Report of interviews with Civil Society Organizations' representatives regarding the Summits Virtual Platform (SVP)

Interviews conducted by: The Summits of the Americas Secretariat with the support of OAS/Radio[1]

Background:

The SVP initiative carried out in preparation for the Fifth Summit of the Americas evidenced that the opportunities for interaction enabled by new e-participation technologies, such as virtual fora, facilitate the work of the Summits Secretariat to promote an inclusive and participatory regional process, particularly when one considers the limitations in time and resources facing stakeholders involved in the Process (i.e. OAS, Member States and civil society).

As this initiative involves changes in the way ongoing interaction with different stakeholders is carried out, the SAS/OAS considered it critical to engage civil society and other social actors in planning the next phase of the SVP. In this spirit, the Secretariat collaborated with the OAS Department of International Affairs (DIA) to conduct the on-line survey "Exploring New Ways to Engage Social Actors in OAS Activities", which was completed by a total of 269 participants throughout the region.[2]

Moreover, in an effort to complement the general information compiled from the anonymous survey, SAS/OAS invited the participation of five civil society representatives from the region with recognized experience participating in the Summits process and other OAS activities. This small sample of testimonials illustrates the perspective of these stakeholders on the opportunities generated by the use of interactive online tools to promote and strengthen social actor participation in the framework of the Summits and the OAS.

Methodology:
- Prospective interviewees were contacted via e-mail by the SAS/OAS;
- The final report of the survey and the SVP case study[3] were sent as background information;
- An interview guideline was also sent as reference (attached as annex 1 to this report);
- A total of 5 interviews were conducted, providing for sub-regional representation,
- The interviews were carried out over the phone and recorded with the support of the OAS/Radio team.

Interview Calendar					
Date	Region	Person Interviewed	Title	Organization	Page
Aug. 28	Caribbean	Gia V. Gaspard Taylor	National Coordinator	International Education and Resource Network Trinidad and Tobago (iEARNTnT)	2 - 3
Aug.31	North America	Melissa Golladay	Director of Youth Exchanges	Partners of the Americas	4 - 6
	Caribbean	Hazel Brown	Coordinator	Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women	7 - 8
Sept. 1	South America	Eliana Bigai Núñez	Coordinator of Social Projects	Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres	9 - 10
	Latin America	Carlos Quesada	Latin America Program Director	Global Rights	11 -13

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[1] SAS Team: Claudia Salazar and Andrea Montilla. / OAS Radio: Mario Martínez (Spanish), Kerne Stanley (English).
[2] Survey conducted from July 28 to August 10, 2009. The report is available in the following links: EN / SP
[3] The SVP Case Study is available in the following links: EN / SP

Caribbean
Gia V. Gaspard Taylor
National Coordinator, International
Education and Resource Network Trinidad
and Tobago (iEARNTnT)
Location: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Q. What has been your engagement with the Summits and the OAS?
A. Our organization's involvement with the OAS has been at the top level. We have been invited to participate in activities in Washington as well as in other parts of the Hemisphere. With the [Fifth] Summit, we had the opportunity to have hosted the Model Youth Summit for Trinidad and Tobago with 24 schools, and it gave opportunity to young people to learn about the Summit [also participated in Civil Society face-to-face consultations both for the Caribbean Sub-region and in the hemispheric forum].

Q. What was your experience in participating in the SVP?
A. I think it was an excellent introduction. We were able to participate and get-in in the questions and issues that were raised and were able to reply to them and have our voices heard. I think it was an excellent opportunity for those who were not able to attend conferences abroad to still have their voices heard and to make their point.

It was unfortunate that not all of the members who were invited to participate understand the process and therefore they registered but did not make any contributions, but for us it was quite good. In our case, we did not have any previous experience and we were able to sign on. My young colleagues also guided me and at the end I found it quite simple. In our group we had active participation, especially from a young man [Abraham Fergusson].

Q. Do you plan to participate in the future?
A. I will most definitely participate in the future! Because of the fact that you can get so much out of the Internet. This type of two-way communication is excellent because it gives those who cannot participate in conferences abroad an opportunity to have their say.

Q. How does it compare with other forms of participation or experiences that you have had?
A. I think it gives you wider participation. When you attend a meeting abroad, because there are so many other CSOs and everyone wanting to get their point across, sometimes it's not always possible to be heard, but through the virtual forum you are able to get your point across because you are not competing for time or attention. It is an excellent opportunity and an excellent way to get your messages across.

