



REPORT

**Public Discussion: The Role of Young People in Democracy in Latin America
Mexico City, March 30, 2017**

Moderation:

Luis Almagro, OAS Secretary General

Words of welcome:

Jakub Klepal, Executive Director of Forum 2000

Alejandro Poiré, Dean of the Escuela de Ciencias Sociales y Gobierno at Tecnológico de Monterrey

Speakers:

Oscar Arias, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, former President of Costa Rica

Jorge Quiroga, former President of Bolivia

Tamara Sujú, Venezuelan human rights lawyer

Jorge Castañeda, Mexican diplomat

Juan Diego Beltrán, student of International Relations at Tecnológico de Monterrey

Talking about the youth's role in political participation implies talking about those who will take the reins of their country in the near future. This generation of young people has been formed with the best social conditions, substantially superior to those of their predecessors. The current generation has the highest level of education, full access to new technologies and can access large volumes of knowledge and information in real time, at a very low cost. However, they also mark low participation and great detachment from politics. The most relevant statements are lost in the massively voiced opinions on social networks. This situation is problematic in a democratic system, because in order for it to function effectively, it requires the participation, not only of the government, parties and politicians, but also of youth, in all possible spaces. It is very important that the youth assumes responsibility in the political life of the country, including the leadership roles: to defend and fight for the country's democracy and for the values and institutions of a free and open society.

The conference "The Role of Young People in Democracy in Latin America", which was attended by Luis Almagro, Oscar Arias, Jorge Quiroga, Tamara Sujú, Jorge Castañeda and Juan Diego Beltrán, revolved around a crucial question: How to get young people involved in politics? This question was presented as a great challenge to be faced and overcome, since the participation of youth is essential to the change of the reality in the region.

Nowadays there are too few young people seen in the streets fighting for the defense of their rights and freedoms. They seem to be oblivious to the political and social problems facing their countries and the rest of the region. The consequences of this position are serious, since they allow corruption, and in the most extreme cases even enable governments not respecting democratic practices, such as in the cases of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia.

The panel of the public discussion identified two areas of opportunity for young people in order to have a greater impact on political life:

- Technology gives young people immense power: instead of using it to isolate themselves from political reality, it can be used as an instrument to defend, criticize and construct proposals for citizenship.
- Encourage participation in social movements and organizations: the political task is not an individual task, but a collective task. That is why we must find a way to have a clearer social commitment to the transformation that is necessary in the particular countries and in the region. In addition, mechanisms must be sought to achieve this.

Jorge Castañeda stressed that many things can be done within universities, but if students want to influence what happens in their country they have to get out into the streets. One cannot act individually. Action that is not collective on the part of the students does not work. Students have to embrace causes. If there are no causes, there is no effect, and there is no consequence.

According to Tamara Sujú, it is essential to be reminded of the names of the disappeared and tortured youths because they are precisely those who go out to surrender their lives in search of freedom. Since 2014 Venezuela has had 6,800 detainees, 70% of them are young people under 25 years of age. Youth has not been attacked by the inner self, but by external subjugation. The scope of systems with deficits in their democracies or totalitarian regimes can exert control mechanisms that affect even the physical safety of young people. The best way to combat political extremism and political radicalization is education of democratic values as well as the encouragement of the participation of youth in social movements and organizations and in politics.

In the last phase of the discussion, many questions came from the part of the audience. The students asked for advice from the experience of the panelists on how to motivate the youth to take to the streets to defend democracy and, in turn, what young people can do not to lose hope or direction in a struggle that sometimes leads to the disappearance of loved ones or their imprisonment. Tamara Sujú emphasized once again the importance of education in democratic values. She explained that youth activism must get out of schools and universities and that it is necessary to train young people as activists



who truly believe in the defense of freedom and democracy and who are able to join forces with the civil society.

Sujú also stated that losing hope cannot be an option, and that precisely the personal circumstances are those that lead to a stronger voice and that the denunciation of a regime becomes collective. Some students also asked questions about the actions youth can take against the populist movement or corruption. To this Castañeda suggested that the best way to combat an idea is not to go against it but to propose different solutions and to fight for them. Likewise, Jorge Quiroga commented that the best way to fight against corruption is to build a united and regional intolerance. In that the young have an advantageous condition thanks to the digital age. In this sense, a question also arose about what young people can do in regards to social networks in order to return to a true policy. The student representative Juan Diego Beltrán responded that it is crucial to find a balance between social networks and taking to the streets, but that balance can be achieved if the networks call for social mobilization. This for example happened in the case of Colombia after the result of the plebiscite, where the social networks were used to put great pressure on the participants of the peace process. As a result, the peace process carried on.

In conclusion, as President Oscar Arias explained, "politics is an instrument for good, for peace, for justice. Politics is the workshop of dreams where perhaps they become more accurate and concrete, but also, it is a place where dreams come true." Politics is not and has never been the task of heroes, but of those who seek and accept the responsibility to lead. For young people to fulfill their role in history, it is essential that they participate in building the future they want to see in their countries and the region, otherwise, others will do it for them.