

From Latin American Civil Society Organizations
MESSAGE TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE OPEN FORUM

August, 2010

As a result of the consultation process with Civil Society Organizations, CSOs, which in Latin America brought together almost one thousand women and men belonging to various forms of social mobilization and organization in 12 countries, we want to share with colleagues in other regions of the world the following ideas, concerns, and suggestions:

1. Although there are peculiarities in every country, we can say that we are acting in a **context of profound changes** in the economic, social, political and cultural environment, especially in the context of global crises (financial, climate, food, etc.). This scenario has changed CSOs' relationships with the state, the private sector and each other. Therefore now is a good time to rethink these relationships and to address debates about the role of CSOs and about the principles and environment from which the necessary adaptations to new contexts should emerge. The global nature of this reflection, proposed by the Open Forum, gives it a highly innovative and enriching added value.

2. In the current context, where the concept of development and its forms of expression are profoundly challenged, we have found that CSOs play an important role in the critique of prevailing models, especially those centered on neoliberal conceptions. At the same time, CSOs play a role as contributors to new ways of understanding development. For some time, new paradigms based in human rights, sustainability, equity, and the ancestral wisdom of our peoples have been emerging in the region. For example talking about Sumak kawsay -a full life, which is not same as "welfare" as understood in the West. These proposals are only in their infancy and require content and actions. The role of **CSOs as actors of new development** is thus a great challenge that lies ahead.

3. Among the challenges arising from the National Consultations in Latin America is recovering the importance of politics and the nature of **CSOs as nonpartisan political actors**. It is clear that this role is always played, consciously or not, even if only operating projects or actions designed by others. This is why we make a fraternal but emphatic call for re-politicizing and rebuilding our common agenda. In particular we invite our peers in the North to reconstitute cooperation and joint advocacy agendas.

4. On the other hand, we also warmly and fraternally invite all CSOs to **assume their responsibility to produce egalitarian and equitable gender relations**, both within the organizations themselves and in their work of transforming society. Meeting the challenge of overcoming relations of subordination can no longer be only a goal of women's movements and organizations. It is urgent that we understand that there is no genuine development or democracy if the rights of women in all areas of daily life and society are not included.

5. One of the concerns of CSOs in the region is a widespread threat to their work and existence. To confront this, it is essential for the sector to highlight the value added by CSOs and to recognize their special role in society. In this area, state officials and other public authorities have a high responsibility and it is more to be protectors and promoters than prosecutors. The accumulated knowledge and experience of organizations must be highlighted. Also the same emphasis should be

given to the necessary recognition of CSOs' independence and autonomy, strongly tied to the right of citizens to free association, thought and expression. Democratic societies are unthinkable without autonomous, independent and critical CSOs

6. We recognize the construction and implementation of **practices of active transparency and accountability** as an ethical imperative of CSOs, since they work with and for the production of public goods. In the current context these practices are not only a duty, but also a good example for other sectors of society. They are also a source of legitimacy and a trust-building tool. Our region has seen important advances in this field in recent times and we have CSO networks where hundreds of organizations are publicly and voluntarily accountable.

7. The voice of CSOs is critical of the world of **International Cooperation**, which is withdrawing from the region based on the argument that today the vast majority of these countries belong to the "middle income" rank, while it is no secret that hidden behind average statistics is the reality of the most unequal region in the world. It is time for all to assume our co-responsibility for solving global structural problems such as inequality and poverty that strike broad masses of people in the region and around the world. In the case of private cooperation, it is necessary to rebuild this relationship as a supportive exchange of strengths and resources of a different nature and as a political alliance that goes far beyond the simple contractor-contracted relationship.

8. It is time to open a broad debate, both nationally and internationally, about the **need for public policies to strengthen social organizations**. This includes discussing the need for public and state funding of those activities of CSOs engaged in the production of public goods, which are clearly of common interest. Consistent with this, democratic states should adopt a policy of financing a portion of that activity as part of their responsibilities. On the other hand, we invite International Cooperation in its various forms, to include strengthening the local social organizations as a measure of effectiveness of the programs they carry out.

9. The debate over the **effectiveness of CSOs** is not new. In fact, it can be said that organizations are constantly looking for ways to improve and achieve their purposes. In this round of discussions we agreed that, for CSOs, goals and outcomes are as important, as the means to achieve them. In terms of results, the effectiveness of CSOs is related to building capacities and conditions for the people they work with to defend and realize their rights. And in terms of methods, effectiveness should be evaluated using parameters such as respect for the integrity and dignity of each person, creativity and innovation built into each tool, responsible use of the available resources, recovery and enrichment of socially constructed knowledge and sustainability of the proposals.

Latin American CSOs want to be more effective for facing the internal big challenges that we have as organizations and as a sector and for the strategic goals of transformation of the realities of inequity, injustice and exclusion that persist in the world today, the climate, food and environmental crises and in the construction of a new architecture for the planetary government and free and autonomous human beings.