Q. What are some of the challenges?
A. I had no earlier experience and I was able to sign on, as well as our young man. But there were other members who registered but were not able to participate. Sometimes they couldn't find exactly where they could log-on, they couldn't find the messages that were posted, little things like that; although I found it quite simple, they couldn't find it, even though they were guided and told what to do, yet they had problems. I think that training may be one way out of it. If we can probably have training sessions for the Spanish-speaking countries and then in the Caribbean.

Q. Do you think that access represented a challenge?
A.   Because most of our work was done at night time, not having a home computer may have represented a challenge.

What I found most challenging was getting other members to participate. That's why I think training may help. If you're in a room and they show you where you need to click, add or delete comments as the case may

be, people will be able to make their contributions. Another thing I found is that I know some people were able to get on, yet when it came to making their contributions they panicked - they didn't know what to say.

Q. How do your think that e-participation would help Summit and OAS to provide information on their activities to Civil Society?
A. As I have said before, it's an excellent tool, as a matter of fact is 'the tool' that is used in the International Education and Resource Network - the internet - where we interact with young people throughout the world. So that for me, it is a fantastic tool in getting information from the OAS and imparting information and participating online. I can only speak for myself and my organization to say that I think it is an excellent tool, but I believe that there are others who participated and they would concur with me and that the OAS themselves thinks so or else they wouldn't have had gone into it.

In including other areas in the region and the problems that we have had, maybe we can have a piece of software that would help in the interpretation, because that has been one of the problems and the English-Spanish fluency is sometimes low.

R. Any suggestions to getting people to use it?
A. I think that keeping active, because more and more people will use it and will be able to participate. The SVP is new for the Summits process, and the process of the Summit itself was new to the people of T&T as the first Summit held in this region. So that for us in the region these were new ideas. Given time I think people will get used to it and be able to participate fully.

Q. What are your expectations for the new phase or what changes would you suggest?
A. I thought that some of the tools that the SAS is planning to introduce are excellent. However, one should not overload it with too many new things because of the fact that people are still getting used to it. Given the opportunity more members will get involved.

As for the final Summit document, it would be an excellent opportunity to really go in depth into the document and be able to comment online taking one question at the time. As it was done in the introduction of the SVP, the questions were broken down and if that could be done with the final document, I think it would be an excellent way of getting information from members and (overall) participation.

Q. Do you think it would benefit other areas of the organization?
A.   Most definitely yes, yes, yes. I think it is a tool that should be used, it is an effective tool and it should also be used effectively outside of the Summits process in the OAS in general.

Q. What do you do and what has been your relation to the OAS?
A.   The Youth Exchanges Direction of Partners of the Americas facilitates the exchange of high school students from Latin America to come to the US to learn about civic education and volunteerism. One of the important things we do is really trying to get them involved with their local communities and in relationships between their country and other countries in the region and so, being able to participate in a Hemispheric forum as the OAS and the Summit of the Americas is very important for these youth as it gives them a voice and a place to express what they feel they need and connect with other youth as well.

Q. Are you familiar with the platform? How would you describe your participation through it?
A.   Yes, we participated. Different themes were available on the platform, I logged in and it was interesting to read the thoughts and opinions of other organizations throughout the hemisphere. I only participated on some of the themes that were more specific to my work of culture exchange and social development, but I did go   in every now and then and read what some of the other forums were discussing... I thought it was an interesting dialogue, a good precursor to the Summit and some of the forums that went on there; it gave people kind of a briefing of what would be discussed.

Q. In regard to your previous interactions with the OAS, how are those compared to this new form of interaction that was launched for the Summits process?
A.   I like the virtual platform because it gives you a way to participate from your desk. In my case, I'm based in Washington DC and that allows me to go to the OAS and attend the meetings or events and hear what some of the representatives are talking about as well. But even though I live in the area, its not always so easy going to the OAS so it's nice to log-on from your computer and instantly be able to engage with organization from all over the region.

Partners of the Americas has been involved with the Summits process for many years and we have tried a lot of different fora to get civil society organizations involved in the process and one of the big criticisms is that a lot of civil society engagement is that it happens late in the process, so, the more things we can do to get people talking earlier on, the better, because not only do people become informed of what exactly the issues are at the Summit but they also have the chance to express their voice and know what other people are saying; the more you know what other people are concerned about too, the more you can prepare your own thoughts and be able to contribute to that conversation, so I thought that was really key. In the meetings, especially at the Summit, there are always so many actors, so many civil society organizations and everybody wants to talk and you only get a couple minutes, it is really chaotic. Thus, the virtual platform is really nice because you can take time to think about what you want to say and read everybody's comments.
I was a little disappointed that there were fewer organizations participating than I had expected.

