



Summary

Over the past two decades, the Organization of American States (OAS) has built a strong mandate and developed a wide range of mechanisms for building peace and supporting inclusive and sustainable democratic processes in the Americas. The OAS of the 21st century should continue to play an active role in strengthening democratic governance in the region. This Policy Brief outlines the major challenges and opportunities for the Americas in the fields of peace and democracy support, and highlights the mandate and mechanisms established by the OAS to respond to these challenges. It includes policy recommendations which, if implemented, would help strengthen the OAS's work in these fields.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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Supporting peace in the Americas: Lessons from the Organization of American States

Key recommendations

1. *Improve conflict-prevention measures:* The Organization of American States (OAS) needs to invest in conflict-prevention measures. A better understanding of the root causes of conflicts, and of the way in which they interconnect, can contribute to strengthening the effectiveness of the OAS in the consolidation of peace and democracy in the Americas.
2. *Adopt a comprehensive approach:* The OAS needs to work more closely with civil society, the private sector and the media.
3. *Strengthen dialogue processes for peace:* The OAS will have to continue working with a variety of stakeholders to enhance political dialogue as a tool for conflict resolution and for the formulation of public policy that enables citizens' participation and strengthens democratic governance.

Background

In recent times, most of the countries in the Americas have built solid democratic institutions and achieved sound economic development. Over 80 million Latin American citizens have been lifted out of poverty and the middle classes have experienced unprecedented expansion and growth. However, despite progress in terms of democratization and economic development, a series of serious challenges continue to undermine peace and democratic consolidation in the Americas.

Persistent and growing inequality in terms of income and access to resources remains a major concern for both citizens and governments in the Americas. While equality often translates into social inclusion, in Latin America and the Caribbean a growing segment of society feels alienated and excluded and has lost confidence and trust in the institutions of democracy. In some cases, social exclusion and unemployment are the direct causes of an alarming rise in organized crime and gang violence that undermines peace, democracy, sustained economic prosperity and development.

In May 2015, on the occasion of his inauguration as Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro reflected on these challenges and outlined the future tasks for the organization: 'In 2020 the OAS should be recognized as the political forum of the Hemisphere with equal participation by all countries of the Americas, working



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Luis Almagro, 2015

in a climate of peace to consolidate democracy, promote and protect human rights, and foster integral development and multidimensional security, thus enabling it to support prosperity with opportunities for progress for all' (Almagro 2015).

In order to face these challenges, support peace and deepen democracy, the OAS has built a strong legal framework and a series of specific mechanisms. At the core of the legal framework lies the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted in 2001, which affirms that democracy should be the common form of government for all countries in the Americas. The Charter also expresses a commitment by Member States to maintain and strengthen democracy in the region.

Based on this instrument, the OAS has been able to effectively contribute to the prevention and management of a number of conflicts and political crises. Specifically, it has facilitated and negotiated peaceful solutions to critical political conflicts in Venezuela (2002), Nicaragua (2005), Ecuador (2005 and 2010), Bolivia (2008), Honduras (2009) and Paraguay (2012).

In 2001 the OAS adopted the Plan of Action of the Third Summit of the Americas, calling for strengthened conflict-prevention measures and the promotion of citizens' participation at all political levels as ways to consolidate democracy in the region. In addition, the Social Charter of the Americas was approved in 2012, reflecting the OAS Member States' determination and commitment to eradicate poverty and hunger, and to urgently address the serious problems of social exclusion and inequality at all levels in order to achieve sustainable social justice.

Furthermore, in 2006 the OAS established the Secretariat for Political Affairs with a mandate to assist Member States in strengthening their democratic governance, and to carry out activities related to the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. The Secretariat consists of three divisions: the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation, the Department of Sustainable Democracy and Special Missions, and the Department of State Modernization and Governance.

The Department of Sustainable Democracy and Special Missions is the current focal point and principal advisory unit to the OAS Secretary General on political issues, developments, challenges and crises that occur or may occur. Among other activities, the Department provides advisory and technical services to Special Missions established by the OAS Permanent Council (or by the General Secretariat) in the event of a potential or ongoing conflict, or in response to Member States' requests.

As of 2015, the OAS has deployed Special Missions to Bolivia, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay in response to requests for assistance in addressing real or potential situations of political or institutional crisis. In addition, the OAS continues to maintain its Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia, which has contributed to peacebuilding and statebuilding in that country.

Preventive diplomacy, mediation and promotion of dialogue figure among the most prominent measures employed by the OAS to resolve tensions between countries and help governments handle internal conflicts.

Likewise, the OAS Secretary General has played an active role through his ‘good offices’, bringing key parties together for dialogue and problem-solving activities. OAS assistance, programmes and special missions have exerted a positive political impact in situations ranging from armed struggle to low-intensity violence and volatile political tension.

