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ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE AMERY BROWNE, MINISTER
OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO AT THE
CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

“Social Innovation and Implementation: Citizens in Motion”

(April 15, 2009 - Carnival Victory, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago)

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Chairperson of this morning’s proceedings
Assistant Secretary General of the Organisation of American States – Mr. Albert Ramdin
Other Distinguished Members of the Head Table
Leaders of Civil Society Organisations
Members of Academia
Representatives of Development Agencies
Representatives of Labour Organisations
Representatives of the Media
Representatives of Government Ministries and Agencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning,

It is an immense honour to be a part of these historic proceedings, as Trinidad and Tobago is the first Caribbean State to host the prestigious Summit of the Americas. For those of you who are visiting our shores – and especially those who are here for the first time – I bid you a warm welcome on behalf of the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago. I sincerely anticipate that you will enjoy the hospitality of our wonderful country and I hope that you will have the opportunity to visit our historic sites, our beautiful beaches and other places of interest, and to taste the flavour of a vibrant and cosmopolitan society. And it gives me great pleasure to address this particular gathering, given that Trinidad and Tobago’s Government in general and Ministry of Social Development in particular rely heavily on collaborative partnerships with civil society organisations to achieve our mandate within the social sector.

This morning, three fora are being convened simultaneously, with key focal groups of the nations of our Hemisphere: you, the representatives of the civil society, members of the private sector, and the youth. These proceedings underscore the commitment of our Heads of State and Governments to preserving and promoting the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, particularly Article 6 which advocates: “It is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development. This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy. Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy.”

This particular forum, the Civil Sector Forum, is one of the most important opportunities afforded to us via the Summit process. Since 1994, at the very first Summit of the Americas in Miami, Governments have recognized the importance of the civil sector and the crucial role its organizations play in spearheading civic engagement in policy issues and decision-making practices. The contributions of civil society organizations to the consolidation of democracy are a vital element for the success of development policies, at local and national levels. As members of the civil society, yours is a unique and often understated role. You have charged yourselves with the task of promoting the economic, social, political and cultural well-being of our fellow-men. Hence, you are particularly vital not only to the success of this particular Summit, but also far beyond it. The organisations you represent are invaluable,

as both ally and advocate, in the implementation of programmes of cooperation between Governments and regional and international organisations.

This year marks a full decade since the Committee on Civil Society Participation in the Organisation of American States was formed, in recognition of the myriad contributions of such social partners to furthering the work of the OAS. And this forum constitutes a critical medium via which you are able to represent the interests of the citizens of your country, and participate in decisions relating to your own development.

The theme of this forum - Social Innovation and Implementation: Citizens in Motion – stresses that you, the citizens and your own actions, are directly behind the process; you are the ones who impel the social changes we need. If Government represents the Head of a country, you are invariably its Heart. And it was Helen Keller who said that the best and most beautiful things in the World cannot be seen or even touched...they must be felt with the heart.

Civil society because of its positioning and composition in society has a major role to play in identifying, developing and implementing programmes and projects that promote genuine social development. Working from the very nucleus of societies, you possess precious and very precise knowledge on those who are in vulnerable situations, as well as what exactly is needed to improve their lives. The challenge is for us to work together to devise and implement measures which ensure that the causes of such vulnerability are negated, so that we can avoid the vicious cycle of treating symptoms instead of the actual social problems.

And this is why, Ladies and Gentlemen, I urge you to make the most of this forum. While I am certain that you are all honoured to be here, we are the ones who are indeed privileged to have your informed participation in the entire process. From the very onset, we have sought to inject new vigour into advancing much-needed reform and action into and out of the Summit.

Whereas previous Summits have produced two documents – a Declaration and a Plan of Action – we have produced a single, all-encompassing Declaration of Commitment. Through it, we have attempted to marry commitments with actions, and so focus on implementation of proposed initiatives, to generate concrete results which will improve the standards of living of our respective peoples.

This Declaration of Commitment reflects an understanding of the central roles that the civil sector plays in development, and outlines several key areas of focus that can be addressed by civil sector organisations. Some examples include:

- Alleviating deep and persistent inequalities especially in education, income levels, health and nutritional status, exposure to violence and crime, and access to basic services;
- Exchanging information on policies, experiences and good practices in order to support our national efforts to reduce social disparities and inequality, and halve poverty by the year 2015;
- Targeting and reducing the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs);
- Promoting inter-cultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity, since it fosters mutual understanding and convergence, which help reduce conflict, discrimination and the barriers to economic opportunity and social participation;
- Increasing public awareness on energy and environmental issues; and
- Mainstreaming gender into public policies and strengthening the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and girls.

The reality of today's world poses a plethora of challenges for our nations, as reflected in the theme for the Fifth Summit of the Americas and its Declaration of Commitment - Securing our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability. We can all appreciate

the overall theme's suitability at this time, given the global climate of economic downturn, declining energy supplies and environmental and social risks.

Throughout the Americas deep and persistent inequalities persist in a number of areas. In the region, 96 million persons live in extreme poverty, 400 million experience some form of discrimination and 22 million youth are neither working nor studying and are therefore are not in a position to advance themselves or improve their life chances. These conditions can serve to undermine security by eroding social cohesion and weakening the support base of our democracies.

Security has many dimensions. While it tends to include some measure of prevention of crime, in a broader sense security in a society manifests itself in that society's ability to overcome exclusion and violence, as well as improve lives and instil in citizens the feeling that they have a personal stake in the status of their nation. This Summit's focus on security is a commitment to deliver tangible outcomes that will make a real and positive difference in the lives of the peoples of the Americas. We must all acknowledge that much of the violence that impacts our nations is fuelled by a drug trade that rages on and on with untold human suffering in supply countries, demand countries, and transshipment countries. Again the call for real solutions for this and any other complex social issue must be synonymous with calls for sustained multi-sectoral collaboration.

