

Promoting Peace in the Americas in the 21st Century
A Contribution to the UN's Peacebuilding Agenda
Organization of American States (OAS)
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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the OAS has assumed the promotion of peace as one of its most relevant tasks. In Article 2 of its founding Charter, the member States proclaim that one of the essential purposes of the Organization is to strengthen the peace and security of the continent, prevent possible causes of difficulties, and ensure the peaceful settlement of disputes that arise between the member States. However, the threats to the region have not always been the same since the Organization was established. With the end of the Cold War, the traditional approach to security was changed.

Today the threats to peace and security in the region are rapidly evolving. The countries of the Americas do not fear wars, but rather the new threats that constitute a serious challenge to peace and stability, such as corruption, climate change, social exclusion, income inequalities, unemployment, organized crime, and --- as we have witnessed during the past three years: pandemics.

While the Americas has effectively averted inter-continental conflict, it cannot boast that it is a peaceful region when it experiences some of the highest rates of violence and continues to be one of the most unequal regions in the world, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, food shortages, as well as international economic events that have especially impacted the lives of the most vulnerable individuals, in particular minority and at-risk groups.

In consequence, the inter-American system has begun to search for a new conceptual framework that enables it to address these contemporary problems and threats to peace and security in the region in a more comprehensive manner. This search has led to the development of an ongoing dialogue regarding the need for a multifaceted approach to security where human beings are placed at the center of security concerns and where the concept that democracy, peace, and development are inseparable and indivisible parts of a renewed and integral vision of solidarity in the Americas is advanced.

As we look towards building a more peaceful and prosperous future for all the citizens of the Americas, we must prioritize efforts directed at strengthening democracy and the rule of law, addressing security challenges from a multidimensional perspective, enforcing, and expanding human rights, and advancing inclusive economic growth and development.

DEMOCRACY

When the countries of the Americas created the OAS in 1948, they concluded ---and subsequently penned in the founding Charter --- that representative democracy was an indispensable condition for the stability, peace, and development of the region. Subsequently, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted on September 11, 2001, became the main hemispheric reference for the promotion and defense of democratic values and practices in the region. The importance of this landmark document lies in the fact that it not only reaffirms a regional commitment to guaranteeing free and fair elections, but it goes beyond to include safeguarding the social, economic, and cultural rights of each and every citizen of the hemisphere as essential elements of the democratic system, because elections alone do not guarantee democracy.

Although today, the level of democracy that we had reached with the end of the Cold War is in decline, democracy is still regarded by the majority of the peoples of the Americas as the best form of government because it provides the most inclusive, fair, and peaceful environment for every citizen to participate in the policy and decision-making processes of their own country based on shared values of freedom and equality; on constitutional rule; and on the peaceful transition of power and government. The Americas has a shared fate, and it must remain committed to securing more rights and more freedoms for all the people of the Americas, and the means to achieve that goal lies with the Democratic Charter. By committing to fulfilling its objectives we can pave the way to building more peaceful and just societies.

Support to Electoral Processes

The right to universal suffrage by secret ballot is at the core of the democratic system of government. The ability of every country to rely on electoral processes that are free, inclusive, peaceful, and transparent is of vital importance. To this end, we must ensure that there is equity in voter registration, access to polling locations, and the casting of ballots. This also entails the full and effective exercise of every individual's right to vote regardless of race or gender, and that minority voters have full access to voting centers. It is also necessary to invest resources and political support to integrate reliable technologies into the region's electoral processes to reduce risks and ensure the integrity of elections. This will require the development of new regulations, as well as policies and standards that can both guide and hold accountable governments, candidates, and political parties alike. The recommendations of the electoral observation missions deployed throughout the hemisphere on electoral reforms required to improve electoral processes should also be heeded.

Freedom of Expression and Fighting Misinformation

Freedom of expression, investigation, opinion, and dissemination of thought are essential elements of democracy. Moreover, independent, free, pluralistic, and diverse media play a fundamental role in strengthening democratic societies. A democracy cannot flourish if citizens cannot exercise their rights to seek, receive, and impart information. To continue to strengthen freedom of expression in the region, additional legal guarantees for the free practice of journalism, with a gender perspective, including the incorporation of protection measures and the strengthening of technical capacity must be secured. The promotion and support of digital literacy and inclusion, and the reduction of the digital divide should also be emphasized.

On the other hand, data misuse and misinformation affect democratic governance because it installs doubt and erodes public trust and confidence in democracy, its institutions, and the work of politicians. To counter the misuse of communication technologies to spread disinformation and misinformation, the Center for Media Integrity of the Americas was recently established. Continued support to the Center so that it can further expand its partnerships with a wide range of journalists, media outlets, academia, and NGOs to provide quality journalism without financial pressures will be key to promoting and supporting the practice of independent, non-interested affiliated journalism and social media production and to combating disinformation and misinformation in the Americas.