Q. What future topics do you recommend to be included in the Virtual Forum?
A.   The themes of either the General Assembly or the Summit or whatever event that is convened for should be front centered and participants should be able to focus on those themes and what they need for the work that they are doing. In addition to that, democracy and governance is a big issue, especially because it does relate to the manner in which civil society can participate so, that is a big topic for civil society to be able to have a voice on.

Getting more people involved, not only in the politics of the region but within civil society, helping them to express their voices and what they have interest in for the future.

Q. After this phase of the SVP, do you think the platform has a role on the follow-up to the Summits of the Americas?

A.   Definitely. I think that the more fruitful discussions can actually happen after the event; certainly, there needs to be substantive discussion before an event so that civil society can really contribute to the process but I think that, learning about what happens at the Summits or the General Assembly and others, it could really spark more conversations. One of the things missing from civil society participation in this process is a strong role in follow-up. Civil society organizations can contribute to initiatives being implemented locally, in collaboration with Governments. There is a real need of a discussion following these events so that civil society can understand what their role in follow-up is, learn how to really work with governments to see projects be implemented in terms of the Summits mandates and share with each other to learn "who is doing what?", "what's working?", "what is not?", so I think the conversation should be continued, really.

Q. One activity made by the OAS in follow-up to the SVP was the anonymous survey, were you able to participate? And, did you see the results?

A. Yes, for both.

Q. Anything to add to those results? Anything surprising in them? You already mentioned that the early on participation was one of the challenges, is there anything else?

A.   Well, I was kind of disappointed with how many organizations did participate, I thought it was lower than the number of organizations that actually showed up to events, which seems counter-intuitive, you would think that it might be much easier to participate online than attend an event, so that was a surprising result.

Q. One of the major concerns coming out of the survey is that there is lack of skills and access from some groups to use this sort of platform and technology. What do you think are some of the things that SAS could do to help this process?

A.   The lack of access is a tough issue. I think one thing is publicize that these tools are available; really make them well known so people know how to access them, how to utilize the information that is on, but I think that a lot of it too is finding the technology, having access to the internet and computers that you could use and making sure that this type of access is available for the countries that are participating. I think that the SVP was a new tool that hasn't been used before so that contributed to a low level of participation of some organizations but just increasing technology is key as it can identify some areas where civil society is weak and to think in some creative ways to get technology out to them so that more people can participate.

Q. What about the SVP itself, anything missing or that can be added to the SVP? Some of the stuff mentioned in the survey were the download/upload of documents and videos, so anything else in your mind that you think would be useful?

A.   I see a role for a place to upload documents, videos and more information and I think it would be very useful to include an 'organizational profile' so that people who are part of the platform can put information about what they are doing, where they are doing it, to kind of facilitate linkages between organizations and find out for example, for me, who else is working on youth and cultural exchanges in the Americas so we could be able to find those organizations quickly and link up with them and to put information about partners and what we are doing so that others see that and could be able to contact us. Also, I think that being able to upload documents is great but I do question though is how much time it would take organizations to go through all of that material to find what's useful and valuable for them, as it wouldn't be good to kind of load the platform with too much information that is not properly filtered.

Q. How do you see the SVP in the future?

A.   I think this is definitely the right direction. Larger participation from more and more diverse civil society organizations would be helpful. I feel that this could make spaces available for the youth; as you know, this year the Summit also had spaces available for the indigenous populations, the unions and some other different types of groups, so having that available online would also be helpful.

Really, the earlier the process can start the better because more people would become not just involved in the process but they would have time to become informed on how you participate in the Summits process, what type of discussions are going on, where they can insert their information, when they can be most valuable to the process. For a lot of organizations who don't have a lot of time, it's a time consuming process to be able to figure out how you can participate in the process, so the sooner that tools are available online, the sooner that information is disseminated to civil society, the better because they would have time to figure all that out before they start making resolutions, evaluations, documents and things like that. So, getting the word out, getting information out there so that people have a space to participate; I think those are the most important steps to move forward.

Caribbean
Hazel Brown
Coordinator, Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago
for the Advancement of Women
Location: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Q. What has been your engagement with the Summits and the OAS?
A.   Our Network is over 25 years old and over 100 organizations are affiliated. Our participation with the OAS goes back to a project involving gender engagement in decision-making and politics. We have since continued that to the extent that we formed the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership, which brought all of the women working on issues and women working on political decision-making to an institutional framework and the OAS continues to support that.

