



**REFLECTIONS & FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS: THE OAS @ 70**

**Interview with the Assistant Secretary  
General of the Organization of American  
States (OAS)  
Ambassador Nestor Mendez**

**‘Forward Looking Vision of the OAS’**

**Conducted by Javier Montes**

*Nestor Mendez was elected to be the ninth Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) on March 18, 2015. He began serving his five-year term on July 13, 2015 with a commitment to work closely with the Secretary General and the member states to reinvigorate and modernize the institution.*

*The Assistant Secretary General based his platform on five main thematic areas: improving regional inter-connectivity; fostering economic growth, addressing the impacts of climate change and natural disasters; promoting partnerships for development, and working to empower and respond to the needs of the youth across the hemisphere.*

*Upon receiving the mandate from member states, he pledged his “unwavering commitment to seize the opportunity that is before us to work together to transform the OAS into the Organization that we want and that the people of the Americas deserve.”*

*Prior to his election, Nestor Mendez was a career diplomat in the Foreign Service of Belize. He served as the Ambassador to the United States of America, Permanent Representative to the OAS, and Non-Resident High Commissioner to Canada.*

*He holds a Master's Degree in International Policy and Practice from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., a Graduate Level Certificate in Diplomatic Studies from Oxford University in Oxford, United Kingdom, and a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from the University College of Belize in Belize City, Belize.*

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**JM:** *Ambassador Mendez, on April 30, 1948, the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) was signed in Bogota, Colombia. Since then, fundamental changes in the global political context have emerged over time, bringing with them attendant social and political challenges. How has the Organization been able to adapt to a hemisphere and world that are in constant change?*

**ASG:** The Organization of American States is the oldest regional organization in the world. Notwithstanding its impressive history and trajectory, in order to remain functionally utilitarian and relevant, the OAS has had to demonstrate its ability to adapt and to respond to the needs and challenges faced by its Member States. From the earliest days of its founding, the OAS has endeavoured to respond to Member State driven demands, which are in constant evolution beyond the discernible vacillations in the political panorama. The security landscape and the social demands in our countries are also constantly evolving, and include challenges such as migration issues, unemployment, and a burgeoning youth demographic which in many countries is neither studying nor working. Those are challenges that we face every day, and the Organization has been strident in its response to such issues. For instance, when the issue of trafficking persons emerged as a significant challenge, at the request of Member States, the OAS provided the relevant technical expertise to address the issues and concerns. The OAS also implemented mechanisms to systematically address the complex issues related to drugs in response to escalating concerns, especially in the Central American corridor and in the producing countries of South America. The Organization also designed very specific programs to address social challenges with youth unemployment, including the highly successful Small Business Development Centers initiative. We have a flagship scholarship/fellowship program that has helped to extend academic opportunities to thousands of leaders and potential leaders of the countries of the Americas. In the area of democracy,

we have worked assiduously towards institutional strengthening to ensure that elections are transparent and legitimate. We have also done a lot of work to strengthen governmental institutions across the spectrum. In short, the OAS has been responsive to the evolving demands of its Member States, and that is what has kept us fundamental and relevant to transformative processes in the Americas.

*JM: So in essence, the programs and technical assistance that the OAS provides evolve as required to meet the changing needs of the people of the Americas over time?*

**ASG:** Exactly. We do not invent our mandates. We respond to what the Member States need within the ambit of the four core pillars. It is important that the Organization remain an indispensable tool, steadfastly dependable institution in constant search of solutions. Although the OAS may not possess the fount of fiscal depth on which bigger organizations can count, what we do have is a valuable brand, we have convening power, we bring a level of legitimacy to the table so that when we are involved in a project, it gives our partners the confidence that the OAS will contribute creditably, as is its tradition. Such a reputation is invaluable.