Effective Public Administration and Transparency

Democratic processes must be transparent, inclusive, and accountable in order to maintain the public's trust. Corruption has been identified as the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development. Governments must address corruption at its root by developing institutional capacities with clear and consistent rules and regulations, implemented in a transparent manner, that forbids wrongdoing, complemented by credible and independent mechanisms for accountability and enforcement. This requires strengthening the rule of law and ensuring that all government branches can function independently.

Likewise, we must continue to strengthen regional dialogue and cooperation on open government and e-governance, with a view to implementing and promoting e-government best practices and promoting policies and the use of digital technologies to fight discrimination and inequality in the Americas, promote transparency, central digital services for citizens and streamlining of procedures. In the same manner, capacity building, education, and technical training and policy implementation activities on open government, open data and digital government must be reinforced with a view to facilitating access to issues relevant to strengthening democratic institutions.

Combating Corruption and Impunity

An essential part of the regional efforts to combat corruption is the Follow-up Mechanism for the Implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESISIC), which was adopted to prevent, detect, punish, and eradicate corruption in the performance of public functions. Member States should continue to demonstrate their commitment to combating corruption and impunity by strengthening the MESISIC, its financing, the participation of civil society in it, the follow-up to its recommendations, the practice of in-situ visits, and the dissemination of its activities and results, as well as by strengthening cooperation with other organizations and follow-up mechanisms such as that of the UN, and by reinforcing hemispheric cooperation in areas such as the responsibility of the private sector and asset recovery to avoid duplication of efforts and to harmonize the work advanced by like-minded organizations.

Education on Democratic Values and Practices

Promoting a culture of peace to prevent violence is at the heart of the mandate of the OAS and involves an education on democratic values and practices. The rearing of citizens from a tender age with a greater knowledge and understanding of democratic institutions, values, and practices and with a greater commitment to them is fundamental for the development of a democratic political culture and for full participation by the population in the business of politics and civic life. It must also include a gender perspective, as well as the values of indigenous cultures, afro-descendants, and other minority groups.

This culture is an indispensable foundation for the viability of democracy and fosters and facilitates cooperation and peaceful relations within and among states. Hence those values and practices must be taught through formal, as well as informal learning processes within the framework of a regional education for peace program. Likewise, a strong democratic system requires leaders who possess, in addition to their vocation, knowledge about the functioning of democratic institutions and processes. This will require investments in civic education and public management so that young leaders can effectively contribute to creating new generations of agents of peace.

Capacity Building in Conflict Management and Access to Justice

The OAS has vast experience in confronting the region's peace and security challenges by assisting governments and civil society to develop initiatives to foster dialogue and consensus-building. It has developed ad hoc mechanisms for conflict resolution and has designed medium and long-term conflict management and prevention strategies within member States. However, despite its significant experience in mediation, currently, it has limited institutional capacity and resources to attend the needs of its stakeholders. Likewise, in the Americas there are communities that lie beyond the reach of the traditional institutions of justice. In these

communities, lack of access to the justice system means that conflicts or disagreements that start out small can develop into a more costly and violent outcome.

To address these shortcomings, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the member States in the use of peacebuilding and conflict resolution tools, such as communication, dialogue, negotiation, mediation, and preventive diplomacy, taking into account the particular needs of minority, vulnerable or at-risk groups since they are traditionally the most affected by conflict and violence and have also been the most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, it is important to continue strengthening the work of judicial facilitators to extend the reach of justice by using them as a bridge between legal institutions and the population in rural isolated communities.

Early Warning and the Identification of Root Causes of Conflict

Enhanced prediction and forecasting can help reduce the onset, duration, intensity, and effects of different forms of political violence. Therefore, a regional analysis and mapping of countries and at-risk areas, as well as a permanent monitoring of the existing threats to democracy is necessary in order to identify the root causes of conflicts or potential conflicts so that specific proposals and programs adapted to the different regional and subregional realities can be developed, with the ultimate goal of preventing their emergence or escalation.

As part of this process the OAS recently launched the Observatory on Democracy in the Americas. From a methodological point of view, the data-driven approach will facilitate the development of reports on democracy by providing a multidimensional vision of regional threats to democratic governance, as well as a more complete social, economic, and political representation of the realities of our continent.

Prevention of Social Conflicts

In the Americas, social conflicts are widespread, and occur mainly when local communities feel that their territories and environment are threatened as a result of private or public investment activities. The different causes that give rise to social conflicts in the region have common features and shared challenges including inequality, the concentration of media, the locations where social conflicts are increasingly taking place, the State as a central actor but with limited capacity to manage and resolve conflicts with a sense of social cohesion and democratic expansion, the trend towards decentralization of conflicts, and the inconsistencies between the demands of the people and the inability of State policies and institutions to satisfy such demands.