We have subsequently been invited to communicate and work with the civil society unit of the OAS and its efforts to be build that relationship with civil society. Particularly in the Caribbean, because one of the concerns that we've had – and this is directly related to this project – is the challenges we have of communications in the Caribbean. Because there are a lot of things going on, it's not easy for us to know what other people are doing. The costs of meetings and the unreliability and the high costs of traveling and the high costs of using the telephone affect some of the efforts in the Caribbean for collaboration with agencies like the OAS. So for us, that is probably the one critical issue, what can we do to facilitate better communication among civil society people in the Caribbean.

Q. What role would the SVP play in that sense?
A.   It was extremely useful for increasing the level of participation of CSO in the Caribbean. When we have been to OAS meetings in Washington on various topics, we have always been put out by the low level of Caribbean participation. So this is one of the things that this virtual platform did for us. Also to put us in touch with people that we did not know and put us back in touch with those that we do know. For the Fifth Summit in particular; because it was in the Caribbean we had to find any way, any means to bring several Caribbean voices into the meeting.

Q. In terms of your experience with the SVP, What challenges did you see?
A.   A lot of us are technologically challenged and finding your way around it's not always easy [laughs], when you try to press this or that and it doesn't open, and then the phone line goes down, it gets pretty frustrating. Some others were more adapted, particularly our young colleagues definitely helped and I find myself relying heavily on them. Sometimes I find I don't have the patience to figure out how it works.

Q. How do you think that the Summits of the Americas or the OAS can help to alleviate those challenges?
A.   I certainly think that the question of institutional strengthening with CSO in this region is a problem. We don't get the kind of funding and support that we need and that we should be having. Even though the government talks about partnerships, there is no real partnership in relation to working together as equal in a respectful way. But we think that when we speak with a stronger voice, then we are better able to get the respect and the resources that we need to do our work. So it's kind of two-ways, we do our work and the work gives us credibility and a voice and then that voice and credibility gives us the resources to continue to do our work.

For all, the Fifth Summit was a challenge. We've learned some serious lessons about the communications in that kind of triangle between the OAS, the government and civil society. Also, one thing that became very obvious in the Summit was the partitioning-off civil society into business groups, youth and CSO, we were labeled off and put somewhere in one corner, and people with disabilities also treated as a different group. We believe very strongly that, as result of that experience, the communication and the use of

this technology must not only allow us access to information and communication with each other, it must also be a kind of bridge that brings these different sectors together and creates a serious multi-sectoral dialogue.

Q. Since the Summit, What do you think about having a SVP for the follow-up?
A.   That was one of the recommendations coming out from the first sub-regional civil society forum last October. We need to keep the virtual forum up and running, ongoing. The facilitation done was excellent. Without this good facilitation and somebody pulling the things together is just another talk. So we think that the platform needs to stay up and with a dedicated facilitator.

Q. Are you aware of the anonymous survey? Where there any surprises or challenges?
A. Yes, we participated. Indeed, I couldn't get to the end of the survey; it did allow me to go through.

Q. Do you think that connectivity Caribbean-wise has anything to with it?
A.   We would like to see more and better Caribbean regional connectivity. We seem to need more speed and more help in using these tools.

Q. What about the results of the survey, anything jumped-up in these results?
A.   Well, the response to question 6, which suggested that these tools should complement the face-to-face participation. For the Summit, one of the good experiences we had was a video-conference, facilitated by the IDB, so that you could virtually have the meeting because then, we could get an immediate response to your need of information. That is another level of communication that facilitated conversations. Traveling from this region is very difficult and you don't have to have a US visa or others to go virtually everywhere.

Q. What tools should be added to the SVP? Do you think then that videos and documents would be useful?
A.   Yes. Things in formats that people can easily upload and download, as not everyone has the same computers or technology. Also, information about the technology, about the programs that work and the systems that are easier to users.

Q. Results coming out of the face-to-face consultations, did this new tool prove to be useful in complementing them?
A.   Off course. In the Caribbean, we have the language challenge as well. Many things are in Spanish and translations are not always available on time. This has to be included also in the SVP.

We have been involved with the Summits process since the Canada Summit in 2001, as part of a CSO network which makes follow-up to the Summits mandates. We were involved for the Fifth Summit and we have been following the monitoring and evaluation of Summits mandates, through the initiative led by Participa. This is the network responsible for creating the evaluation index of Governments compliance with implementation of mandates.

One of the issues that we have in the OAS now is what happens with all the mandates and commitments made by the Governments? Who is following them and how can they be implemented? We got to the position of saying that we don't need another single Summit or mandate; all we need to do is go back through the mandates; we know it's not possible to make them all but we need to prioritize some in order to achieve them.

The recommendation would be that the platform has to continue conversations and play a role in implementation. If there is a priority for us in terms of matters to be carried on in the platform it would be: How can we monitor implementation and what can we do to ensure that the things that are promised are achieved?

