

Hemispheric Leaders Must Not Squander Summit of the Americas.

Communities and the Climate Can't Wait.

The launch of the 9th Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, California offers a vital opportunity to take stock of the critical challenges facing societies across the Western Hemisphere. The most significant challenge is not a new one. Even before the COVID-19 global pandemic, Latin America already experienced the highest levels of economic inequality of any region in the world. The pandemic deepened and accentuated the yawning gaps between rich and poor across the Western hemisphere. Facing that daunting reality, political leaders coming together this week must focus on truly creative and even daring ways to tackle systemic inequities.

Western Hemisphere nations are also experiencing a serious political crisis that is exemplified by the autocratic and extremist political trends one can see in the United States of America, Brazil, and with echoes in El Salvador, Peru, and even Costa Rica. A large and growing segment of the population throughout the Western Hemisphere has lost confidence in the notion that conventional political parties, or even democratic forms of government, can solve their most pressing problems. This alarming trend should spur Western Hemisphere leaders to engage in a serious conversation about how to redefine the practical meaning of democracy and put forward innovative plans to practice transparency, accountability, and hemispheric cooperation in ways that can deliver on the promise of prosperous, sustainable, and democratic societies across the hemisphere.

In the midst of the dual challenges of systemic inequities and dysfunctional democracies, the issue of climate change cannot be ignored. The effects of climate change are already threatening communities in the Caribbean Basin, and science warns that a tipping point in the Amazon is nearly upon us. If we are to contain and reverse this existential threat for all forms of life on our planet, the nations of the Western Hemisphere must take major and urgent measures to end the dependence on fossil fuels and adapt to the crisis already at hand. Unfortunately, we are far from that reality.

The challenges facing societies in the Western Hemisphere are alarming and monumental, but not impossible to solve. Doing so, however, will require true leadership and a firm commitment to break from the business-as-usual approach. Fortunately, we have guideposts to move forward. One place to start is to fully embrace the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set years ago, and that offer a minimum set of specific results all nations should commit to produce. However, the SDGs are only a minimum standard. We can and must do more. Above all else, nations around the world must change course in terms of the economic policy system that has brought us to where we are today. We simply cannot repeat the mistakes of the past decades, hoping for a different result.

And yet, despite the clear and present dangers facing our collective well-being, the 9th Summit of the Americas may well play out as one more wasted opportunity to chart a truly new plan to move forward towards better days for people in the Western Hemisphere, especially those who have been historically ignored, excluded, and left out. The leaders of our hemisphere appear to prefer a focus on distractions, instead of real solutions. The lead-up to the summit has been mired in disagreements about who should be invited, and who makes those decisions. Political leaders will certainly disagree on policy, but the summit is a rare opportunity to listen to all opinions. The exclusion of certain governments, and the decision by other leaders not to attend an international event where not all the voices and opinions will be heard, simply facilitates avoiding the central questions summits like this one should be addressing.

Beyond the bickering over participation, one of the greatest distractions in this summit will be the issue of human mobility across borders in the Western Hemisphere. The past several decades have marked a period of significant population movements in the Western Hemisphere. By and large, these movements have been forced. Not just by conventional conflicts such as wars, and devastating natural disasters, but by a systematic denial of economic, social, political, and cultural rights to large segments of populations in Latin American and Caribbean nations. In this respect, the forced act of migration, which in absence of realistic, humane, and common sense-driven migration policies, must often happen via unauthorized and unsafe manners, is largely a symptom of the failure by people in leadership to address and resolve long-standing systemic breakdowns.

The United States of America, which is now home to nearly 22 million people born in Latin American and the Caribbean, mainly from Mexico, has allowed the public and political debate to become dominated by political forces driven by racial and ethnic hatred, as well as xenophobia against people portrayed as impoverished and undesirable. For most of the past 40 years, U.S. immigration policy has been dominated by contention, restriction, exclusion, and punishment. Since at least 2014, this policy approach has been actively extended beyond U.S. borders, via bilateral or regional agreements.

The political mantra that dominates the policy conversations about migration is largely divorced from the well-documented positive impact that migration has had for nations of destination, as well as nations of origin. The positive impact of migration has been vast, not only in economic terms. It extends to the social, political, and cultural spheres. The greatest beneficiary of migration has been the United States of America. Migrants have injected youthfulness and demographic dynamisms to an otherwise aging population and communities. Migrants have revitalized entire industries, making them very profitable, and have literally added flavor and color to the U.S. cultural landscape, from food to music.

If policymaking about migration and migrants in the Western Hemisphere were being driven by facts, not ideology and prejudice, the Americas could be a shining example of visionary, humane, and mutually beneficial policies for all parties involved. Sadly, the main policy considerations continue to be motivated by an old and false set of premises. If we were not talking about human beings, the implications of this would not be so tragic. But in fact, the negligent approach to migration policies and policies towards migrant persons does result in suffering and even death, on a daily basis.

