

THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAS DEPENDS ON THE ANTI-CORRUPTION FIGHT

By Huguette Labelle

It was precisely to take up the fight against corruption that in 1996 American states signed the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption. This was the first international legal instrument of its kind worldwide. With this pioneering step, 22 countries committed to drive measures and legal reforms with the goal of preventing and punishing the practice of corruption, while cooperating with one another on the legal persecution of corruption crimes. Civil society organizations argued in favour of this Convention, and once it came into force, they have constantly contributed to its ratification and implementation. Since then, 33 countries have ratified the Convention; several have promoted legal reforms and implemented anticorruption and transparency policies. Moreover, in 2001, urged by civil society and within the Organization of American States framework, a follow-up mechanism to the implementation of the Convention was created. The possibilities for this mechanism and for an increased dynamism in national reforms opened the door to new expectations from civil society.

Corruption and its effects on the governance of the American continent is currently a top preoccupation. The media reports on corruption scandals in various countries as a daily occurrence. In some Latin American countries governments have been removed from power by multitudes of unsatisfied citizens who have had enough corruption. In others, candidates have used anticorruption as an electoral weapon. At the same time, government agencies, judicial authorities, legislative bodies and political parties don't have a satisfactory level of public trust. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2005, a number of these institutions are considered among the most corrupt in Latin America. Similarly, the 2005 Latinobarómetro report points to a perception by the majority of countries in the region that public officials are corrupt.

Unfortunately, ten years after the initiatives to implement the OAS anti-corruption Convention seems not to be bearing results as expected. In fact, the Latinobarómetro surveys reflect a low perception of efficiency in all countries in the region. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2005 shows that the overwhelming majority of Latin American countries register a rating below five on a scale of zero to ten, where zero is equal to a perception of very corrupt. Further, in relation to the low level of public trust in democratic institutions, governance seems to rely more heavily on the figure of the president than on the pillars of government. This is worrisome in a continent where in the last 13 years, 14 presidents were unable to serve their complete terms.

At this point of the road, the future of the anti-corruption fight is in the hands of those who hold public office in each American country. Governments and congresses are the main players in this challenge. They are the ones who can, in this decisive moment, strengthen the fight against corruption. The difficult task of regaining public trust begins by carrying through concrete actions and delivering tangible results.

We would like to see a real implementation of the OAS Convention in each country, effective sanctions on the corrupt, democratic and sustainable mechanisms for civil society participation, efficient and transparent public procurement systems, and the unquestionable right to access information. Civil society organisations can contribute from their respective areas of specialisation, to help guarantee good public governance and to collaborate on initiatives to reinforce institutional capacities, if not to decidedly denouncing the illegal use of power. On the other hand, the OAS could turn into a canalizing factor for the efforts of international donors, governments and civil society to promote transparency, favour cooperation and the financing of initiatives on a national level, along with the public and effective tracking of international anti-corruption commitments.

We hope that during this Inter-American Year Against Corruption, we could see facts that cause us to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption on our continent as a promise that can be fulfilled. After all, the issue is not just a moral and legal obligation, but public services without bribes, education without made-up fees, public works finished without the squandering of public funds and sustainable development for our nations.

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