Q. Judging for what has happened, do you think that the SVP might be this tool?
A.   Absolutely! We have the index, and even though the index only covers 4 big issues, if we take those and then follow and monitor the implementation, it would make it very, very useful.

Sur América
Eliana Bigai Núñez
Coordinadora
Proyectos Sociales, Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres
Location: Caracas, Venezuela

Introducción personal y de la Organización a la que pertenece y de su relación con la OEA

La Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres, en la cual la licenciada Bigai Núñez tiene el cargo de directora de proyectos, ha participado activamente desde el 2006 en actividades de la OEA, una vez logramos la inscripción como organización registrada ante la OEA.

P.   ¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia participando en este proceso de las Cumbres de las Américas?
R.   Abrir la plataforma virtual es el mayor avance para lograr el objetivo de mayor inclusión y participación de las ONGs a nivel hemisférico; ha sido una buena iniciativa porque las distancias a veces pueden frenar los canales de comunicación y en cambio con la plataforma, el acercamiento entre las ONGs ha sido bastante efectivo. Creo que la experiencia ha sido muy positiva desde todo punto de vista, porque se puede tener una visión global de lo que se está haciendo a nivel hemisférico, no solo de la rama que trabaja la Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres, sino lo que se está haciendo en general con todas las iniciativas que se están realizando.

P.   Habiendo participado tanto en las actividades presenciales como en los foros virtuales, desde su punto de vista, cual le parece mejor?
R.   Ninguna de las dos son excluyentes, me parece que son necesarias las dos.

P.   Esta plataforma virtual estaba en su fase piloto, ¿Estuvo usted enterada de la realización de una encuesta anónima de la plataforma, y participó en ella?
R.   Si, ambas.

P.   ¿Cuál ha sido su percepción acerca de la encuesta y sus resultados?
R.   Vi varias cosas que me llamaron la atención, sobretodo teniendo un instrumento tan valioso como la plataforma, al revisar los ítems, las respuestas, los porcentajes, y las estadísticas que se sacaron de esa encuesta, parece mentira pero un 48% si estaba enterado pero no supo como llevar hasta el final el uso de la plataforma; quizás siendo un plan piloto, uno puede pensar que la OEA puede haber afianzado un poco más el tema de la comunicación. En general, la gente está muy satisfecha con el uso de la plataforma, no es solamente mi opinión sino la que resultó de la encuesta realizada, así que realmente, vale la pena.

P.   En los resultados de la encuesta, hay una gran mayoría que justifica que se esté trabajando en este sentido ¿Qué opina usted sobre este nuevo instrumento o herramienta de participación en los temas de la OEA?
R.   Es un instrumento muy valioso, porque se incluye a mayor cantidad de gente, no solo a las ONG ya inscritas en la OEA sino también a otras tantas organizaciones que vienen trabajando, y que pueden enterarse de los lineamientos que se están llevando a nivel de todo nuestro continente. Creo que es una tremenda experiencia y vale la pena seguir reforzándola, y por supuesto, mejorándola.

P.   Desde su punto de vista, ¿Qué le faltaría a esta plataforma virtual para que sea más completa?
R.   El tema de la interacción persona-persona es importantísima. Incluir tal vez una WebCam; quizá que se puedan hacer un mayor número de conferencias a nivel virtual o participación en línea de seminarios, talleres o lo que se quiera realizar a través de la plataforma. La interacción visual es bien importante, no solamente

escrita o textual; esto iría más allá, chatear en tiempo real. Este puede ser un buen estirón que se le puede dar a la plataforma.

P. Desde su experiencia, ¿Cuál ha sido el mayor desafío de su relación con la OEA en general?

R. En el tema de la participación, la experiencia es que cada vez más es necesario que esas opiniones y consultas que nos hacen, esos primeros estudios, sean cada vez tomados más en cuenta por la OEA. Es decir, que nuestras opiniones no se queden en un papel, o en una estadística, sino que tengan algún poder mayor de penetración en la toma de decisiones de la OEA (aunque sea un poco utópico lo que estoy diciendo). Que se tome mayor consideración a todo lo que estamos opinando, sobretodo porque son las organizaciones de la sociedad civil las que cargan con el peso de lo que pasa en nuestras sociedades y son las que están sintiendo los vaivenes y lo que se necesita en cualquier sociedad; obviamente, es muy importante que sea tomado en cuenta todo lo que podamos aportar. Eso es lo que pediríamos como punto final a todo este conjunto de iniciativas de la OEA. De nada valdría toda esta cantidad de esfuerzos e iniciativas realizadas, con muchas opiniones que se están dando, si realmente no llegar á a nada.