In consequence, there is an increasing urgency to promote ongoing exchanges and communication between local community representatives, the States --both receiving

extractive investment States, as well as investment-generating States -- and the private sector to restore social peace and prevent and manage social conflicts derived from the exploitation of natural or productive resources. The data and information compiled from these exchanges could serve as a basis for the development of a regional system for the prevention of social conflicts.

Facilitating Dialogue with Legislatures

Recognizing that legislatures play a key role in the promotion and defense of democracy and human rights, it is necessary to increase efforts to facilitate and enhance the participation of democratically elected national legislators from the region that advance the principles of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the core values of the organization in OAS activities, including through the exchange of experiences and parliamentary best practices on matters of common interest, while respecting the separation and balance of powers. Likewise, in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, opportunities for interparliamentary dialogue to discuss issues of hemispheric importance should be facilitated through bilateral, subregional, and regional mechanisms, including through the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas.

Coordination and Cooperation with Subnational Governments.

Local authorities represent the most direct point of contact between governments and citizens. They are the ones who best know and understand the challenges facing their communities. Coordination among subnational governments, as well as between the subnational governments and the central governments is key to ensure an effective and quick response to the region's challenges. This was made patently evident during the Covid-19 pandemic with respect to the health and education challenges that the region faced. Consequently, cooperative regimes that foster new innovative governance models beyond the context of the pandemic management will be key to rebuilding more resilient societies. This is all the more important considering the manifold interrelated hemispheric and global challenges governments face alongside the pandemic, including climate change, migration, among others.

Likewise, civic engagement will be needed to enhance inclusion, tolerance, and diversity. These values are best fostered by local people and local communities. In a progressively interconnected and interdependent world, it will be necessary to raise the voice and increase the participation of subnational governments in the hemispheric dialogue by creating spaces for ongoing exchanges at the multilateral level that will enable the charting of a new era of collaboration for peace with these influential local actors.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL EQUITY

The inter-American human rights system plays a fundamental role to respond to situations that undermine democracy and the rule of law and to protect the civil and political rights of individuals when they are not duly guaranteed those rights in their own countries, especially when grave and systematic human rights violations are committed under dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. Likewise, the limited enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights, including the unequal distribution of wealth and access to basic services; low social mobility; lack of employment opportunities; and the intergenerational transmission of poverty presents a clear interconnection between inequality and social exclusion and violence. Moreover, weak judicial systems, and corruption within the police and those in charge of security, combined with high levels of impunity in the investigation and conviction of those responsible for crimes, as well as the ability of organized crime to penetrate and co-opt State institutions are all factors that contribute to a culture that encourages the repetition of human rights violations, to the abuse of power and to the erosion of the democratic system of government.

The best way to reduce violence is through comprehensive and integrated public policies that not only address risk factors but are also capable of addressing security and human rights challenges as they evolve. Strategies that focus solely on control and repression and rely only on the police and justice system are insufficient. A more broad and holistic approach is necessary. This entails different sectors and institutions working together and coordinating the actions they undertake, as well consensus building to meet the interests of all stakeholders so that they are sustained over time as State policy. Consequently, it is important that States devote more effort to violence prevention and reduction policies that focus on its root causes, from a human rights perspective. Those policies also need to address the rehabilitation and reintegration into society of perpetrators, as well as care and reparation for victims.

Strengthening the Role of Women in Peacebuilding

Women's rights are front and center in conflict and post-conflict settings since women are, on the one hand, particularly vulnerable to violence and, on the other, essential to respond more effectively to the needs of their communities. Moreover, democracy cannot exist without the equal participation of women at all levels of decision-making processes. The Convention of Belem do Para, and its follow-up mechanism MESECVI, are powerful, regional, legally binding tools which have been used in court cases across the Americas to prosecute violations of women's rights.

At the global level, UNSCR 1325 serves as the roadmap to address policy gaps concerning women's roles in peacebuilding processes and the impact that conflict and violent situations have on women. However, women continue to be on the margins of formal peace processes,

and women –in particularly from minority groups --are the main victims of conflict and violence, including in the form of discrimination, segregation, domestic violence, sexual violence, femicides, limited participation in the labor market, lack of economic autonomy among many others.

In order to address the specific needs of women, further action is required in a range of key areas, such as economic empowerment, governance, participation in public life as well as humanitarian and public security affairs. Thus, ending violent conflict requires a more inclusive process with women playing a pivotal role in peacebuilding both from the bottom up as well as from the top down, engaging with multiple stakeholders and representatives from various levels of government to advance and implement sustainable and holistic peace practices.

It is also necessary to build alliances with multiple actors in order to advance the women, peace, and security agenda and in particular with civil society; to establish regional and subregional networks of women mediators to link the experiences and expertise of women who have worked in peacebuilding, peace keeping and post-conflict settings; and to promote gender-sensitive capacity building programs. Countries should also continue to support the development of National Action Plans that define and establish the participation and commitment of the States with the women, peace and security agenda both at national, regional, and international levels.

