



FIFTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS
April 17-19, 2009
Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago

OEA/Ser.E
CA-V/INF.6/09
14 April 2009
Original: English

ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE PATRICK MANNING, PRIME MINISTER
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO AT THE
CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM OF THE FIFTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS:

“Social Innovation and Implementation: Citizens in Motion”

(April 14, 2009 - Carnival Victory, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago)

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Chairperson

Heads of Government

Representatives of the Diplomatic Corps

Representatives of Civil Society Institutions

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Fellow Citizens of the Americas

On behalf of the governments and peoples of our hemisphere, and the government and people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I welcome you to the Fifth Summit of the Americas. I deem it a great honor and privilege to address you at this Opening Ceremony of the Civil Society Forum of this historic Summit.

Your forum is not only historic but also timely. Many of our children live in environments which promise them no secure future. Millions of families are homeless and destitute and in need of care. We know that some activities are the natural province of the State, and that others fall logically to the private sector. However, there are certain types of activities that can best be carried out by a third sector of intermediaries. It is this third sector that we refer to as civil society: our charitable and voluntary organizations, our non-governmental and community-based institutions.

Many of you gathered here this evening have been associated with civil society organisations over the years. The selflessness of your contributions and their effects on society have often been lost to many of us who toil in other vineyards. However, we know by the evidence before us, that without your presence in our hemisphere many of those in need of care and compassion may not have been comforted; many who face misfortune in one way or another may have been denied support; many whose homes were lost through earthquakes, hurricanes or other forms of natural disaster may still have been homeless. Before going further therefore, I must express my deep appreciation to all of you for your commitment and dedication to service over the years. The fact that you form an important part of this summit is irrefutable evidence of your growing importance in our hemisphere.

This evening, we are assembled here firstly against the background of our common understanding of the fact that this third sector, our civil society, has a critical role to play in the development of our peoples and the governance of our societies. Secondly, we are gathered here in recognition of the fact that, given this importance, civil society must be satisfactorily facilitated to play its indispensable role. But there is also a third consideration.

As nations, if we are to realize the full benefits of good governance, we must act on the principle that governments must govern, not in their own interest but first and foremost, in the interest of the people.

Additionally, it must be recognised that if we are to realize the maximum potential of our democracies, we ought to act on the principle that in the best interest of the people, the people must themselves have their say. Their voices must be heard and they must be allowed to make their contribution at diverse levels.

When treating, for example, with the communal administration of care, there are many services (aspects of governance) that can best be provided through the involvement of people's organizations. It is a fact that some undertakings by these institutions, within and across our borders, are executed in a manner far more effective and far reaching than others undertaken by government agencies.

There is a time-honored truism which states that a people make a nation. But how do we recognise a great people? How do we define a great nation? Well, my dear friends, I humbly suggest that if you show me a nation where the people themselves demonstrate great care for the least fortunate amongst them, I will surely show you a great people and a great nation in the making. I therefore submit to you this evening that in its caring for the people and its capacity to mobilize the citizenry towards constructive national endeavor, civil society has the potential to make nations great.

It would seem therefore, that every government in our hemisphere has a responsibility to promote the spread and effective functioning of civil society organisations in their country. The challenge for governments, however, has always been how to cater for the myriad views and interests of the various groups within our societies. This of course, involves determining what is to be done and how best to do it.

But this is where institutions like this Civil Society Forum come in. It is my hope that the open dialogue and information sharing that will be facilitated by this Forum will help to bring greater clarity to our understanding of the role and function of civil society organisations in our countries. It is my further hope that as a result of your deliberations and overall process of engagement, this Summit will help to advance the relationship between civil society and the state in every country of our hemisphere.

Such an enhanced relationship cannot but redound to the benefit of our individual nations. They would then be endowed with increased capacity for service delivery. They would also be better prepared to benefit from further capacity-building assistance and support through cross-border dialogue, international networking and collaboration.