Finalmente, "de verdad muchísimas gracias por la oportunidad de podernos también expresar y dar a entender y conocer que esto vale la pena".

P.   Tenemos entendido que Global Rights y usted tienen una amplia trayectoria de participación con la OEA, ¿Qué nos puede decir acerca de su experiencia?

R. Global Rights es una organización de capacidad institucional y lo que queremos es que nuestras contrapartes afro-descendientes que quieren hacer incidencia en la OEA conozcan las distintas maneras de cómo acceder a la Organización sin necesidad de estar aquí en Washington DC; de ahí que para nosotros es muy importante ver como los foros virtuales se convirtieron en una herramienta para la Quinta Cumbre de las Américas, y que nuestros contrapartes pudieron participar en los diferentes foros que hubo para la Quinta Cumbre y sus temas.

P.   ¿Qué le puede recomendar a la OEA sobre qué le hace falta a este proyecto para que sea más completo?

R.   Hace falta mayor difusión. Muchas de las organizaciones de América Latina que manejan el tema reciben la información porque nosotros la retransmitimos, pues la OEA envía la información a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil que estamos registradas, que han participado o que tienen algún tipo de trabajo con la Organización, pero creo que al mismo tiempo esto es muy limitado, habría que encontrar alguna forma (no se si en la página principal de la OEA o donde poner sociedad civil en la OEA o de los foros virtuales) donde se haga un llamado para que aquellas organizaciones que no están registradas en la OEA puedan solicitar información o participar en estos foros virtuales. Ha sido un obstáculo la difusión.

P.   ¿Considera que estas organizaciones registradas ante la OEA deberían tener un acceso más privilegiado, más seguro, para hacer este intercambio de información?

R.   No necesariamente. Podría ser abierta para todos, lo que ha pasado es que la experiencia que tuvimos con los foros virtuales de cara a la Quinta Cumbre es que eran aquellas organizaciones que estaban participando en todo el proceso de la Quinta Cumbre, pero debe estar abierta a todas las organizaciones.

P.   ¿Qué pasa con el seguimiento de los mandatos que son adoptados por los Estados a este nivel? ¿Cómo se están implementando estas decisiones?

R.   Esa es una buena pregunta que es la que siempre le hacemos a la Organización de Estados Americanos, el seguimiento a los compromisos adquiridos. Ha habido una cuestión política que es la falta de voluntad política de los Estados para hacerle seguimiento a lo que se han comprometido. Allí es donde es realmente importante que haya mayor fiscalización de parte de la sociedad civil y donde los foros virtuales podrían jugar un papel importantísimo. Un foro virtual sobre el seguimiento a los compromisos adquiridos en la Quinta Cumbre sería algo genial que se pudiera realizar porque entonces las organizaciones de la sociedad civil, sin la necesidad de estar en Washington, desde sus diferentes países pueden hacer una evaluación más de rendición de cuentas de qué es lo que los Estados están haciendo.

P.   ¿Usted cree que el vínculo que existe entre la sociedad civil y la OEA es el adecuado en este momento? o ¿Qué le falta al uno y al otro para que haya una mejor complementación?

R.   Primero que todo, es desigual la forma en la que los Estados ven a las organizaciones de sociedad civil. Unos Estados Miembros abogan por una mayor participación de la sociedad civil, más activa, mientras otros no. Por ejemplo, un problema que tuvimos en la Quinta Cumbre es que el país anfitrión no quiso que los borradores de discusión estuvieran accesibles a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Esto ocasionó un problema porque en cada uno de los eventos subregionales que se hacían no se discutía sobre los documentos que estaban realmente en negociación sino que se realizaba sobre el borrador original, con el agravante que muchas organizaciones de la sociedad civil, incluyendo Global Rights, teníamos acceso a Estados Miembros

que nos pasaban los últimos borradores y entonces habían dos versiones siendo discutidas. Esto reflejaba la desconfianza que algunos Estados Miembros tienen con respecto a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil y por otra parte, una relación de confianza con otros Estados miembros. Contestando rápidamente, hace falta mayor confianza entre los Estados Miembros y la sociedad civil. Los Estados tienen que ver a la sociedad civil no como el enemigo público número uno sino como organizaciones que pueden complementar el trabajo que ellos están haciendo.

