

“Local Leaders: Democracy’s Frontline”

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Thank you very much for this opportunity to address such a distinguished audience. I am honored to be here today. I’d like to start off by thanking Florida International University for inviting me to speak this morning. I want to express my gratitude, and that of my predecessors at USAID, to Dr. Allan Rosenbaum, Cristina Rodriguez-Acosta and the Honorable Senator Javier D. Souto for their hard work and tireless efforts to organize this outstanding conference. The hundreds of mayors and practitioners that attend this conference year after year are a testament to the commitment and capabilities of the organizers and sponsors.

USAID is extremely proud of FIU and our role in starting this great tradition of bringing together mayors and local authorities from around the region, so that they can learn from one another and share best practices. Over a decade ago, USAID, together with the World Bank, Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank, launched the First Regional Conference of Mayors and Local Authorities. Just two years

later, FIU and Miami-Dade County assumed ownership of the event, and they have maintained the tradition to this day. While USAID and other donors helped organize the first conference, it is thanks to FIU, Miami-Dade County, and all of you that it has become the thriving, successful annual event that it is today. Thanks to your efforts, citizens throughout the region are benefiting from improved local governance. This is a significant accomplishment!

Even though USAID is no longer directly involved with today's conference, we continue to share common interests with the region's mayors and local authorities. For instance, we share the common goals of making sure the region's citizens are safe, healthy, and enjoy their rights to life and liberty. We also agree that democratic governance is a necessary pillar to achieving these goals. Fortunately, the majority of the region's citizens agree with us. The 2006 Americas Barometer Surveys, which are conducted by Vanderbilt University and supported by USAID, found that an overwhelming majority of people in the region believe that democracy is the best form of government, in spite of its challenges.

All of you – the region’s mayors and local authorities – play a vital role in building democratic citizenship and trust in local governments, as well as in promoting the health, education and economic well-being of citizens throughout the region. You are the frontlines of democracy; and often the only contact that citizens have with government officials. Your local efforts interface with the vast majority of citizens. Whether the services provided are as basic as registration of a birth or a business, local governments are the first responders. It therefore should not come as a surprise that the AmericasBarometer 2006 surveys ranked municipal governments among the most trusted democratic institutions in the region.

In addition, we cannot overestimate the important role that local governments play in our societies. Local and regional governments are necessary in a democratic system of checks and balances. As all of you know too well, local governments have formed an important training ground for democracy, providing the formative experience for new leaders who are closer and more accountable to citizens. We can cite many examples in the region, where local leaders who were known and trusted by their constituents later became national leaders. In **Bolivia**, for example, a whole generation of political leaders emerged as a result of the 1994 Popular

Participation Reforms that transferred funds and responsibilities to local governments, and mandated citizen participation and oversight. Since these reforms took effect, several of Bolivia's former municipal mayors have assumed greater leadership positions.

Bolivia's Popular Participation Reforms were actually part of a global municipal movement. Over the past decade, national governments throughout the region have taken steps to distribute power more equally across their systems -- to the legislature, judiciary and to local governments. This re-allocation of power to intermediate and local governments is occurring in just about every country in the hemisphere. As a result, most local leaders are elected by popular suffrage, and they are providing services to their communities through the administration of increasingly larger public budgets.¹

A necessary and deliberate consequence of these reforms is that citizens – especially members of groups that have historically been on the sidelines – are now becoming active participants in electoral processes. National governments in **Ecuador, Guatemala, and Honduras** have

¹ AmericasBarometer 2-pager on Decentralization (Montalvo)

implemented electoral decentralization reforms that are establishing voting centers in rural areas. For example, in **Guatemala**, these reforms resulted in record participation by women and indigenous voters in the 2007 general elections. In fact, there was even a slight increase in the number of women Deputies and indigenous mayors elected to office that year. Electoral decentralization is bringing government closer to the people, thereby fostering greater participation and accountability.

