

## **A LONG-STANDING COMMITMENT**

The first steps in hemispheric consultation were taken prior to the Santiago Summit when, in 1997, DFAIT commissioned the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) to undertake five sessions across Canada to seek input for the preparatory process. Following that Summit, DFAIT began a process of "information exchanges," which take place before meetings of the Summit Implementation Review Group (SIRG), both to explain the process and to seek views. The SIRG, through the National Coordinators, is responsible for developing the Declarations and Plans of Action of the Summits. In addition, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organized a series of meetings across Canada on general hemispheric issues and on specific sectors, soliciting policy input from parliamentarians and a variety of NGOs, academics, indigenous groups, youth, the private sector and other experts. More details on the Government's consultation process on the Summit of the Americas are available at <http://www.americascanada.org>.

The importance of NGO participation in strengthening and preserving democratic institutions was firmly established in the Declaration of Miami, at the First Summit of the Americas in 1994, and repeated at the two subsequent Summits. Accordingly, several governmental committees were established across the hemisphere with the goal of increasing and reinforcing the participation of civil society in hemispheric affairs. Most noteworthy are the Committee on Civil Society Participation in OAS Activities, which seeks to enhance and regularize consultations and information exchange between civil society groups and the OAS; the FTAA Committee of Government Representatives on the Participation of Civil Society, which receives submissions from civil society groups, analyses them and reports these views to trade ministers; and finally, the OAS Special Committee on Inter-American Summits Management (CEGCI), which has become the main hemispheric consultative mechanism for civil society groups on the Summit process.

In February 2000, the Permanent Representative of Canada to the OAS, in his capacity as Chair of the CEGCI, took the initiative to open the sessions of the Committee to organizations of civil society and to broadcast them live on the Internet. This is now an ongoing process both in the implementation phase and in preparation for the next Summit. The recommendations received by the Chair of the Committee are transmitted to National Coordinators during the meetings of the SIRG.