*JM: You have played a key role in helping to reposition the institution to the prominent standing it holds today. What are the most important factors that have contributed to the emergence of the OAS as the single most important platform for political dialogue, consensus-building and collective action in the Americas?*

**ASG:** One very significant aspect of the OAS is that it is the only organization, the only regional institution which counts in its membership all the independent countries of the Americas, all 35 of them, 34 of which are active. As you would be aware, Cuba has not been a participating Member State although its suspension was lifted in 2009. There is tremendous value in membership. At Headquarters in Washington D.C., the Permanent Council of our Organization brings together the Permanent Representatives of all of these Member States, and this represents a most vital platform for direct communication and dialogue among States. It also provides the only forum where all of them can sit down and address the many political challenges, security challenges, those related to democracy, development, and any other political

emergency which may arise. We have the platform which brings citizens of the hemisphere together to discuss how we can jointly and collaboratively respond to our challenges.

*JM: Among those Members, the smallest country has the same weight as the biggest country, in terms of decisions by consensus or voting?*

**ASG:** Precisely. That is another important factor. Not only are we talking about the forum that grants access to the Representatives of the 34 active Member States, but we are also speaking to the decision-making process. Whereas we strive to make decisions based on consensus, the fact is, if there is need for a vote, each country has one vote. Among the 34, the smallest in relative size of our Member States has the same voting power, as the largest and most powerful sister states of the hemisphere. Comparatively speaking, that provides certain leverage to these countries when viewed in the context of similar international organizations whose membership is spread across significantly larger geographic zones.

*JM: You are a son of the Caribbean, and a seasoned diplomat who has served as Ambassador of your country to the United States and as Permanent Representative to the OAS. What is the relevance to Caribbean States of membership in the Organization of American States?*

**ASG:** Caribbean States derive many benefits from membership in the OAS. The Organization looks at issues such as climate change, which is absolutely important for these countries. The OAS is, for many of these countries, an important source of technical cooperation. We have, as I mentioned earlier, a flagship scholarship program which has been of tremendous utility as an avenue for educational advancement, and which has continued to expand and to evolve in terms of its offerings. In addition, being at the decision-making table on issues that affect the region is particularly invaluable in and of itself. Other areas in which the technical assistance of the OAS can make an important difference include capacity-building opportunities in countries of the Caribbean which routinely confront human resource challenges, as well as expertise in drafting or sharing model legislation which may be adapted, as appropriate, to address existing and emerging concerns. We also do a lot of work with youth and with women in terms of the assertion of their rights. Fortunately, the Caribbean

has a historically strong democratic tradition; nevertheless, there are other challenges such as issues of security, vulnerability to natural disasters, the challenges of ensuring that the youth demographic, the greater part of the population of these countries, has opportunities to be trained, educated, and to obtain decent employment. These are existing challenges which the Organization is working to address. With regard to the global benefits to be derived by Caribbean Member States, the value of the Organization ought to be considered from a holistic perspective, rather than viewed through the myopic prism of single projects or initiatives which the OAS undertakes.

*JM: You have been an outspoken advocate for more action on climate change. Given the polarity of ideas and convictions on this subject, and the reality with which all states, particularly small states, are confronted, what would be your recommended approach to addressing this considerable and complex issue?*

**ASG:** I think that the divide over the reality of climate change is very unfortunate. My view is that it is beyond consideration for anyone to surmise that climate change is not real. So how do we convince the people in these areas that believe it is not as serious as we think it is? We need to change the focus and the approach. Appreciating the gravity of natural phenomena in the last couple of months, the severity and frequency of natural disasters is something that will continue to batter our Member States in the foreseeable future. I am not only referring to the most vulnerable countries, the small island States; we are also seeing changing climate patterns that have led to extremely heavy rainfall for prolonged periods of time. This year we have witnessed inundations of epic proportions in some large South American countries, resulting in untold damage. The tropical storm that passed through Costa Rica and Nicaragua actually left in its wake unprecedented loss of life. It is incumbent on us to recognize the obvious, and to equip and retool our countries with the knowledge and the mechanisms to adapt and to mitigate the damages brought about by changing climate patterns.