Defending Indigenous Rights

The rights of indigenous peoples are essential to the future peace, prosperity, and development of the hemisphere. The American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples reaffirmed the commitment of the countries of the Americas to recognize, promote and protect the fundamental rights of over 70 million indigenous peoples in the hemisphere, including their basic right to self-determination, education, healthcare, self-government, cultural practice, lands, territories, and natural resources, as well as to gender equality for indigenous women.

However, indigenous cultures and peoples continue to suffer from historic injustices and persistent human rights abuses, thus preventing them from improving their economic and social well-being, despite their invaluable contributions to society, including to development, plurality, cultural diversity, and the management of the environment, among many others. In addition, indigenous peoples are on the frontlines of climate change and global warming and are increasingly becoming environmental refugees. They also face ongoing violations and expropriation of their land.

To ensure that indigenous peoples in the Americas enjoy and exercise all of their rights and that their contributions are acknowledged and widely disseminated it is necessary, both at the national and hemispheric levels, to continue to promote and draw attention to the culture of

the indigenous peoples of the Americas; further activities to promote their traditions; recognize the value of their knowledge, history and languages; strengthen intercultural education, skills and employment training; and improve their access to justice, security, new technologies, healthcare, as well as to other basic services.

Racism and the Situation of Afro-descendants

Approximately 200 million people of African descent live in the Americas. People of African descent are among the most vulnerable groups in the Hemisphere as a result of poverty, underdevelopment, social exclusion, and economic disparities that are closely associated with racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. Afro-descendent nations and other member states of the Caribbean Community have traced their developmental challenges to the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, racism, racial discrimination, and intolerance.

In order for afro-descendants to enjoy their economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights and fully participate on equal terms in all areas of society, member States must commit to adopting and strengthening public policies and administrative, legislative, judicial, and budgetary measures to this end. Moreover, efforts directed at promoting greater knowledge and respect for the diversity of the legacy and culture of the people of African descent and their contributions to societal development through cooperation, exchanges of experiences and good practices must be prioritized in compliance with the Plan of Action for the Decade for People of African Descent in the Americas (2016-2026).

Youth, Violence and Conflict

Youth involvement is limited when it comes to policy development and decision-making, however young people often represent a disproportionate share of the victims of conflict and violence. Understanding the current challenges faced by youth in the Americas will better prepare the countries of the region to mitigate and prevent the conflicts of tomorrow.

Before the pandemic broke out millions of young people were seeking employment and millions more were neither studying nor working. In the Americas, indigenous and youth of African descent constitute the most vulnerable groups, as well as refugees, migrants, LGBTQI+, and people with disabilities. Likewise, too many young people in the region are malnourished, illiterate, and only a privileged percentage have access to secondary education.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this bleak regional scenario, especially in at-risk areas where there is little or no presence of state or where access to services and care is limited. Youth unemployment rates in the Latin American and Caribbean region have now skyrocketed and a large majority of the youth population missed at least one year of school as

remote learning was limited to the lucky few who had access to the Internet. As a result, living conditions and trust in public institutions have weakened across the region. According to recent polls, only half of the population under 25 support a democratic system of government.

Confronted with these challenges we must focus our efforts at empowering young people as equal partners and agents of change. We must prioritize and incorporate youth perspectives into our workplans; we must actively engage young people in peacebuilding efforts; and we must include the specific concerns and needs of youth in the design of recovery efforts in a post-pandemic world by creating spaces for dialogue and opportunities for constructive exchanges. Today, youth activism is more engaged than ever thanks to technological advances, social media, and easy access to information, which have empowered our youth to take an informed stand on critical global issues. We must therefore take advantage, support, and train it so that it plays a leading role in crafting a better future for all citizens of the hemisphere.

With respect to child soldiers, emerging criminal organizations, pandemic lockdowns, and economic distress has led to a surge in the number of youth and minors joining criminal and illegal armed groups in recent years. Ending the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict must be a top priority for the countries of the region. Accordingly, governments must give precedence to upholding commitments to end child rights violations, hold accountable recruiters and the perpetrators of crimes against children, support efforts to demobilize child soldiers and to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society children affected by armed conflicts, and strengthen conflict prevention tools and mechanisms to keep children and communities safe.

Protecting Displaced Persons and Refugees

In the Americas, there are more than 17 million forcibly displaced persons, including internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees. Their right to seek asylum, reaffirming the principle of non-refoulement, and the rights of equality and non-discrimination, and providing humane treatment to people forced to flee must be a priority responsibility of the region. In this regard, close coordination, and cooperation with member States, as well as with other international organizations such as the UNHCR, will be essential to provide attention and protection for internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees, as well as to provide them with durable solutions to ensure their integration into their host communities, resettle to a third country in the most vulnerable cases or have the opportunity to return home in dignity and safety.