These experiences highlight the important role the OAS can play in responding to ongoing or potential political and institutional crises, as well as assisting Member States in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Achievements

The Inter-American Democratic Charter and the institutions and initiatives of the OAS have greatly contributed to the consolidation of representative democracy in the Americas.

In particular the Charter, by going far beyond the minimalist concept of democracy as the holding of competitive elections, draws an inextricable link between democracy, human rights, integral development and poverty alleviation. It represents a commitment by OAS member states to strive to achieve these goals and, more importantly, it expands the existing regional mechanisms available to the Organization to confront political or constitutional crises and respond to threats to the constitutional order and preserve democratic systems.

Challenges

Despite these achievements, the individual OAS Member States also require the organization to increase its work to address the multiplicity of multi-dimensional and transnational threats that weaken both democratic governance and human security in the Americas.

The OAS will therefore need to use its comparative advantages, which are not based on coercion but, rather, on its moral authority and its capacity to act as an honest broker of region-wide consensus, to carry out important dialogue processes in support of internal efforts to strengthen democratic rule in the region.

Recommendations

Several policy recommendations have been identified which, if implemented, would help further strengthen the role of the OAS in consolidating peace and democracy in the Americas. These recommendations relate to improving conflict-prevention measures; adopting a comprehensive approach that engages all actors; and strengthening dialogue processes for peace.

Improve conflict-prevention measures

More effort needs to be invested in conflict-prevention measures. A better understanding of the root causes of conflicts, and of the way in which they interconnect, can contribute considerably to strengthening the effectiveness of the OAS in the consolidation of peace and democracy in the Americas. The root causes of tension—including social exclusion, inequality and distrust in state institutions—need to be understood and addressed in order to prevent crime, violence and (ultimately) the resurgence of conflict.

The Social Charter of the Americas provides the OAS with a stronger mandate to further strengthen its work in conflict prevention, focusing on inclusive socioeconomic development. This is reflected in the Charter’s reference to the need for governments to adopt ‘policies to promote inclusion . . . in order to safeguard equal rights and opportunities and strengthen democratic values’ and ‘commit to promoting and to progressively realizing the full achievement of economic, social, and cultural rights and principles’ (OAS General Assembly 2012).

Adopt a comprehensive approach

Intergovernmental organizations, national governments and civil-society organizations need to work more closely with the private sector and the media. The complex and multidimensional nature of the threats to peace and democracy consolidation in the Americas requires solutions and measures that are designed and implemented with the cooperation of multiple actors. Only a comprehensive and holistic approach can ensure that

The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy

The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) is a platform for engagement among regional organizations on democracy, and is facilitated by International IDEA.

Regional organizations participating in the IRDD include the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the League of Arab States, the Organization of American States, the Pacific Islands Forum and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

International IDEA acts as the IRDD Secretariat and also hosts the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre, a virtual resource for democracy at the regional and inter-regional level.

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effective and sustainable measures are put in place.

Independent media organizations in particular play a key role in strengthening democracy, holding governments accountable by providing continuous and open flows of information and ideas that allow people to make informed choices.

In the Americas, there are two ways of understanding the relationship between private-sector actors and the communities in which they operate, mostly associated with the terms in which they relate to the managing of resources and lands. The first refers to the productive side of the relationship, while the second refers to the role of the private sector in implementing and promoting socioeconomic development. Within this context, the OAS has the capacity to identify productive synergies, and develop positive relations with private-sector actors, whose role is often overlooked during preventive diplomacy and mediation efforts.

Consolidating strong relations with the private sector can help increase capacity to implement projects and generate a positive impact at the community level. Also, it can generate opportunities and alternatives to mitigate the effects of social exclusion and, therefore, minimize and mitigate the occurrence of crime and violence.

Strengthen dialogue for peace

Structured dialogue processes have become essential tools for the OAS in its work on peace and security, conflict management and democracy support. In this regard, the organization has continued to work with a variety of stakeholders to enhance political dialogue as a tool for conflict resolution and for the formulation of public policy that enables citizens' participation and strengthens democratic governance. Several lessons can be learned from the experience of the OAS in promoting dialogue platforms.

First, it is of strategic importance that women, youth and members of other marginalized groups have the possibility to 'sit at the table'. Everyone needs to become an active actor and an enabler of peace processes and democratic consolidation. This calls

for greater involvement of these groups in the OAS's conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution activities.

Second, it is of strategic importance that all actors working to build peace and democracy are equipped with the necessary capacity and skills to effectively contribute to these processes. This means that resources need to be available and strategically allocated to reach further in terms of the OAS's core pillars of democracy, human rights, security and development.

Third, it is crucial to secure adequate political will and support from OAS Member States to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of the OAS's work.

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