

Hemispheric integration is a necessary complement to national policies aimed at overcoming lingering problems and obtaining a higher level of development. In its broadest sense, a process of integration based on respect for cultural identities will make it possible to shape a common, interwoven set of values and interests that helps us in these objectives.

Globalization offers great opportunities for progress to our countries and opens up new areas of cooperation for the hemispheric community. However, it can also heighten the differences among countries and within our societies. With steadfast determination to reap its benefits and to face its challenges, we will give special attention to the most vulnerable countries and social groups in the Hemisphere.

Education is the determining factor for the political, social, cultural, and economic development of our peoples. We undertake to facilitate access of all inhabitants of the Americas to preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education, and we will make learning a lifelong process. We will put science and technology at the service of education to assure growing levels of knowledge and so that educators may develop their skills to the highest level. The Plan of Action that accompanies this Declaration defines the objectives and goals we intend to achieve and the actions that will make them a reality. In order to meet our goals within the agreed timeframes, we reaffirm our commitment to invest greater resources in this important area, and to encourage civil society to participate in developing education.

The decisions adopted by our Ministers of Education at the Conference held in Mérida, Mexico, last February, reflect our desire to promote specific joint initiatives designed to improve access to education, with fairness, quality, relevancy, and effectiveness. In order to consolidate and lend continuity to our decisions, we have instructed that another Conference be held in Brasilia, Brazil, in July of this year.

Today, we direct our Ministers Responsible for Trade to begin negotiations for the FTAA, in accordance with the March 1998 Ministerial Declaration of San José. We reaffirm our determination to conclude the negotiation of the FTAA no later than 2005, and to make concrete progress by the end of the century. The FTAA agreement will be balanced, comprehensive, WTO-consistent and constitute a single undertaking.

We note with satisfaction the preparatory work by the Ministers Responsible for Trade over the past three years which has strengthened our trade policies, fostered understanding of our economic objectives and facilitated dialogue among all participating countries. We appreciate the significant contribution of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), acting as the Tripartite Committee.