Likewise, at a time when the number of forced displacements in the Americas is increasing, member States must continue to strengthen national asylum and international protection systems. Specifically, measures such as the provision of humanitarian visas, refugee

resettlement efforts, and the adoption of mechanisms for temporary or subsidiary protection, legal stay agreements, and migrant regularization initiatives that include protection safeguards must be integrated into national legislation and protection frameworks so that these mechanisms are effectively sustainable in the long run.

Preventing and Punishing Torture and the Forced Disappearance of Persons

The respect for human dignity must serve as the foundation of peace. All acts of torture or any other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment constitute an offense against human dignity. The crime of torture can never be justified, not even in circumstances such as wars, public emergencies or disasters, domestic disturbances, or during the suspension of constitutional guarantees. The Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture is the regional tool available to member States to restrain and hold accountable public servants who instigate, induce, or commit crimes of torture. When these offenses are committed, they must be investigated and tried under criminal law and punished by severe penalties that consider their serious nature. Reparation and rehabilitation to victims must also be guaranteed, as well as the adoption of mechanisms and measures to ensure the non-recurrence of practices that amount to torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, including acts of sexual and other gender-based violence. States must also adhere to international obligations with respect to judicial guarantees and due process, as well as to the protection against any illegal or arbitrary detention or deprivation of liberty.

Similarly, the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons establishes that the systematic practice of the forced disappearance of persons constitutes a crime against humanity and is punishable commensurate with its extreme gravity under international and regional human rights norms. Therefore, countries that have not yet done so should consider acceding to these conventions.

More rights for more people,

The only path forward to inclusive prosperity is by securing more rights for more people, regardless of social origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, or disabilities. When crises occur, youth, women, and other minority groups, including indigenous persons, afro-descendants, LGBTQI+ persons, migrants, older persons, persons with disabilities, and/or marginalized religious communities are usually the first and foremost affected. Women are more negatively affected than men and people of indigenous and African descent constitute the most vulnerable groups.

We must therefore strengthen our work to reverse the persistent inequities and inequalities in the Hemisphere, especially since the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, by placing people and their communities at the center of national policies on development and adopting concrete

measures to fight inequality and discrimination. Specifically, policies and programs that target minorities must apply an intersectionality perspective at all stages and consider the specific needs and concerns of victims of discrimination. Moreover, legal, and institutional reforms required to address structural discrimination and inequality must be prioritized.

In addition, people who do not have a legal identity, and cannot prove who they are, who have been displaced or who are stateless are especially vulnerable in society and even more so in conflict settings. In fact, without a legal identity it is very difficult to access or benefit from social protections and basic services such as healthcare if they are directly impacted by conflicts, humanitarian disasters or climate emergencies. Developing appropriate safeguards to prevent cases of statelessness, in particular with respect to children and adolescents, and groups in a vulnerable situation; eliminating discriminatory and xenophobic practices against stateless persons; promoting the universal registration of births --including births that occur in border zones, indigenous territories, and remote rural areas are all actions that must be reinforced to extend the protection of human rights and to provide enhanced social protections to those individuals who find themselves in these irregular situations.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY

The concept of hemispheric security in the Americas has evolved and now includes multidimensional aspects reflecting the different security interests of national governments and regional groupings. Today, the region faces severe threats from new and existing conditions and challenges. These range from the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and persons; money laundering and transnational organized crime to terrorism; insurgent groups; poverty; and social exclusion.

In effect, with instability and civil unrest plaguing various countries of the region, natural disasters, health crises, food shortages and other economic hardships rising, the concept of security must now incorporate social, economic, and political, as well as military, dimensions. Furthermore, greater cooperation among all of the countries of the region is vital because these new threats do not respect borders and our countries do not have the means to overcome them on their own.

The Fight Against Drugs

The Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) is the Hemisphere's most important regional political forum in the fight to combat the drug problem. One of CICAD's most relevant initiatives is the peer-review Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism (MEM), created to track the individual and collective progress achieved in the efforts made by the countries of the Hemisphere to deal with the drug problem.

As the countries of the region continue to evaluate the measures to control and counter the illicit cultivation, production, trafficking and distribution of drugs, and to address their causes and consequences, it is important to ensure progress on a series of priority actions, including measures aimed at reducing the stigma associated with young people who use drugs, as well as the need to promote balanced, multidisciplinary, and scientific evidence-based approaches, with full respect to human rights and fundamental freedoms; the development of treatment and prevention systems; the promotion of comprehensive alternative development programs to reduce illicit crop cultivation that also mitigates the impact of illicit crops on the environment; and the evaluation of alternative mechanisms to incarceration for minor and non-violent drug offenses.

Combating Trafficking in Persons

Hemispheric efforts to combat trafficking in persons, fight forced labor, prosecute, and punish traffickers, proactively identify, and protect victims of forced labor and prevent fraudulent recruitment practices have been lagging. As a result, it is necessary to review and strengthen actions to combat these crimes, which are increasing around the region and the world. Additional regulatory and legislative frameworks on human trafficking must be developed in line with international standards, as well as training of multisectoral professionals to strengthen coordinated and integrated responses to prevent human trafficking and assist its victims and survivors.

