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Second Inter-American Meeting of Ministers of Culture and Highest Appropriate Authorities Produces Compromise Declaration

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The Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Council for Integral Development sponsored a meeting of ministers of culture in Mexico City August 22-24 to discuss and make future plans on "The Place that Culture Occupies in the Process of Social Development and Economic Integration in Our Hemisphere." I participated as one of eight representatives elected at a July civil society workshop organized by the OAS in Santiago, Chile. The others were Maria Victoria Alcaraz, director, Centro Cultural, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Natalio Hernandez, Association of Writers in Indigenous Languages, Mexico; Nitis Jacon de Arahjo Moreira, president, Cultural Network of Mercosul, and directing president, Teatro Guaira, Curitiba, Parana, Brazil; Nemesio Juarez, president, Argentine Directors of Cinematography, Coalition for Cultural Diversity of Argentina; Mane Nett, president, SIDARTE, vice president, Chilean Coalition for Cultural Diversity; Robert Pilon, executive vice president, Canadian Coalition for Cultural Diversity, Quebec; Erica Smith, chief executive officer Copyright Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, Inc., Barbados.

Central discussions, debates, and resolutions of the Mexico meeting were developed around three topics: 1.) Culture as an engine for economic growth, employment, and development; 2.) Challenges faced by cultural industries; 3.) Culture as a tool for social cohesion and the fight against poverty.

The August meeting was characterized by serious, at times contentious, discussion about the transversal role of culture in advancing democratic development and the full and wholesome representation of culture in public life, including cultures that derive from Afro-descendant and indigenous traditions. Ministers from Canada (particularly Liza Frulla), Gilberto Gil of Brazil, and ministers from Chile, Barbados, and Venezuela made especially strong interventions in support of proactive approaches to the conceptualization and utilization of culture as a context for and means of rethinking economics and democratic policy formulation across key social arenas. Most representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean asserted relatively new and far-reaching perspectives about the nature and role of culture, different in orientation and perspective from the standard trade paradigm and "best arts and culture practice" approach and lists that characterize participation from official U.S. representatives.

The "Declaration of Mexico" adopted at the end of the meeting clearly indicates a major fault line ("Challenges Faced by Cultural and Creative Industries") that will be revisited in future hemispheric discussions and in the UNESCO deliberations of a legal instrument for Protection of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions. Barbados primed the debate with opposition to the section of the declaration which reads: "We recognize the ability of States, consistent with international obligations, to adopt or maintain the measures they consider adequate to promote cultural diversity and to take into account the various needs of all sectors in the cultural field, including cultural and creative industries, especially in the context of the process of economic liberalization."

The dispute about the contested language-brokered by Canada, Brazil, and the United States, with strong backing from Chile, Colombia, and Nicaragua, among others-mirrored an international debate about whether culture should be treated like other goods and services in international trade agreements, and whether countries should be able to set cultural policies not subject to existing trade agreements. Criticism of the Mexico declaration was advanced by Barbados, The Bahamas, Guyana, and St Kitts among other smaller Caribbean nations, largely of African and East Indian descent. In addition, they requested a special notation of the distinct challenges faced by Caribbean nations in the American Hemisphere. Backed strongly by Bolivia, Venezuela, and Argentina, the language dispute was sufficiently influential to be registered in the document in a footnote which reads: "The delegations of Argentina, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia record reservations regarding this paragraph. Bolivia records a reservation exclusively regarding the phrase 'consistent with international obligations.' Venezuela records a reservation exclusively regarding the phrase 'especially in the context of the process of economic liberalization.'" (<http://www.oas.org/> "Latest News" Resolutions/Declarations)

The dispute among American nations about potentially new regulatory cultural agreements that would trump existing trade agreements is also of major concern for grassroots communities and cultural workers that want to maintain traditions and cultural expressions without fear of monopolization of cultural imports and patent claims by large foreign corporations.