

To: “Friends of Central America” – United States, Canada, European Commission, Spain, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), World Bank, United Nations, Organization of American States (OAS)

From: Selected NGOs and civil society groups in Central America and the United States

Re: Citizen security strategies in Central America, donor coordination and consultation with civil society groups

Date: February 10, 2011

As non-governmental organizations (including researchers, advocacy groups and service providers) who are involved in youth violence prevention, the reform and strengthening of police, prosecutors and judicial systems, rehabilitation, and prison issues, among others, we are pleased to see that the governments and multi-lateral agencies who have constituted themselves as friends and supporters of Central America, have taken up the issue of citizen security.

There is no question that crime and insecurity are major challenges for the governments and people of Central America. Street crime abounds, especially in poor communities, and domestic violence is a major problem. Homicide rates, especially in the northern tier of the region, are among the highest in the world. Organized crime – groups that traffic in drugs, weapons, stolen goods, and other forms of contraband and engage in human smuggling – are in control of certain territories and are infiltrating and corrupting state institutions, threatening the safety of the entire region’s population. Youth gangs that engage in extortion, hired killing, and that commit serious acts of violence have proliferated and are often hired or utilized by powerful organized crime groups.

Governments have, so far, been unable to stem this violence. Short term and mostly ineffective *mano dura* responses have been used instead of long-term planning, investment in prevention, and thoughtful strategies designed to modernize and professionalize institutions charged with law enforcement (the police, the prosecutors’ office, and the judiciary). Evidence-based strategies, including an emphasis on community and municipal led programs of prevention and policing, have not been fully developed or implemented.

We hope that discussions now beginning between the governments of the region, the Friends of Central America, and the broader donor community, will lead toward more comprehensive approaches that incorporate violence prevention, especially family and youth violence prevention, along with efforts to reform and modernize public security institutions, in a more planned and long-term process. We hope that local and national, as well as regional plans, will emerge from this process. We believe that in order for these plans to be successful, they must address the multiple and complex root causes of the insecurity and violence afflicting the region through comprehensive policies.

We also believe it would be useful to articulate an overarching set of shared principles that could provide an important framework and common agenda to help guide citizen security strategies in the region, as this process moves forward.

We write to strongly urge that civil society and private sector groups be consulted in an on-going and systematic way as this process moves forward. Many civil society organizations in Central

America, and their partners abroad, are actively involved in implementing anti-crime and prevention projects; they have important information and perspectives on the issue, and their input would be helpful. Additionally, we believe that informed civil society actors can help develop the political consensus that governments will need to move ahead any serious citizen security strategy; those actors need to be engaged and consulted as strategies are developed.

Given this, we urge you, as you work with governments and inter-governmental institutions in the region to develop and coordinate citizen security strategies, to reach out to civil society groups for their input in a systematic way. We believe there are many organizations, like ours, that could be consulted and would be willing to provide useful input. We urge you to incorporate civil society consultation into the planning process, as this sector could contribute positively and substantially in taking on the problem of insecurity in the region.

Civil Society Organizations:

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