Reducing Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition and Explosives

Despite the fact that the region houses less than 10% of the world's population, it is the most violent in the world, where more than 75% of homicides are committed with firearms. The illicit trafficking of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and other related materials has contributed to a generation of violence and an increase in the power of criminal organizations, with the consequent loss of human life, erosion of the social fabric, and reduction in people's opportunities. A notable effort to reverse this trend has been the adoption of the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and other Related Materials (CIFTA).

In order to strengthen coordination and cooperation mechanisms and to consolidate the effective implementation of this Convention, member States that have not yet done so should consider ratifying the Convention. Likewise, a technical comparison between the OAS Model Regulations for the Control of the International Movement of Firearms, their Parts and Components, and Ammunition and the guidelines established in the Modular Small-arms control Implementation Compendium (MOSAIC) of the United Nations should be advanced.

Counter Terrorism Efforts

The Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE) is the leading regional entity to prevent and counter terrorism in the Americas and support for its work must be enhanced so that it can continue to provide technical, legislative, and awareness raising assistance to strengthen the security and resilience of the regional and global supply chain from physical and cyber threats; increase the protection of international civil aviation from acts of illicit interference and possible terrorist attacks; improve institutional capacity to protect vulnerable targets and crowded spaces; shore up efforts to prevent violent extremism; increase the identification and investigation of terrorist groups; step up resilience to the growing threat that malicious cyber activities pose to the critical and infrastructure and essential services of the region; and strengthen hemispheric cooperation and coordination to prevent, and mitigate those threats. Countries that have not yet done so should also consider ratifying or acceding to the Inter-American Convention against Terrorism.

Disarmament

The Americas is a region known for a peaceful coexistence among neighboring countries and for not resorting to weapons and force to resolve inter-State disputes. Disarmament, working against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and eliminating illegal arms trafficking, stockpiles of firearms, ammunition, and explosives has been fundamental to building peace and cooperation among the countries of the hemisphere. Supporting and promoting the establishment of zones of peace at the bilateral and subregional levels; the effective implementation of measures related to biosafety and biosecurity to prevent, detect, and respond to deliberate biological threats; humanitarian demining efforts; disaster relief and humanitarian assistance; have been just as important.

In order to preserve the advances that have been made in hemispheric peace and security, continued efforts will be required by making effective use of the mechanisms agreed upon to prevent and peacefully resolve disputes or conflicts between states, in keeping with the Charter of the United Nations and the OAS Charter, as well as with other inter-American instruments, such as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty) and the American Treaty on Pacific Settlement (Pact of Bogota) and by urging member States to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) through consensus, by reaffirming the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as the cornerstone of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, by taking note of the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW); by advancing towards the goal of making the Americas an antipersonnel-landmine-free zone; and by continuing to develop the Disaster Cooperation Mechanism (MECODE), in order to improve response and coordination procedures among the Hemisphere's countries and mechanisms for dealing with natural and man-made disasters.

Confidence-building Measures

In addition to the legal instruments available to the Organization to counter the different threats to peace and democratic governance there are other tools, including ad hoc mechanisms and confidence-building measures, which contribute to reduce mistrust, fear and hostility that may exist between one or more States, and which may result in premature military action or the use of force and must be adapted to the specific geographical, political, social, cultural, and economic conditions of each region. At the regional level, these mechanisms have been successfully applied in the field of prevention and resolution of conflicts, especially in the context of territorial disputes, as well as during some crises in the member States caused mainly by democratic breakdowns and should thus continue to be encouraged as a highly effective neutral consensus-based tool to ease tensions and promote cooperation.

At a time when new threats are challenging traditional forms of conflict prevention, strengthening existing confidence-building measures, and identifying new mechanisms to build confidence will be key to enhancing inter-State cooperation, transparency, and trust among states. One such step in this direction that has been critical and that will require continued hemispheric collaboration is the operationalization of the confidence-building and cooperation measures in cyberspace to address the disruption of critical infrastructure and services to citizens and economies. Additional efforts must include cross-regional support and ongoing exchanges, including with UN agencies to continue to prevent and mitigate the increasing threats of ransomware and other misuses of information communications technologies (ICTs).

DEVELOPMENT

The eradication of poverty began to figure more prominently on OAS agendas when the concept of integral development was added to the founding Charter, described as one of the conditions essential to peace and security in the region. The Inter-American Democratic Charter went one step further by recognizing that democracy and social and economic development are interdependent and mutually reinforcing and that poverty, illiteracy, and low levels of human development are factors that adversely affect the consolidation of democracy. Equality of opportunity, the elimination of extreme poverty, equitable distribution of wealth and income, and the full participation of every citizen in decisions relating to their own development are thus basic objectives of integral development. Despite the progress made in reducing extreme poverty in recent decades, this region remains the most unequal in the world. The economic damage caused by COVID-19 combined with the effects of the war in Ukraine has increased poverty in many countries of the hemisphere –and especially in marginalized communities --- and undermined the progress that had been made on the Sustainable Development Goals.

