000, the UN decided to increase its efforts to fight against corruption, because the evidence of its tremendous economic cost, particularly for fragile economies, is growing. Indeed, the World Bank estimates that corruption can reduce a country's growth rate by 0.5% to 1% per year.

Specialists agree that greater transparency is a key element of the solution. Since corruption operates in the dark, any transparent mechanism of control and accountability tends to eliminate the phenomenon, at least partially, since it increases the risks that must be run by offenders to obtain the privilege sought. In addition, by giving citizens access to sufficient timely and guaranteed information on the activities in the public domain, parliamentarians greatly increase the number of potential controllers, although without making the mechanisms more complex. Traditionally, when the press enjoys freedom of expression, it also contributes to the vigilant exercise of this role as a watchdog of society's ethical values.

While the efforts made until now have been essential, much remains to be done. Beyond the implementation of increasingly transparent administrative policies, would it not be appropriate to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to corruption, with everything that this involves in terms of requirements in the strict application and enforcement of laws? Should we not try to eliminate the grey areas in legislation, regulations and codes of ethics so as to reduce the virtual loopholes? In the area of political financing, have we gone far enough to safeguard the autonomy of elected officials and to provide the population with all information on the sources and amounts of funds gathered by candidates and parties? Can we place a ceiling on the allowable election spending without putting the candidates at the mercy of lobby groups and wealthier private contributors? In the banking field, can we not further improve the transparency, effectiveness and security of domestic and cross-border operations? Could legislators not play a more pro-active role in all legislations or regulations aiming to ensure greater fiscal fairness, and more transparent trade rules that in turn foster more equitable trade? Up to what point have we succeeded in promoting the inter-institutional coordination that is so essential in the era of communications? Should we not prioritize the improvement of the standard of living of the entire population, in order to reduce the appetite for any form of misappropriated compensation? Finally, on a collective basis, what actions may be taken by the parliamentarians of the Americas in order to ensure that their States adopt concrete measures to remedy the problem?

Since corruption endangers the foundations of democracy and negatively affects the quality of life of all populations of the hemisphere, it is essential that the legislators continue to fight against it energetically. Indeed, they have no choice, since to disappoint the citizens who chose them as representatives would have a demobilizing effect on everyone which would then be virtually impossible to reverse.

A few tools with which to fight against corruption

- The Inter-American Convention Against Corruption (1996) (signed by 23 OAS member-countries and ratified by 9 of them)
- The “Lima Declaration”, 8th International Anti-Corruption Conference of Transparency International (1997) (accepted by the representatives of 93 countries)
- The OAS “Inter-American Program for Cooperation in the Fight against Corruption”
- Symposium on Enhancing Probity in the Hemisphere (Chile, August 1998)
- Meeting of government representatives on contributions to election campaigns, OAS, February 1998, Venezuela.

Workshop II

Interamerican Cooperation and the Fight Against Drug Trafficking: the Role of Parliamentarians

Drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon; the organized fight against the drug trade has been under way for nearly one hundred years. Nor is this an isolated problem that could be solved easily by pointing the finger at one or a few guilty parties. Indeed, in all countries of the hemisphere, there are producers, consumers and many intermediaries, including legal entities or corporations, which deal not only in various illegal drugs, but also in the products resulting from the narcotics trade, money laundering and tax fraud associated with these contraband products.

This problem no longer knows any boundaries; for drug traders, the entire planet has become a single enormous and very lucrative market. In 1995, the worldwide trade in illegal drugs amounted to 400 billion dollars, or the equivalent of 8% of worldwide trade. This represents more than the share of iron or automobiles, and was roughly equivalent to that of textiles (7.5%) or oil and gas (8.6%).

The phenomenon of drug trafficking has become so large that the international relations atlases now present sophisticated maps, updated annually, illustrating the drug routes around the world. What is to be observed regarding these main routes in our hemisphere? First, that the “specialty”, to put it in such terms, is coca production, particularly in the Andean region, and that the distribution networks spread out in all directions, including among its destinations the large and lucrative markets in the north of the hemisphere. Next come the cannabis-derived products, whose areas of production are spread out across the three Americas, although without this sufficing to meet the demand, since additional imports from Russia and Asia enter through the west coast of the North American continent, and then spread out across the rest of the continent. As for heroin, part of the shipments from Russia goes through Canada from west to east, whereas from Panama, another channel of supply comes through central America and Mexico toward the United States of America. The US is also supplied through Florida, and via the west coast, by Asia and the Philippines. In this constantly shifting universe, the demand is even seen to be increasing in developing countries, and production is growing in the industrialized countries.