*JM: What are, to your mind, the most significant challenges or issues with which the region will be faced in the next decade?*

**ASG:** The hemisphere will have to contend with a number of major issues, many of which will be inter-connected in nature. The issue of the preponderance of youth as a percentage of our populations is a reality which must be carefully assessed, since it carries with it the weight of attendant implications for the future of the Americas. As I said earlier, in many countries many of our youths are neither studying nor working. What must our response be in addressing the reality of these citizens? How do we provide for them? Imagine, if you will, a 12-year-old child for whom we are unable to provide an education or the opportunity to grow as a responsible citizen in a democratic country. In ten years' time, this child will be 22 years old, and we would have missed a critical opportunity to effectively contribute to the realization of his or her potential. What do you do with a 22-year-old that did not finish school? One who has no skills, whose chances of securing a decent job, as a result, have been severely diminished? These are the challenges we have to face right now in order to plan for a future of promise and wellbeing, job security, avenues for personal development and social mobility. Additionally, we will have to respond to the need for effective management of water resources, issues which relate to migration, and ongoing changes in climate and weather patterns and the impact these bring to bear on countries, including hurricanes, droughts and floods. These are not challenges which stand on their own. By their very nature, they affect the cycles of production, including food production, and migration, since people will move when they are hungry, when they do not have food, and when they perceive that there are no options and opportunities. They will move in search of opportunities for greater security, for gainful employment and for a better life, for a future of hope. These are some of the big questions with which we will be faced.

*JM: So is there a connection between these potential challenges, migration, food production, water, and climate change?*

**ASG:** Invariably, they can be traced back to climate change. Viewed in the context of the security of the Nation State and its people, once the stability of the State or the region is affected, the impact is comprehensive in scope since all of the factors are inter-connected.

*JM: How would you propose that these challenges be met by the OAS?*

**ASG:** As an Organization, we need to focus on the future, on education and youth. We need to ensure that our people are well-educated and trained in areas of high demand as engines of economic growth. We also need to afford our youths opportunities for decent employment, to promote and encourage enterprise and entrepreneurship ideals, and to facilitate mechanisms for the establishment of businesses. Such responses would target poverty reduction. The other issues on which we have to focus are directly linked to climate change. How do we address the issue of water resources management, of natural disasters, of migration which is an outcome of the aftermath of natural disasters and changing climate patterns? These are questions with which the Organization is already grappling, and for which it must continue to be responsive. Another issue of fundamental importance is the empowerment of women. Women constitute approximately half of the population of the Americas, and in many countries, they are not visible participants in mainstream economic activities, they do not have equal access to education and other opportunities which are traditionally open to men. We have to focus on this very important demographic and facilitate ease of entry into the economic mainstream by opening fair and accessible avenues towards that end. As essential contributors to the comprehensive growth of our hemisphere, women must be empowered so that we acknowledge the benefits of their participation, and support their invaluable work. We also have to focus on innovation and the appropriate use of technology. Pursuing solutions to problems in the same way in which we have been pursuing them for decades without the benefit of the broad successes we anticipated means that nothing will change if we continue to repeat time-worn approaches. We have to tap into the imagination, the creativity of young people and help them to help us solve the problems of our society today. A very important element that can never be far from sight is the issue of renewable energy. Economies cannot function without energy, and as we would be aware, the pattern of energy production over the decades has had a tremendously deleterious impact on the environment. We must therefore focus on renewables, which is undoubtedly the way of the future. To the credit of the OAS, the Organization is already actively engaged on this issue.

**JM:** *How do you see the OAS Secretariat playing a more substantial role in supporting Member States in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement?*

**ASG:** Even before there was a global agreement on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the OAS was already working assiduously in the delivery of projects and initiatives and services under the four pillars that guide its work. These four pillars have been mentioned before: Democracy, Human Rights, Multidimensional Security and Integral Development. When you examine the work being carried out under each one of them, the Organization is already responsive to a sizeable percentage of areas covered by the SDGs. We therefore need to continue and even to expand on the work under the four pillars, mindful that we should be more specific and with keener focus on those areas in which we bring real value-added to our countries. We need as an institution to maintain an integrated approach since all of the issues are inter-connected. This is a fundamental and guiding principle of the Organization in responding to the needs of States. Member States, as sovereign nations, took the decision to accept the SDGs as the framework that would guide their development. Likewise, as sovereign Nation States they are the ones who should request from the Organization how and where they would require it to assist them in their quest to realize the SDGs. Clearly, there are many areas in which the Organization is able to tap into its vast experience, and to leverage its partnerships, synergies, and resources to help the countries in providing value-added solutions.