To revert this trend, the member States must devote their utmost efforts to promote policies and programs that address the structural causes of poverty and inequality and foster strengthened cooperation, including through a substantial and self-sustained increase of per capita national product; equitable distribution of national income; modernization of rural life and reforms leading to equitable and efficient land-tenure systems; accelerated and diversified industrialization, especially of capital and intermediate goods; fair wages; eradication of illiteracy; proper nutrition, access to universal healthcare and adequate housing; youth entrepreneurship and opportunities for ongoing training and occupational retraining; as well as the strengthening of supply chains; the facilitation of investments in the Americas; and the increase of commercial integration. The economic autonomy of women and creating conditions for their access to the labor market and their participation in the generation of wealth and employment in the region is just as important. Likewise, the world's most developed countries and international financial institutions should grant debt relief, offer grants and low-cost loans; increased resources to inter-American organizations to assist with the extraordinary COVID-19 related public health expenses; and provide financial support to transform to digital economies.

Education

Poverty, inequality, and lack of education are interconnected. There is probably no better tool to narrow the gap of inequality and reduce poverty than education. In the Americas, challenges regarding quality education are manifold and directly related to lack of access due to exclusion and/or discrimination of vulnerable groups and underserved areas, as well as the inability to keep up with fast paced digital and technological advances. In fact, the gap between those who have access to modern information and communications technology (ICT) and those that don't is growing to the same degree as the need to develop a digitally skilled workforce to remain competitive in the global race.

The digital divide is multidimensional and depends on computer ownership, high-speed Internet access and digital literacy. Therefore, bridging the digital divide will require major public and private investment efforts in infrastructure and hardware, but more importantly, it will require educational reforms and policies to facilitate digital literacy and the responsible use of digital technologies, such as the Internet, as well as improving affordability and the delivery of services in marginalized communities. The jobs of the future will be profoundly transformed by technology and the creation of green jobs. To advance towards greater social mobility and more equitable and peaceful societies, and to avoid fewer job opportunities, which fuel social tensions and discontent, the region must prepare for the emerging digital world and low-emission economies by prioritizing the modernization and democratization of education and digital skills training.

Climate Change

Climate change is currently the greatest threat to humanity, and its consequences directly impact peace and stability worldwide. In fact, in many cases, environmental degradation and contested natural resources are the main drivers of violent conflict. Its effects in the Americas are shared or differentiated depending on the subregion in the balance. While the concerns of small island and low-lying coastal developing States of the Caribbean differ from those of other countries of the hemisphere, every corner of the continent has been impacted by global warming. The consequences of climate change are also increasing poverty and inequality between people who live in the city and those who live in the countryside, forcing the latter to leave their places of origin.

Access to clean water and sanitation is an important challenge that most of our countries face equally. Droughts not only have a direct impact on agricultural and industrial production but also on human consumption. Likewise, the scarcity of water resources can generate disputes between countries for their use and exploitation, especially in the cases of transnational aquifers that are natural borders between countries. This could reverse the stability of interstate conflicts that has long existed on the continent. The impact of the effects of climate change is also differentiated according to different population groups. Vulnerable populations are the most affected, thereby generating a greater impact on inequality, which is particularly worrying since the Americas is already the region with the greatest social inequality on the planet.

Mitigating the effects of climate change, whether it be through supporting technical cooperation projects to protect biodiversity, strengthening environmental legislation, improving management of water resources, or even by raising awareness of the risks and consequences of this global threat must be prioritized at the national, regional, and subregional levels. Equally notable should be the efforts led by political bodies to engage in ongoing constructive dialogues to address the consequences of climate change on democratic governance, as well as to advance concrete actions by committed deadlines, monitor and report on compliance of agreements and widely share and disseminate results and data to jointly confront the threat of climate change.

Additionally, indigenous peoples are the guardians of centuries of wisdom and traditional knowledge and practices essential to protecting the environment and its biodiversity. They serve as environmental peacebuilders dedicated to building resilience through inclusive and sustainable development. In consequence, sustainable development and lasting conservation must involve the establishment of close partnerships with indigenous communities and bottom-up, community-based approaches.

Health

Health care has not been prioritized in terms of public funding in the Americas. Covid-19 brought to the forefront the immense health inequalities and the fragile social protection systems in the hemisphere. It also highlighted the inadequate health care services geared at older adults, as well as the widespread challenges to vaccination access and acceptance, especially affecting minority groups. Pandemic-related unemployment and Covid-19 fatalities also intensified social unrest, particularly in economically burdened and politically polarized environments.