Despite repeated awareness campaigns directed toward the population to dissuade users by emphasizing the various harmful effects in the short and long term, drug consumption is increasing throughout the Americas and in Europe. In 1999, the UN estimated that the number of drug users stood at about 200 million, recalling that since 1990, opium production has more than tripled, and that of coca has more than doubled. In the United States of America, despite large-scale investment in anti-drug law enforcement (rising from 4.7 billion US dollars in 1988 to 12.3 billion US dollars in 1993), the drop in the street prices of cocaine and heroin reflects the still greater availability of these products.

The problem of organized crime, including drug-related crime, is taking on epidemic proportions. Interpol estimates the profits in this sector at 500 billion dollars annually, as compared with 85 billion dollars ten years ago. These various forms of international delinquency take advantage of the new opportunities resulting from the spectacular technological developments. Thus, under the cover of companies used as fronts, large sums of money are now transferred instantaneously which slip through the mesh of the net of inadequately adapted national and international regulations that are constantly trying to catch up to the more flexible networks of illicit operators. Drug traffickers revel in this lack of consistency between national frameworks of legislation, and the administrative awkwardness of State systems, and are developing a network of cyber-crime whose manifestations that we have so far seen represent only the tip of the iceberg.

In order to preserve the stability of the institutions for which they are responsible, parliamentarians must demonstrate their political will to eliminate drug trafficking. Among the many measures that can be considered, is it not possible to increase the thoroughness of national laws and the legislative consistency at the sub-regional and regional levels, to see to the strict enforcement of laws in each territory, and to eliminate obstacles to cooperation and mutual assistance among States, to adapt laws to crime in cyberspace, and to adopt stricter control measures against money laundering? Should they not also encourage governments to demonstrate a certain flexibility on the delicate issue of national sovereignty relating to the non-divulgence of information essential to the solving of investigations of an international nature? From the same viewpoint, should they also place priority on reexamining the provisions of banking secrecy to simplify the investigation procedures and eliminate legal and fiscal shelters? Should they not also foster greater participation, within their territories, of non-governmental organizations whose actions targeting the local populations contribute to improving the levels of health and education, and to eliminating poverty? Since this is now the trend within the European Union, must the parliamentarians of the Americas emphasize the reduction of the demand, without forgetting the parallel efforts to be continued to reduce drug production? Is there not more that they can do to promote fairer rules of trade in order to reduce the attractiveness of growing illegal products that is too often present for many small underpaid producers? On a proactive basis, can they not foster a better control of the chemical products used in the production of narcotics and non-medical drugs?

Recently, the project to set up a multilateral evaluation mechanism (MEM), under negotiation since the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Santiago (1998), was adopted by the 34 participating countries, and it will be implemented in 2000. This mechanism, the initial results of which will be presented at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City (2001), will make it possible to measure the effectiveness of anti-drug measures in the countries of the Americas according to 82 specific indicators. In the meantime, increased cooperation in this field among all partners in the Americas is essential to at least slow down the narcotics trade, which deprives all citizens of considerable resources and thus slows their development.

A few tools for the fight against drug trafficking

- Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (UN, 1961)
- Convention on Psychotropic Substances (UN, 1971)
- Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (UN, 1988)
- "Political Declaration and a Global Programme of Action (Drug Control)" (UN General Assembly, 1990)
- Inter-American Drug Abuse Commission (CICAD) (of the OAS)
- Sub-regional cooperation agreement on drug control (UN, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Perou, Uruguay)
- Sub-regional cooperation agreement on drug control (UN, Mexico, Central American Republics)
- Barbados Plan of Action adopted at the Regional Meeting on Drug Control Cooperation and Coordination in the Caribbean (29 countries and territories in the Caribbean)

Workshop III

Education: the Driving Force for Equity and Prosperity

*"After bread, education is the primary necessity of the people."
(Danton)*

In their Declaration at the conclusion of the Second Summit of the Americas held in Santiago, Chile, in 1998, the Heads of State and Government declared that the very foundation of human development and the inevitable path for any society aspiring to social and economic progress lies above all in education, adding that education is the starting point from which it is possible to break out of the vicious circle of poverty. In the Plan of Action set out from now until 2010, they undertake, among other things, to ensure universal access to quality primary education, with a primary school completion rate of 100%, and a secondary school enrollment rate of at least 75%, in addition to offering the population at large opportunities for continuing education.

This is a tremendous challenge set by the leaders of the Americas, when one considers that huge gaps persist between the various zones of our hemisphere, as well as between regions and neighbourhoods in our countries and cities, in the area of education as well as in that of economic development, to which it is closely linked. In reality, the participants at the Santiago Summit thus recognize that education is a motive force of economic growth, contributing to technological progress and to the advancement of knowledge. Moreover, it is the very foundation of human development in that it places in the hands of citizens the tools that they need to take charge of their own development and well-being, thereby ensuring their participation in life in society. Education is therefore no longer seen only as a means of development, but indeed as one of its constituent elements.