The indispensable place to begin a healthy policy deliberation is to stick to the facts, as well as to the long-postponed focus on the triggering factors forcing people to make the painful decision to seek safety and wellbeing in foreign lands. The outcomes of an approach like this will not come about overnight. They will take years, if not decades. They will require much innovation in every respect. However, in the short term, the following approaches would help in moving us towards better results in the human mobility challenge:

Humanitarian protection and support must be granted to people who are being forced to flee their countries. Forced migration is not only generated by gross violence. It happens when parents must face a new day without knowing how they will provide for their children and other loved ones. The U.S. southern border represents one of the most pressing humanitarian crises in the hemisphere, with tens of thousands of people in a situation of painful uncertainty about their future. It is crucial to recognize that the still dominant pillars of humanitarian protection laws were established more than 70 years ago, under a very different world reality than now. Therefore, humanitarian protection approaches must be updated in accordance with today's realities.

Populations residing in any given nation for longer than three years should be offered a channel to properly document their presence in their adopted country and integrate in every way possible. The case of the United States of America, where close to 11 million people have resided for many years without the benefit of legal integration into their adopted country, stands out as the most urgent situation to be resolved.

Temporary employment programs for foreign workers must be redefined and amplified. It is crucial to acknowledge that many programs of this type have an ugly track record for systemic violations of labor rights. A new generation of these programs must not simply replicate old practices. They must innovate in ways that center the interests of all workers, domestic and foreign. It is entirely possible that a new generation of temporary worker programs, properly defined, could play a key role in reducing systemic inequities in the host, as well as the origin nation.

Leaders should come together to agree on a hemispheric-wide, integrated system for the portability of labor benefits, economic inclusion, retirement, and health care programs. The human mobility pattern has never really been a one-way street, but it will only become even less so in the future. Therefore, creating mechanisms to allow people to access benefits in the country where they reside, especially in the case of older workers who may wish to retire to a country that is different from the one in which they spend their working lives, will become crucial. We must move towards the portability of social security. Another area of integration is financial inclusion. Earning and credit histories should be applicable across borders. This would enable many migrants to make use of financial tools such as mortgage loans wherever they may wish to buy a home.

These recommendations are only a sample of the policy innovations that should be introduced to move the handling of migration and the rights of migrants toward a common-sense driven approach. We must also remember that despite the many factors pushing people out of their countries, most people in Latin America and Caribbean nations opt to stay in their countries. This is so because people love their families, love their communities, love their customs, love their countries.

So finally, and we return to where we started, the most important task is to articulate a new set of economic, social, political, and cultural strategies designed to tackle, once and for all, the long-standing, systemic flaws that decision makers have permitted to fester for far too long. Getting this fundamental challenge right should provide a laser-beam focus for the Summit of the Americas. From a civil society perspective, we in Alianza Americas are committed to hold decision-makers accountable to the needs and rights of communities across borders.

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The Alianza Americas coalition is:

America Para Todos
Access Living / Cambiando Vidas
Association of Guatemalans Without Frontiers (*Asociación de Guatemaltecos Sin Fronteras*)
Alabama Latino AIDS Coalition
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ACIJ)
Arkansas United

ASOSAL (Association of Salvadorans in Los Angeles - *Asociación de Salvadoreños de Los Angeles*)
CARECEN-DC
CARECEN-San Francisco
CARECEN-Los Angeles
Casa de la Cultura El Salvador
Casa Yurumein
Center for Immigrant Progress
Centro Presente
Centro Romero
Centro San Bonifacio
CIELO (Indigenous Communities in Leadership - *Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo*)
Womens' Transnational Collective (*Colectivo de Mujeres Transnacionales*)
COPAL
CRLN - Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America
Diáspora Hondureña Internacional (DHI)
Dominican Development Center
Durango Unido en Chicago
Familias Unidas en Acción
Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC)
Hondurans Against Aids
Illinois Workers in Action
Latinas en Poder
Latino Commission on AIDS
Latino Policy Forum
LILA LGBTQ, Inc
Living Hope Wheelchair Association
Mission Guatemala
Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLA)
ONECA (Black Central American Organization - *Organizacion Negra Centroamericana*)
Network of Transnational Peoples (*Red de Pueblos Transnacionales*)
Mexican Network of Leaders and Migrant Organizations (*Red Mexicana de Líderes y Organizaciones de Migrantes*)
Rural Women's Health Project
Seeds of Resistance
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN)
St Brigid's Casa Mary Johanna
Strangers No Longer
Telpochacalli Community Education Project
Tennessee Immigrant Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC)
WIN! The Welcome Immigrant Network
United for a Fair Economy
We Count!



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