

## **OBRA and the Summit of the Americas**

### **Panel Presentation at the Launch of Obra Knutsford Court Hotel April 14, 2010**

Panel Colleagues, Dr. Karen Hilliard, USAID Mission Director, Mr. John Dickson, Director of Public Policy, United States Department, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I address you this morning on the occasion of the launch of OBRA, in Jamaica, the Caribbean OAS member state selected as one of the bases for this sub-regional partnership. In a very real sense, this OBRA launch is a culmination of a series of mandates set by the Presidential Summits over the past decade. In the declaration of the second Summit of the Americas in Santiago , Chile, the Presidents acknowledged "education as the determining factor for the political, social, cultural and

economic development of our peoples” and that “overcoming poverty continues to be the greatest challenge confronted by our Hemisphere”. The member states of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in the Plan of Action from that Summit , pledged to “strengthen preparation, education and training for the world of work so that an increasing number of workers can improve their standard of living.... enhance employability prospects by taking into account the development of entrepreneur skills.”

To address these challenges the Presidents recognized the “importance and positive role played by hemispheric institutions , particularly the Organisation of American States and committed themselves to strengthen and modernize these institutions”.

These priorities set for the OAS and other international institutions following the Second Presidential and other high

level Ministerial meetings led to the creation of the Young Americas Business Trust, a mechanism created to further the goals of the Summits. The central mission of the Young Americas Business Trust is to address critical issues of poverty and unemployment among young people across the hemisphere. These are issues that affect the development potential and progress as well as the social stability of all the nations of the Americas and the Caribbean and remain high priorities of all OAS Member states.

Additionally, during the third Presidential Summit of the Americas in Quebec city, Canada, a consensus emerged highlighting the fact that democratic , economic and social development are “interdependent and mutually reinforcing as fundamental conditions to combat poverty and inequality”.

In particular, the Presidents recognized that “increasing access to opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurship ,

productivity and employment among young people” are essential in solving the dilemma of persistent poverty and the lack of congruity between formal education and the market.

However it was in the the preparation for the fifth Summit of the Americas held in Port of Spain, Trinidad, under the theme “Securing our Citizen’s Future by promoting human prosperity, energy security, and Environmental Sustainability” that purposive efforts were made to keep the spotlight on people-centered approaches to development. In November 2008, in preparation for the Fifth Summit, the OAS and the International Labour Organization collaborated on the holding of the Eleventh OAS Round table at OAS headquarters in Washington D.C under the themes “Youth and Decent Work” and “Decent Work and Human Prosperity”.

In opening the dialogue Secretary General Insulza noted that “the richness of the concept of decent work centres precisely around the fact that it places a premium on the dignity of individuals” and stressed the importance that the young people of this hemisphere be afforded the opportunity for stable and decent work not only because they need to earn a living but also because they need their skills to earn social recognition, experience their own worth and reaffirm their self-esteem. It was at this policy round table that revealed ILO statistics of an average of 16.6 % unemployment among the youth in Latin America and the Caribbean. He also highlighted the fact that 22 million young people neither study nor work and that 6 million of this figure are not looking for work.

In his closing remarks, ILO’s Director Maninat recommended that the Trinidad Summit be focused on how to provide young citizens of the Americas a ladder to lift up

themselves. He suggested that the Presidents should demonstrate the requisite will and that young people be viewed not merely as factors of production or entrepreneurs generating wealth but also as the foundation of a system that viewed them as 'democratic purveyors of the democratic commitment of the Americas'.

So it was that at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain, for the first time, there was a separate forum for youth. The decision was founded on the premise that although youth are a part of civil society, they are in a position to make specific and unique contributions to the summit process and should be given a platform on which they could come together and contribute to the process. So it was that recommendations of the youth forum organized by the OAS and the Young Americas Business Trust were taken into account in the decisions taken at the Fifth Presidential Summit to place emphasis on the provision of

work for young people as both income generational and in restoring dignity to the individual.

OBRA is therefore viewed as a most significant response to this most urgent of needs.

And the need, ladies and gentlemen is paramount.

Approximately 11.1 million live on less than US\$1 per day in Latin America and the Caribbean, in comparison with 4.1 million in Europe and Central Asia, 2 million in the Middle East and North Africa, 46.6 million in East Asia and the Pacific, 84.1 million in South Asia and 60.7 million in Sub-Saharan Africa. (World Youth Report, UN, 2005)

Unemployed youth represent almost half the total population of the unemployed in the entire world. On average, the unemployment rate of young people is approximately 2 or 3

times more than national unemployment rates (World Bank , 2007)

Around 6% of the youth in Latin America is infected by AIDS, in comparison with 1% in the Caribbean and 2% in industrialized countries.

In Latin America and the Caribbean the unemployment rate among young people is double the total unemployment rate and three times higher than the adult unemployment rate.

In some countries it is up to five times higher than the unemployment rate of adults over 45 years old.

Youth in this hemisphere is the group most affected by violence in the world. Roughly 29% of homicides are among children and young people between 10 and 19 years old.

The available information indicates that homicide is the



second cause of death between groups of this age in 10 of 21 countries in the region. (Pinheiro, Youth Violence)

The countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with the highest levels of youth unemployment include Suriname (83.5%), Sain Lucia (44%), Colombia (36%), Saint Vincent and the Granadines (36%), Uruguay (34.2%), Jamaica (34%) and Argentina (31.8%). (Youth in Numbers, World Bank, 2005)

### **The Promise**

Young people in the Americas embody the region's present as well as the future because they constitute the majority of the population in countries throughout the hemisphere.

Almost ten percent of all the young people in the world , 100 million young persons aged 15 to 24 , live in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Because economic growth in the Americas since the 1980s has fallen behind population growth, employment has not kept pace with overall economic recovery and labour force growth. As a result poverty has broadened and deepened and income distribution in Latin America and the Caribbean has become more unequal. Though young people in the Americas represent the region's social and economic potential, conditions of poverty profoundly affect their chances of survival, as well as the newly established democracies in which they live. Combating poverty begins with entrepreneurial skills on an individual level and is basic to economic growth at the macro level.

A prevailing dichotomy of Caribbean states is that job vacancies requiring high levels of skills continue to co-exist with significant unemployment levels as a result of skill gaps and continuing mismatch of skills. Appropriate training through accurate foresighting methodologies are required in

order to train relevantly and place young persons in fast-paced mode.

This in turn requires a high level of collaboration among all the social partners in order to ensure pragmatic and effective partnerships highlighted in the Fifth Presidential Summit, and a cornerstone of the OBRA initiative.

Indeed the goal of the host government of Trinidad and Tobago in preparing for the Fifth Summit of the Americas was to ensure that the focus remained on people and through the inclusion of the Youth Summit on its margins, to ensure explicit and specific attention to the urgent concerns of young people.

I take this opportunity to pledge the full support of the OAS Office in Jamaica and that of the Jamaica Chapter of the Young Americas Business Trust and which I have the honour to chair to the Jamaican component of OBRA. We welcome this important initiative and wish all success to USAID and

the executing authorities as activities are rolled out over the coming months.