It is important however, to note that while such assistance is available, accessibility can sometimes be fettered, by the failure of some civil society groups to organize themselves properly. In part, this can perhaps be as a result of the nature of the work that they do, which is primarily voluntary. But the dilemma can be often compounded when a group fails to clearly define its purpose or primary reason for being in existence. This results in its mission remaining unfocused and its target population unidentified. Let us not forget also that civil society operates against the background of the disabling proposition that just about anyone can do what Civil Society does.

Our Civil society groups therefore need to be highly organized and focused. This is mandatory and must be approached in a manner which legitimizes and authenticates their efforts and operations. Fortunately, we live in an age of almost untrammelled flow of information. Further, there exists unprecedented opportunities for co-partnering with international agencies to improve Civil Society standards within our countries. We must do our utmost to ensure our communities can properly access this invaluable international reservoir of support.

Additionally, in some territories civil society institutions need to assert themselves. Progressive regimes all over the world have come to recognize that today's public voice is far more well-informed, participatory and responsive than in the past. Increasingly, in our hemisphere, governments are opting to

operate within a framework of decision making which assumes full participation by the people in the decision-making process. This Summit recognizes this fully. We are happy for this development and wish to see more of it.

For after all, in the final analysis what we in this Summit are in search of is a better world: a better hemisphere, where all in our nations can prosper; a hemisphere in which every citizen – the most vulnerable among us included – is considered, supported and accounted for, and can hope for the continued enjoyment of a most meaningful existence.

This is why we are here this evening, and I sincerely wish that you would view our forum against this most important background. For, there is in fact an inextricable link between what we are seeking to do at this forum and the mission of the Fifth Summit itself.

The theme of this Summit, “Securing our Citizens’ Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability”, has been carefully chosen. It reflects the pressing considerations of our very challenging times. It concerns matters on which we must engage in decisive and collective action.

The same holds for this opening forum which will consider, among other things, the civil society consultation process itself; the current global socio-economic environment; and strategies for strengthening the implementation capacity of our civil society organizations. Clearly this is about people-participation: thorough involvement by a fully involved people. This, my dear friends, is a people’s summit. I assure you that in the end, it will be the people who benefit.

This evening we come to this forum against the background of two years of extensive pre-Summit consultations with civil society stakeholders across our hemisphere. And, not surprisingly, today’s dialogue commences with the presentation of the key recommendations which have emerged from that preparatory process. This level of preparation for our engagement with civil society challenges in these Americas is unprecedented. This Fifth Summit therefore, is in a unique position to take greater advantage than ever before of the vast repository of knowledge and collective resolve that has been built-up over the years.

As the representatives of civil society who are participating in this forum we have ahead of us today enormously important responsibilities; responsibilities which cut across our domestic borders and go beyond group or sectoral interest. For, of necessity, in our growing interdependence, we are to consider, not our own interest only, but also the needs of others. All nations must be helped; all institutions must be strengthened.

Ideally, we want to see the development of as many civil society institutions as are necessary; we want them to operate with efficiency and transparency, and with due attention to their duty of care. By this we mean unequivocal commitment to their particular undertaking: the elderly, the ailing, the differently-abled, the less fortunate, the specially gifted. We want to ensure that these institutions operate according to international best practices; and that they benefit from research. We want to have them connected to similar institutions across the hemisphere and wider world; and we want them working for the good of every single member of our societies. We are asking a lot but we can make it only if we try. In any event, the present socio-economic realities suggest not merely that we try, but that we try much harder than before. For after all, it is care compassion and concern that have brought us here

I am confident that your deliberations and resolutions today and their implementation would go a considerable distance towards improving the quality of life of the people of our hemisphere. Through your contributions over the years you have brought hope and meaning to the lives of many. Through your

contributions to this forum we can enhance the capacity for co-prosperity, security and sustainable development in our part of the world. Let us proceed with resolve and commitment to the challenge at hand. Without love there is no giving. Without charity, there is nothing.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you.