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### Canada Should Seek a Greater Role beyond Trade in the Americas

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By Jim Hodgson and Tara Ward

The Seventh Summit of the Americas, held in Panama earlier this month, brought together all 35 countries in the hemisphere for the first time ever. The agenda, however, was once again overshadowed by economic and political issues that divide Canada and the United States from the others: different approaches to economic development and diplomatic tensions with Venezuela. These divisions and the disenchantment with dominant approaches to global economic integration have led to the creation of sub-regional bodies that exclude Canada and the United States, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The Americas Policy Group represents Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs) that have years of experience in Latin America and, collectively, are connected to thousands of women's, labour, human rights, peasant, church, and indigenous organizations across the continent. Our recommendations reflect what we and our partners throughout the Americas ask of Canada.

Canada designated Latin America as a foreign policy priority in 2007, but its record to date has been narrowly focused on the pursuit of free trade agreements at the expense of deeper engagement on crucial issues such as decent employment, sustainable economic development, citizen security, corporate accountability, democratic governance, and human rights. CSOs have long argued that Canada could restore its relevance in the Americas by signalling a broader commitment to the hemisphere and by respecting the diverse forms of governance found in the region, including the left-of-centre governments.

To bolster Canada's role in the Americas, we believe it is imperative that trade agreements be premised on compliance with international human rights standards and that corporate accountability be a top priority. We also maintain that supporting the militarization of corrupt regimes must not be seen as the solution to drug and criminality problems. Central American migration challenges must be addressed by targeting inequality, poverty and corrupt government and security forces – root causes of the growth of organized crime, unsafe and undocumented migration and indiscriminate violence. Moreover, the criminalization of human rights defenders in the hemisphere should be understood as a threat to democratic governance and vehemently condemned.

Given that Latin America is the most unequal region in the world, with 167 million people living in poverty and a further 200 million considered economically vulnerable, it is time for Canada to address this challenge. Public policies and tax reforms to mitigate extreme inequality should be actively supported in Latin America.



While welcoming the government's announcement of \$98 million for various initiatives in the region, we hope that the funds will be used to achieve the outcomes we seek.

On another note, promoting dialogue between Venezuela's government and opposition should be recognized as more effective than unilateral support for the opposition and for US-imposed economic sanctions. Canada must also continue to support efforts toward normalization of relations between Cuba and the United States, recognizing that the best way to produce positive change in Cuba is to end the economic embargo and to establish regular diplomatic relations.

Finally, we urge Canada to seek out citizen input and give it more space and weight in policy processes in the region. The Canadian government and the OAS have established consultation processes with civil society in the lead-up to the Summit of the Americas, but they remain limited and generally have not resulted in tangible outcomes. In their current format, the consultations and parallel civil society events cannot directly influence government deliberations, let alone final agreements. Most of the negotiating, and the wording of joint declarations, had already been finalized by the time these consultations took place. Even so, no joint final declaration was achieved at the Panama Summit.

Global civil society is an important actor on the world scene that should not be ignored by governments and multilateral institutions. Heeding voices that are connected to people on the ground in Latin America would be an important step forward in bolstering Canada's role in the Americas and diminishing the growing isolation that Canada and the US are facing in the hemisphere.

*Jim Hodgson and Tara Ward are co-chairs of the Americas Policy Group, a working group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation focused on development and social justice issues in the Americas.*