Like the UN, we must observe that "the search for gold, the conquest of land and the command of machinery as the path to economic power" have been replaced. Today, "knowledge is the new asset." This development promises remarkable progress for humanity, which is called on to work increasingly in networks, enriching its experience and knowledge through contact with prominent partners with different cultures, languages and means. However, some observers fear a new rift between two worlds developing in parallel to one another: on the one hand, those who are "connected", enjoying immediate and inexpensive access to information, and on the other, all those for whom access is still impossible, delays are longer and costs are higher. Since these two worlds are in competition with one another, the unfair chances would place the underprivileged yet at a greater disadvantage, and their marginalization and poverty would increase to the point of subtly creating a sort of knowledge-based apartheid. Unequal access to education, to training and to information are thus among the main causes of the disparities that characterize the Americas, despite the major progress of the technological means available to us.

In this regard, the Internet provides an incredible and under-used potential for development: among other things, it makes available information and the sharing of teaching material for training activities on a wide scale, whether basic, occupational or specialized; it enables the development of distance training and modular training, it creates networks within which data from many sources circulate, which are quickly updated, and it facilitates communications at a lower cost. But one paradox of the Internet is that this main highway of modern knowledge can also become a kind of wall that prohibits access to an increasingly indispensable mine of knowledge, as a result of the limits arising from the gaps in the levels of economic development, infrastructures and education. All citizens of the hemisphere must be able to rely on information networks and the Internet, which constitute powerful tools to counteract exclusion and poverty by opening the way to forms of educational collaboration never previously imagined, and by enhancing the promotion of democratic and cultural values. In this context, how can the development of the Internet be oriented so as to fulfill the needs for information and training in the various regions of the Americas? What strategies can be favoured to open access for all to basic telephone service and the Internet, at an affordable price? How can sub-regional and regional cooperation be strengthened in a field such as education, in particular drawing on satellite technology, traineeships and exchange programs, while making the best use of a shared language? How can the participation of the private sector, of NGOs and of international organizations be increased, in financing local and transnational projects?

Education is a powerful factor in social cohesion and peace if efforts are made to take into account the diversity of individuals and of human groups, and to reestablish gender equality. Yet the UNESCO World Report on Education (1995) reports that two thirds of illiterate adults are women. Furthermore, it proves to be desirable to reestablish the balance between genders, since many experts have established a clear correlation between the level of education of women and the general improvement of human development (UNESCO, 1996). How can parliamentarians improve family policies and social policies in general, in order to give women the opportunity to fully exercise their fundamental rights? How can parliamentarians act as catalysts in transforming broadly accepted principles of fairness into concrete actions, and thus contribute to the economic autonomy of women?

Within each of our regions, we sometimes note a gap in the matching of the needs for qualified resources of our societies with the labour force coming out of the schools, colleges and even universities. Also, not to mention the standardization of knowledge and of didactic processes, globalization already encourages the adaptation of training programs to a constantly changing environment, accentuates the importance of increased interdependence between the various partners, and imposes the development of broader common bases that enhance the job-readiness of individuals. This greater versatility ought to enable them to exercise their occupations in various places, at different stages in their careers, in progressively closer cooperation with partners of different languages and cultures. Parliamentarians must therefore ensure that, on the one hand, the institutions adapt to the new social and economic realities and, on the other hand, that the populations can adapt to such changes in order that all may benefit from the spinoffs of economic and technological progress. This is an important responsibility, destined to maintain fairness, justice and the improvement of the life choices of the greater number.

The scale of the challenges raised by hemispheric economic integration should also be such as to provide the opportunity to facilitate the sharing and transfer of knowledge and the development of new inter-American solidarities in the area of education and training. Such a commitment, oriented toward efforts to coordinate educational and development policies, could create the opportunity to build societies with greater solidarity, and to inject renewed dynamism into democracies. However, taking into account the limited budget of each of our societies, what is the true capacity of States to invest in education and training? Has the time come for political leaders to devote a greater part of the State budget to education, since education plays a key role in sustainable human development? Should the Americas not exert themselves to become less militarized and progressively better educated, so as to face the new challenges?

SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS
Priorities of the working group on education

- Compensation programs for underprivileged populations
- Evaluation of teaching quality and of teacher competence
- Decentralization of the school system, and encouragement of community participation
- Occupational training
- Strategies based on cultural diversity and on democratic principles
- Promotion of access to new information technologies.