The Global Call to Action Against Poverty in September 2004 noted that sustainable development requires that strategies comprise economic, social and environmental components. Furthermore, the 'Call to Action' demanded that gender equality be viewed as central to poverty eradication and that the rights of women, children and other previously excluded groups be upheld and their equal participation be ensured. The 'Call' also mirrored the popular thinking of the day – effective development strategies, in the face of globalisation, require innovative partnerships between the State, Civil Society and the Private Sector.

Trinidad and Tobago has certainly answered this 'Call', Ladies and Gentlemen. In the spirit of democracy and good governance, we have embarked on a development agenda to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a developed nation by the year 2020. Our Vision embraces the people's participation in decision-making.

Our Government is increasingly seeking to enhance the effectiveness of the delivery of public services through creative partnerships with civil society and the private sector. Civil Society Groups play a multi-faceted role in the national development process, and this even extends to acting as a watchdog – tracking expenditure and activity and advocating for continued transparency and accountability of Government. Government must remain a primary actor – providing the fundamental framework for society and upholding its moral obligation to provide the kind of leadership that serves the needs of its citizens. However, civil society can utilize the relative freedom of its space to fully explore the interaction of the various groups that make up society, examine norms and customs, and communicate to the other partners in development how best their activities should be modified to serve the needs and interests of their target beneficiaries.

An Agenda for Development, the May 1994 Report of the United Nations Secretary General, states and I quote:

“Few, if any, societies can pursue all aspects of development unaided. Development requires international cooperation and it requires that other actors assist States in their efforts..... The sheer number of actors in development today, the global trends that their activities reflect, the interrelationship of problems and the mechanisms for their solution – all highlight the urgent need for greater awareness and more determined commitment.....”

As participants in this Forum, you are presented with the opportunity to contribute to a Regional Agenda for achieving accelerated human development and poverty reduction, social and cultural inclusion, greater energy security and ultimately, more sustainable communities. The Fourth Summit of the Americas identified Decent Work as the most effective tool for achieving material and human progress. This has implications for increased investment in education and skills development as well as a strengthened micro, small and medium enterprise sector.

Trinidad and Tobago seeks to address decent work and is making great investments into creating a workforce that is highly skilled and knowledgeable and which will stimulate innovation and growth for generations to come. The quality of a nation's human capital is a key determinant in the achievement of its growth and development targets. So, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are addressing not only the aptitude for innovation and the utilisation of new technologies, but also the capacity for entrepreneurship whilst striving to preserve our cultural identity and diversity.

Ladies and gentlemen, essential to improving the quality of life of our citizens and the sustainability of our economies, are a healthy environment and the responsible management of our ecosystems. The key areas on our environmental agenda are: agricultural, water resource and natural resource management; rural and urban development and management; ecosystem and biodiversity protection; and the treatment and disposal of hazardous waste. In recent times, and increasingly so, mitigating climatic changes have impacted on the Region's food production, urban and transportation infrastructure, industrial development, potable water supplies and forest cover. The frequency and intensity of rising sea levels, hurricanes, storm surges, flash floods, earthquakes and landslides indicate a need for all of us – especially the Small Island Developing States of the Caribbean – to enhance our mechanisms for sharing early warning information. We must make strides to improve disaster preparedness, strengthen and coordinate emergency responses and relief programmes and be guided by trends in the occurrence of natural disasters in all our decision making, from planning national budgets to determining the nature and locations of housing projects and other investments.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the task of fulfilling the mandate of the Fifth Summit of the Americas – Securing our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability - may seem daunting to some. But I put it to you today that there is a great difference between the challenging and the insurmountable...and that difference is measured not by miles or kilograms or dollars but by the value of our determination to work together for a common purpose.

Now is the time, as the world faces an unprecedented economic downturn, for all sectors of society to work together as one for the well being of our various countries; we cannot at this juncture afford to be divided by partitions of the past; now is the time for each of us to be the voice of our people, our community and our country and our Region. In the social sector we must never be daunted by the loud voices that tell us that it can't be done. If at this event or anytime in the future your task seems impossible, I humbly suggest that you can derive inspiration from the fact that this Fifth Summit of the Americas is being successfully hosted by a very tiny developing country such as Trinidad and Tobago. And indeed we are tiny, a mere 5000 square kilometres, with a population of approximately 1.4 million citizens. So many cities in this Region are bigger and more populous than this entire country. But we are doing it. We are hosting one of the world's most prominent meetings, with the most influential leaders in the Hemisphere. And it all started with a vision, a vision that blossomed from understanding the value of meaningful dialog and collaboration.

The opportunity is now at hand for each of us at this forum to join together in a vision for a better and greater Americas. And as we work together to shape this vision of our future, let us never forget the past, and the legacy left by our many forefathers and the indigenous people of this great Hemisphere. We have

all inherited a Hemisphere with diversity and energy and magnificent cultures that are admired around the World.

Upon that proud platform, and with the increasing commitment to people-focused policies in so many of our nations both large and small, it is within our capacity and I believe within our destiny to build a future for the Americas that is characterized by equity, tolerance and the creation of the conditions through which our citizens can achieve their fullest potential. That is the essential purpose of civil society, that is the essential purpose of Government, and this is the essential purpose of the 5th Summit of the Americas. My friends from civil society, the power is yours, the power is ours to ensure that what happens in Port-of-Spain does not stay in Port-of-Spain but that this enhanced vision is extended to every capitol, every village, and every family in the Western Hemisphere.

On behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, I wish us all a Summit of great success and lasting value.

I thank you, and God Bless You.