

The Special Summit: So Many Initiatives, So Few Institutions

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As the “Special” Summit of the Americas, scheduled for mid-January in Monterrey, Mexico, rapidly approaches, there is no shortage of good ideas. Worthwhile proposals abound on themes as varied as immigrant remittances, HIV/AIDS, educational standards, hunger elimination and anti-corruption. Nor did the previous three conclaves of hemispheric leaders lack creative initiatives. The first Summit in Miami manufactured 164 action items, Santiago recorded 141 and Quebec hit 245 agreed goals.

The frustrations with summitry have not been for lack of interesting initiatives. The shortfall has been elsewhere: the too-frequent failure to transform leaders’ pledges into practical programs backed by adequate financial resources and a committed instrument of implementation.

Summit pageantry has not been matched by the creation of institutions designed to transform ideas into programs. Instead, Summits have handed off their many mandates to pre-existing regional institutions, notably the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) – but without granting these already overburdened agencies new resources.

Happily, the OAS and IDB have responded vigorously to some of the most important Summit mandates. To advance the centerpiece of summitry, namely the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the premier regional institutions have significantly beefed up their respective trade units. While the democracy promotion units in the IDB and OAS have origins independent of summitry, Summit mandates have helped to raise their prominence and increase their budgets. The Summits have also given a boost to efforts to open select OAS and IDB activities to representatives of civil society organizations. Additionally, foreign ministers, who are chiefly responsible for organizing Summits, compose the OAS’s supreme governing body. In a series of formal resolutions passed at its annual meetings, the authoritative General Assembly has directed the OAS to consider Summit mandates as binding.

Yet, the capacity of the OAS is severely undercut by its skimpy annual budget, which falls short of \$US 100 million – pathetic in comparison to the depth of the problems assigned to it.

In contrast, the IDB’s annual activity budget runs into the many billions of dollars. Many IDB programs – from trade integration to corporate social responsibility – coincide with Summit mandates. But more direct IDB engagement with summitry is constrained by several factors. The IDB is run by ministries of finance that have kept their distance from Summits, which they see as run by competing centers of power (presidencies and ministries of foreign affairs). Second, the IDB prides itself as being a “demand-driven” Bank – that is, it is responsive to requests from borrowing countries, as opposed to guidelines established by, say, Summit leaders. Third, the IDB’s Executive Board has purposefully chosen not to establish strong mechanisms to pursue nor monitor the implementation of Summit mandates. So what can be done to give summitry the institutional back-up it needs, to make sure that Monterrey’s legacy is more than presidential pageantry?

1) Governments must quickly design negotiating procedures that produce a leaner list of priority mandates that command more legitimacy at the regional institutions to which they are assigned. As one IDB official has commented, "Asking for everything is the same as asking for nothing."

2) Accountability – getting agencies to serve agreed-upon goals – would be further enhanced if Summit mandates posit measurable indicators of performance. Better monitoring and evaluation is also crucial. It will help that the IDB is following the current trend in development finance toward establishing impact indicators and quantifiable outputs.

3) To nest the IDB more comfortably within summitry, its governing authorities – the ministries of finance – as well as its Executive Board need to be engaged immediately in the various stages of summitry, including the preparation of Summit mandates.

4) The OAS desperately needs more money, perhaps in exchange for an agreement on badly needed administrative reform. In the meantime, with its vastly superior capital base, the IDB should be more willing to fund Summit-mandated OAS projects.

Realistically, Summits have a number of functions other than implementation of their communiqués. Summits underscore shared values, add legitimacy to certain ideas and help to fortify personal relations among leaders and their senior staffs. But over time, if Summit pledges of action remain unfulfilled, the whole Summit process will increasingly be perceived as "only empty rhetoric," and the other functions of Summits will also suffer. The entire edifice of summitry requires at least some degree of transformation of words into deeds.

Here's the simple Feinberg rule for successful summitry: no initiative should be approved by leaders unless accompanied by corresponding resources and a capable bureaucracy or public-private coalition committed to its implementation. And don't forget measurable outcomes and monitoring procedures to ensure public accountability.