P.   No todos los países son iguales, pero ¿Cómo podríamos solucionar de alguna manera esta situación de confianza por un lado y desconfianza por el otro?
R.   Debe haber mayor transparencia, por ahí hay que empezar. En ese sentido, la OEA, si bien es cierto que es el ente técnico que representa a los Estados de las Américas, debe tratar de plantear o construir puentes para que haya una mayor confianza entre los Estados Miembros y las organizaciones de la sociedad civil para que haya una mejor transparencia, y que los organismos de la sociedad civil sepamos cuales son los documentos que están en discusión, porque eso permite una mayor retroalimentación de parte de la sociedad civil. Hay varios buenos ejemplos en el marco de la OEA: actualmente esta en discusión el proyecto de Convención Inter Americana contra el Racismo y toda forma de Discriminación el cual ha sido un buen ejemplo de cómo la sociedad civil ha aportado al grupo de trabajo, compuesto por los Estados, en la elaboración del borrador; la sociedad civil ha hecho aportes interesantes y algunos Estados incluso las han asumido como suyas. Entonces, hay espacios dentro de la OEA donde la sociedad civil es tomada en cuenta. Desafortunadamente, en la Quinta Cumbre hubo un problema de entrada y fue que no se le permitió a la sociedad civil tener acceso a los documentos que estaban siendo discutidos, estamos creando un problema de desconfianza política.

Hay ejemplos buenos en la OEA que ofrecen un trabajo de colaboración y complemento entre las Secretarías de la Organización de Estados Americanos y la sociedad civil.

P.   ¿Hay alguna otra cosa que pueda hacer la OEA para mejorar esta situación?
R.   También es importante que la organización envíe la información con antelación. Una queja por parte de la sociedad civil de cara a la OEA es que muchas veces, inclusive para la participación en ciertos eventos, se nos envía la información con bastante atraso o más bien antes de tiempo. Hay poco tiempo para que la sociedad civil pueda responder como debería responder a ciertos documentos. Hay poco espacio en el que la sociedad civil puede aportar si es tarde el espacio que tiene para ello.

P.   ¿Considera que las herramientas de participación en línea ayudarán en el objetivo de lograr mayor participación de la sociedad civil en la OEA? Hay otras herramientas que le gustaría incluir?
R.   Claro! Desde el inicio de esta iniciativa la vimos con muy buenos ojos, porque precisamente permite el acceso a organizaciones que no están acá, poder participar, sobretodo si se da con antelación, como ocurrió para la Quinta Cumbre, pues dio la posibilidad de que las organizaciones pudieran expresar lo que pensaban y hacer recomendaciones concretas a los documentos que habían empezado a ser discutidos, aunque esas recomendaciones no fueran tomadas en cuenta.

La recomendación que yo haría es que pudiera ser más amplia a más organizaciones de la sociedad civil de las Américas y que se diera más tiempo para esas consultas. Inclusive, decir explícitamente qué fue lo que se hizo con esas recomendaciones, si se mandaron a los Estados Miembros, y específicamente a cuales Secretarías de la OEA, y qué pasó con esto, para que la sociedad civil tenga también la impresión de que sus opiniones fueran al menos escuchadas.

La participación sí está sirviendo, es una oportunidad única que se da, pero al mismo tiempo lo que hay que pensar es ¿qué se hace después del foro virtual?, ¿qué dicen los Estados de esas recomendaciones que se mandaron de forma virtual?; esa sería una parte que aún falta complementar.

[Intervención de Claudia Salazar, Secretaría de Cumbres de la OEA] Con respecto a la retroalimentación, nosotros lo que hacíamos después de todos los foros es canalizar todas las recomendaciones que salían de los foros, virtuales y presenciales, a los Estados Miembros. Ahora, ahí se queda un poco este proceso; lo que no tenemos es la retroalimentación por parte de los Estados, que depende poco de la OEA, pero ¿que podríamos hacer para apoyar o facilitar ese proceso de recibir?, o ¿qué esperan ustedes de los Estados como respuesta? Y tal vez, ¿si ves algún papel para estos mecanismos de participación en este sentido?, en esta retroalimentación que entiendo que queda un poco como en el aire. ¿Qué crees que podemos hacer?

R.   Una idea que ya la había expresado [a la Secretaría de Cumbres], era poder abrir también algún espacio en la plataforma virtual para que los Estados participaran y que los foros virtuales tuvieran un espacio donde, después de que la sociedad civil discutiera, los Estados, una vez leído el informe final (que también contaran con un espacio o un tiempo donde los Estados pudieran leer en línea), pudieran inclusive enviar comentarios en línea, y donde también la misma sociedad civil pudiera ver que es lo que dicen en respuesta los Estados con respecto a las recomendaciones que hubiera hecho la sociedad civil, para promover entonces un cierto diálogo electrónico entre sociedad civil y Estados Miembros.