Another necessary consequence of greater political inclusion is that citizens are now demanding more from their governments. People want democracy to deliver jobs and an improved quality of life. As a result, local governments – which now enjoy greater authority and increased discretion over their budgets – are also being held accountable through direct elections, and are now under increased pressure to deliver on democracy’s promises of employment, crime reduction, health and education.

Delivery on these promises will yield positive results. Wherever people succeed in getting local official to build a foot bridge or stop the police from demanding bribes, they become more committed to participate in local politics through established institutions, and are less likely to pursue

change through undemocratic means. Similarly, when they feel that their local governments respect and honor their needs, they are more likely to pay taxes and provide oversight to ensure their tax-monies are spent on areas of greatest need.

Ultimately, my message is this: local leaders must deliver on their promises for reform and build democratic citizenship throughout the region; and USAID supports you fully in this endeavor. We are committed to helping you take on these challenges, and will continue to support your efforts for many years to come. In the sixteen countries where USAID has Missions, nearly all have programs that work to strengthen local governance and promote municipal development. Our commitment to local governance is based on the principles laid forth in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which states that democracy is essential for social, political and economic development. People have a right to democracy and their governments an obligation to promote and defend it.

While USAID governance programs work at both national and local levels, the vast majority of our efforts today are at the local level. In particular, we are supporting municipal efforts to provide equitable and

accountable service delivery, as well as broader citizen participation. For example, in **Honduras**, USAID has provided training to local officials to manage decentralized health and education services, engage civil society in discussions on priority issues, and promote economic growth through simplified business registration and partnerships with chambers of commerce. Similarly, in **Colombia**, our programs support local efforts to deliver health, education and citizen security services in 25 municipalities that were previously occupied by illegal, armed groups.

Corruption erodes citizen's trust in their governments, and for this reason we must educate citizens about the important role they play in securing accountable governance. Citizen participation also increases the effectiveness of policy implementation, and makes democracies more pluralistic, representative, and responsive. USAID programs promote productive citizen participation in local governments in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Honduras. In **Ecuador**, USAID collaborates with municipalities along the country's Northern and Southern borders – the areas most vulnerable to narco-economies – to increase citizen participation. These efforts have resulted in greater transparency and accountability in the expansion of local infrastructure and economic development projects, which,

in turn, are helping create licit employment, strengthen legitimate economies, and improve living standards.

In **Honduras**, USAID supported citizen participation in the municipality of Las Vegas. People were astonished when municipal Mayor Carlos Fuentes suggested that municipal meetings be broadcast live on television. His efforts have increased citizen trust in his government, resulting in broad support for local projects and policies, as well as increased tax revenue for the municipality. We hope that this positive cycle that Mayor Fuentes has set in motion continues into the future. I'm sure there will be many more examples like this one shared here in the next few days.

To conclude, the United States supports municipal and state governments abroad because our own experience has proven that investments in local leadership deliver effective infrastructure improvements and improved standards of living in the short-term. And the payoff in the long term is a stronger belief in the ability of democracies to deliver tangible benefits. The United States was founded by local leaders who were well-known, understood and trusted. They cherished what they had, and pursued national reforms based on their experience at the local level. For this reason,

we have a tremendous respect for local leaders around the region, and are committed to supporting your training, development and efforts to promote local level reforms.

USAID aims to foster sustainable development and invest in activities that will become sustainable and successful. This week's Conference for Mayors and Local Authorities is a fine example of the sustainability we seek, and I ask that you take advantage of every opportunity the conference has to offer. Meet your peers from around the region and ask questions about one another's experiences. Consider ideas and best practices that may be applicable to your communities.

We see this week's conference as a huge success for the democratization of the region. We are incredibly proud to have helped initiate this wonderful tradition. Thank you FIU and Miami Dade for maintaining this tradition, and *Muchas Gracias* to all of the local leaders that are here today. Thank you for your participation in this conference, for your commitment to democratic governance, and for your tireless work building democratic citizenship throughout the region. We hope you and your

colleagues continue to attend and make this event a success for many years to come.