

**Conference on International Experiences on National Dialogue
Paramaribo, Suriname March 5-6, 2014**

Dr. Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary for Political Affairs of the OAS

Your Excellency, H.E Winston G. Lackin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Suriname;
Honorable Jennifer Geerlings-Simons, Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Suriname;
Distinguished members of the diplomatic community accredited to Suriname, Distinguished international experts and representatives of Surinamese society, Ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honor for me to represent the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS) at this opening ceremony. This is a special privilege in part because the Organization has long played a role in supporting the Surinamese people's quest for peace. We take pride in the role we played in facilitating the Peace Accord of 1992 and in the consolidation and maintenance of peace and stability through the OAS Special Mission to Suriname that lasted almost 8 years, from 1992 to 2000.

I am pleased to see that 20 years after its return to democracy, the country has followed a sustained path of peaceful human and economic development. While the Peace Accords brought a return to democratic rule, peace did not mean that all pending issues were successfully resolved. In countries such as Suriname, which have experienced conflict and a return to democracy, national dialogue processes have sometimes served as important tools to achieve practical solutions to a broad range of pending issues. National dialogue initiatives have been used to unite or reunite societies that have experienced political violence, deep social divisions and confrontations, or to conduct a process of political transformation in a comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable manner.

It is in this context that the OAS has been very pleased to help organize this conference, to draw on the experiences of a group of experts from different institutions and countries from around the world that have been directly engaged in comprehensive national dialogue experiences. They will share their knowledge with you, the lessons they have learned, their impressions and views on national dialogue initiatives through specific examples drawn from both the Americas and Africa.

During the Conference, we will examine how national dialogue processes can foment trust among national actors and serve as a means to achieve a national consensus on key political, economic and social issues in support of long-term peace and development. We will also extract from case studies the valuable lessons about international support in these processes. We will examine the opportunities and the challenges, and most importantly the conditions required to engage in a meaningful national dialogue.

Let us be clear about what we're doing here. This is not the installation of a national dialogue process, this is not even the beginning of the installation of a national dialogue in Suriname. Only you, the Surinamese actors, across the political and social spectrum, can decide if and when such a process would be a good idea for your country.

What we have helped to put together here is no more than an open and informed discussion of the merits of national dialogue experiences as tools to strengthen democracy and resolve conflict, as shown by the recent history of a great many countries.

This does not imply any judgment on our part on the political debates within the Surinamese society or on the goals that may or may not be pursued by the Surinamese political actors through a dialogue process.

This is simply part and parcel of the technical work that the OAS does all over the hemisphere to improve democratic governance. Today we put comparative knowledge in the hands of Surinamese social and political actors, like we've done it before in Paraguay, Honduras or Colombia; like we hope to be able to do tomorrow in countries in our region, some not far from here, that desperately need to start a meaningful and inclusive conversation about their future, if they are to arrest a downward spiral towards anarchy.

We firmly believe that national dialogue processes are important tools in the arsenal of all democracies. Like elections, national dialogues may be used to pursue widely different purposes. That is for national actors to decide. Our task is simply to remind societies that this instrument –so often forgotten amidst the adversarial dynamic of politics—has shown its value in very different contexts.

Indeed, dialogue initiatives are being used worldwide with different goals in mind. They have varied considerably in scope and application; from averting violent confrontations, as in the case of the dialogue over Kirkuk in Iraq in 2009, to helping rebuild in post-conflict situations and seeking reconciliation as in the case of the National Dialogue in South Africa (1991-1996). Dialogues have served to resolve political rifts or crises, as in the Bolivian Dialogue on the constitutional reform process that took place in 2008; and have also assisted with peaceful transitions of governments as in the case of the ongoing National Dialogue in Tunisia. Dialogues have also served to address transnational issues, such as climate change, and to improving relationships between different sectors in society and designing public policies at the local, regional and national levels, like in the case of the 2002 National Dialogue in Peru. The dialogue with grassroots organizations in Malaysia last year served to foster national unity and social cohesion in that country. Dialogues have also served to set a new political vision for the future by identifying national priorities as in the “Visión Guatemala” case in 2002.

National dialogues do not guarantee success, and the examples I have mentioned as well as other have produced mixed results. Nonetheless they have all searched for practical and peaceful ways to address issues that underlie a past, present or latent conflict. It is also critical to understand that dialogue is not a goal in itself but rather a means to reaching the goal.

There are no magic formulas to conduct a national conversation; they depend on the objective to be reached, the specific context and the particular nature of the problem. Nevertheless, there are some essential elements that are needed in order to engage in a genuine national dialogue initiative. These include a strong political will and broad support from society; inclusiveness of all relevant stakeholders and a sense of national ownership among government and state institutions, political actors, and civil society. Dialogue cannot be imposed from above and by fiat. It is inherently a voluntary and collective endeavor that can only bear fruit if all parties accept their mutual right to sit at the table.

The purpose of dialogue is to get confronting parties to talk, to shed distrust, to build relationships, and bridge their differences. It is a tool through which all sectors of society, including those historically marginalized, have a chance to sit together on an equal footing to express their views and needs, and jointly seek for common grounds.

Not taking into account the essential elements for a genuine dialogue can really hinder the outcome of any process and can result in political cynicism, dialogue fatigue and the loss of the legitimacy of a valuable tool.

Ownership by national actors may be the most important of these principles. So while we are pleased to share our experiences with you, we believe that only the Surinamese people themselves can design their own path toward the future.

My friends:

This is my second visit to Paramaribo. A little more than 4 years ago I came here knowing little about the place. I left fascinated by many things, most notably the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity that I saw, which is managed by the Surinamese people with a grace and maturity that I found truly remarkable.

One image of Paramaribo stuck to my mind ever since. As some of you may suspect, it is the sight of a mosque and a synagogue standing next to each other in Kaizerstraat. I understand that this is the only place in the world where that happens. It is, in any case, an exceedingly rare occurrence, one that powerfully conveys a message of tolerance that words alone could not conjure. It occurs to me that when a country's people grow used to seeing the quiet, unassuming coexistence of what in so many places would count as mortal enemies, that country has a lot going for it.

This much I know – whatever trials this country may have gone through in the recent past, I have seen in our hemisphere lands far, far more barren and unforgiving than Suriname for the seed of national dialogue to flourish. Pluralism and acceptance of diversity have deeper roots here than in most countries in the Americas. After gauging your options you may decide not to travel down the route of a national dialogue process, but as far as I can tell the potential is there.

We hope this conference will provide a space for reflection and analysis of achievements and challenges in national dialogue processes so that you can evaluate whether this tool, so dear to democracy, can contribute to the progress, peace and prosperity of this wonderful country.

Thank you.