P.   ¿Un chat entre OEA, Sociedad civil y Gobiernos?

R.   Si aunque no necesariamente un chat, teniendo en cuenta los tiempos necesarios para cada parte.

P.   ¿Qué otro tipo de herramientas quisieran ver en la plataforma a parte de los foros? o ¿Te parece que en este momento solo con los foros estamos bien? Además, notamos en los resultados de la encuesta que la subida de documentos parece ser muy valorada por la sociedad civil, así como los videos. ¿Algo más que te parezca para agregar?

R.   Sería muy bueno tener todo dentro de un mismo calendario; es un problema pues a veces los organismos de la sociedad civil nos confundimos entre la página de Cumbres y la página de sociedad civil. Por ejemplo, una pregunta que yo me haría es ¿quién tiene que informarle a la sociedad civil cuando se reúnen los Ministros de Educación, por ejemplo, en la cual van a discutir algunos de los mandatos, pero esto de los mandatos son parte del proceso de Cumbres? De pronto me llega la información del Departamento de Asuntos Internacionales, pero los mandatos son de Cumbres. También, ¿en donde puedo encontrar yo los documentos que van a ser discutidos (no se si debe ser en la página de Summits o de la sociedad civil en la OEA)?

[Claudia Salazar]: Que bueno que lo mencionas pues hay una nueva página general de la OEA en la que quieren ofrecer una navegación más temática, y una de las cosas que pensábamos proponer para esta nueva fase es que haya un portal único de entrada –para actores sociales- y que en él se encuentren los diferentes espacios porque, por ejemplo, puede haber una pestaña para pueblos indígenas, una para afro-descendientes, para organizaciones de sociedad civil, otro para el proceso de Cumbres... ¿como verías tu eso, es conveniente?

R.   Excelente! Me parece muy bien la idea de poder incluir diferentes pestañas donde uno pueda acceder con base en el interés de la organización.

- ANNEX 1 -
Follow-up to the SVP pilot initiative and to the anonymous survey
"Exploring New Ways to Engage Social Actors in OAS Activities"

(Text in red included as reference for interviewers only)

Interview guideline:
Introduction of the person and his/her relation to the OAS activities and the Summits.

1.   What was your experience with the SVP pilot phase?

2.   Were you aware of the anonymous survey of the SVP undertaken by the SAS and the DIA of the OAS from July 28th to August 10th, 2009? If so, how did you find out?

3.   Overall, what is your reaction to the results presented in the final report of the anonymous survey? Were any of the findings surprising to you?

4.   Do you think e-participation tools would facilitate reaching the purpose of your engagement with the OAS/SAS? If so, in what ways?
   - Refer for example, to Question 6 of the survey. When asked how relevant the use of e-participation tools are to facilitate and promote engagement with the OAS, participants assigned the most relevance to:
     - As means to provide input to the policy-making process (49% highly relevant)
     - Team collaborative work (45% highly relevant)

5.   What are the main challenges that your organization has faced in its engagement with the OAS?
   - One of the recurring challenges mentioned by CSO is the lack of feedback on recommendations and suggestions provided by member States. How would you expect this could change? Could e-participation tools be leveraged for this purpose?

6.   What are the main benefits that could be derived by social actors from this type of platform?

7.   In regards to face-to-face consultations, do you consider that having a virtual and interactive e-participation tool available for social actors would add value to this process? If so, what is the main added value that you would highlight? What specific outcomes would you expect from this relation?

8.   In your perspective, what types of tools should be included?
   - Refer for example, to Question 9 of the survey. When asked to indicate the level of relevance assigned to incorporating different e-participation tools into the OAS website as a means to facilitate participation in OAS activities and multilateral political processes, respondents assigned the highest relevance to document upload/download (85% relevant), online fora (73% relevant) and video upload/download (73% relevant).

9.   Other tools and sections that are being considered for the Platform include the possibility of sharing projects and best practices among the virtual community, and the inclusion of an interactive map in which users can visualize the activities being held by other civil society organizations in the region, etc. Do you think that these kinds of tools would potentiate a more active participation of social actors in the Summits process?

10.   Do you envision that these types of tools could strengthen regional CSO networks in the region? If so, in what way?

11. Do you consider that registered CSO to the OAS should have a more secure environment within the platform to access and exchange sensitive information?

12. One of the major concerns identified by participants was the lack of skills and access by some groups to make effective use of e-participation tools. In your opinion, what would be the most appropriate way of overcoming this obstacle? (in terms of delivery / communication channels, format, training, etc)

13. In your experience, what are the most important content and topics that should be included?