***JM:** Despite reasonable economic growth, Latin America and the Caribbean is still the region of the world with the highest levels of income inequality. Is there a greater role for the OAS to play as an institution in addressing this challenge? What role should economic or social policies play in this regard?*

**ASG:** My view is that all of the factors are inter-related. The four pillars which underpin our work are, I reiterate, also tied to each other. In addressing the issue of poverty reduction, the pillar which would be at the forefront of solution-oriented approaches is that of Integral Development, an essential strategy of which would have to be a focus on youth, particularly as it relates to education. I hold fast to the adage that education is the great equalizer. I know this to be true because education is a tool for creating opportunities; education is a catalyst to a more informed citizenry in a democratic society. Education is a channel through which people understand the inherent value of their rights in a democratic society, and



certainly what are their obligations as citizens of a democratic society. Education also provides opportunities to access jobs. The right education also affords young entrepreneurs, especially women, the opportunity and the capacity to create their own jobs and to strive for self-sufficiency. A pivotal point from which to advance is the creation of our own jobs, that is, innovation and entrepreneurship. One very important area requiring concentration is innovation in technology. Many of the social challenges, those of a structural and developmental nature, may be successfully addressed if we seek out appropriate technologies through which to analyze and resolve the problems. For that we need to keep innovating, actively encouraging the young, creative minds to become involved in solving the problems that challenge our society today. The foundation of all of this is education.

*JM: Looking forward, how can Member States ensure that the OAS retains the dynamism, foresight and instinct to continue to evolve without losing sight of its core values?*

**ASG:** Member States are the owners of the Organization, and they determine the direction in which we move through the mandates that they give us. These mandates are the result of intense discussions on the challenges as well as the opportunities in our region. I think that the Permanent Council of the Organization can focus more on substantive issues, the big issues of the day. As the second highest authority from which our mandates originate, they have a key role to play in directing the Organization to focus on the larger, seminal issues which impact the lives of our people. The General Secretariat of the OAS is firmly committed to implementing these mandates, to providing the services that the political bodies require to do their work as the decision makers in the Organization.

*JM: Take a look through a forward seeing prism as the current Assistant Secretary General, and share with the people of this hemisphere your most ambitious thoughts on the trajectory of the OAS over the next 20 years.*

**ASG:** It is incumbent on us, even at this juncture, to be visionary in defining the OAS of the future. Tomorrow's OAS will be an institution that is optimizing technology to meet its operational needs in benefit of our Member States, and towards cost

efficiencies, procedural expediency, and the management of its resources. There will be increased focus on empowering the youth of the Americas and the women of our continent towards a transformative agenda for balance and equity. The OAS of the future will continue to play its role as a proactive, responsible member of the international community, certainly of the family of multilateral organizations, and to build on its historical mandate to strengthen democratic ideals in its Member States. While even the most prescient among us will not be able to foresee all of the challenges which the future forebodes, we can appreciate that many of today's issues will continue to be recurring themes, including natural disasters, migration, and issues of multidimensional security, including food security. One constant solution-oriented approach in the future, as it remains even today, is to focus on educating our youth. Imbuing them with a social conscience and appropriate skills will position us to mitigate these challenges. The OAS of the future also has to be closer to the people of the Americas. We respond to the mandates of governments but the services we deliver affect the lives of our common citizens in a very direct way. With the use of technology, the OAS must find a way to establish and maintain regular and meaningful direct contact with the citizens of our hemisphere. In so doing, the OAS will continue to work with the governments of our States to bolster peace and security, and to strengthen the democratic principles which espouse and defend the human rights of all of the peoples of the Americas.