The provision of adequate funding and resources combined with the inclusive, transparent, and effective coordination between central governments and local authorities is key to successfully responding to health crises. However, health officials must also work in close coordination with the private sector in order to deliver adequate health services, as well as to receive, track, and distribute the requisite medical equipment and supplies needed during health emergencies. Significant investments to train public health, health science, and medical professionals throughout the region will also be required to address future disease outbreaks.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy, reinforces trust, and enables cooperation for peaceful problem-solving. For this reason, for the past seventy-five years, the various organs, agencies, and entities of the OAS have developed, in the context of their institutional aims, various kinds of cooperative relationships with different types of civil society organizations. In the Americas, civil society plays a pivotal role in peacebuilding by engaging with multiple stakeholders and representatives from various levels of government to advance and implement sustainable and holistic peace practices.

Furthermore, civil society helps to strengthen relationships and solidarity at the local level by building a sense of shared values, engaging community members in addressing common challenges, gathering, and disseminating key information, and identifying threats and risks in a quicker and more comprehensive manner, even from the most remote and rural communities. Consequently, promoting, increasing, and strengthening the participation of civil society in conflict resolution efforts is crucial to advancing towards the construction of more just and peaceful societies.

CONCLUSION

Although the OAS has reacted effectively to the challenges presented in terms of security and peace in its member states in recent years, within the framework of the mandates it has received, there has been a lack of consolidated efforts throughout the hemisphere towards the

proactive promotion of peace, the identification of the underlying causes of conflicts, and the implementation of programs for the maintenance of peace in at-risk areas. The post-pandemic future offers an ideal opportunity to build more just and peaceful societies in the countries of the Americas by tackling the aforementioned sources of conflict ---which are now being exacerbated by rising inflation, food insecurity and the energy crisis --- from their roots.

Thus, our prevention efforts must consider the symbiotic relationship between different forms of violence and socio and economic factors. In this sense, we must pay particular attention to bridging the gap of inequality; condemning discrimination in all of its forms; fighting corruption through a system of checks and balances; and breaking the cycle of impunity by holding wrongdoers accountable regardless of the position they hold. The mandates are clear, but the homework is long overdue. If governments don't deliver on promises and on expectations of a better future, if they are unable to generate hope, and if they fail to make progress on overcoming these challenges, but instead turn to repressive tactics and human rights abuses to subdue social tensions and disaffected communities, the very survival of democracy will be at stake.

We are also witnessing governance crises and decreased credibility in public institutions throughout the region as a result of incompetent leaderships, mismanaged conflicts, and inefficient policies, which are further eroding the trust and legitimacy of democratic governments. In this sense, we must call out populist leaders who polarize and divide society through a rhetoric of resentment and hate, spread disinformation, undermine government, and question the outcome of electoral processes that do not favor them. In order to push back against populism, commitments must match actions, and good governance must translate into political, social, economic, and legal accountability. To regain trust and restore social peace and stability, states must also respond better to the needs of all citizens and create adequate conditions for investments and the creation of jobs.

Elections serve to renew leaderships, but they do not necessarily ease public discontent, because elections alone cannot guarantee democracy. For a democratic system to subsist in the long term, governments must rule democratically, respect the independence of powers, guarantee freedom of expression, but also, and equally important, invest in its citizens to ensure that their basic freedoms and human rights are met in an equitable manner. Neglecting to do so will continue to ignite and increase the spark of discontent, with the potential of exacerbating and spilling over to unlimited boundaries.

Likewise, states must demonstrate consistency in their commitments to human rights and dignity by adopting the necessary measures to prevent human rights violations --in any shape or form --from going unpunished, as well as by signing, ratifying, and enforcing the mechanisms that are provided under international law and in the inter-American system intended for those

purposes. Failure by member States to take on international human rights legal obligations limits their credibility with respect to their commitment to human rights and puts into question their ability to advocate for them.

The cost of conflict and violence surpasses immeasurably the cost of peace. Significantly increasing investments and resources in conflict prevention would save millions of dollars, not to mention lives, but it is a demanding task which must involve the concerted efforts of all sectors of society, the staunch support of the global community, as well as long term-commitments. It also requires a proactive promotion of a culture of peace to counter the culture of violence that has pervaded the hemisphere by advocating for shared values-based exchanges, by searching for common ground and consensus building, and by focusing on what we have in common rather than what makes us different.

The Organization of American States is committed to playing a more preventive role to address the region's peace and security concerns by making the promotion of peace and the prevention of conflict a central and priority issue. However, waging peace in the Americas cannot be confined to the Organization and its member States. It must also encompass cooperation and coordination of efforts with like-minded institutions, including with other international and regional organizations, the private sector, civil society, academia, think tanks, foundations, the media, religious institutions, among many other key influential partners.

The OAS and the UN boast a strong, long-standing collaborative relationship in many sectors. Today, the challenges in our region, aggravated by the consequences of the multiple global threats and crises, urge us to strengthen and expand that relationship so that together we can build a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for the benefit of all citizens of the Americas.