



THE CITY BAR FUND

Latin American Strategy Summit

From March 3rd through 5th the Association was the site of a gathering of leading lawyers from Latin America, here to attend a conference organized by the Association's Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice Initiatives. The Strategy Summit for the Americas: A Profession Supportive of Democracy, hosted by Association President Betsy Plevan, sought to address the role of the legal profession in support of democracy by focusing on areas in which the profession is uniquely situated to contribute to civil society.

The conference brought together 60 lawyers representing bar associations, private firms, law schools and legal non-government organizations (NGOs) from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and the United States, along with participants from Spain, South Africa and the World Bank.

The Summit was an outgrowth of activity that is taking place across the Americas to strengthen the commitment of the legal profession to promote democratic values and ideals. Previous pro bono conferences co-sponsored by the Association – which were held in Argentina, Chile and Brazil beginning in 2001 – had brought many of the recent summit participants together for the first time to discuss pro bono practices as a means of enhancing access to justice. It became apparent at these earlier conferences that pro bono could not be considered in isolation; pro bono is part of a strategy to improve access to justice for the poor.

Access to justice, however, is broader than simply having the services of a lawyer. It must also incorporate public confidence in the fairness, transparency and efficiency of the judicial system and the legal profession; in government policies that address societal needs; and in a developed public understanding of legal rights.

The Association's summit held here in New York last March examined what is referred to as the "four pillars" of the legal profession that support the legal superstructure of democratic societies:

- Access to justice;
- Fair and equitable judicial system;
- Fair and equitable government policies; and
- Legal ethics.

During the 3-day working conference, participants exchanged ideas and experiences, and sought to develop a series of shared objectives to pursue over the next 18 months. Among the broader objectives guiding the work of the participants were:

- Identifying initiatives that could be adapted to specific countries and implemented locally;
- Learning from practices in other countries as to similar challenges;
- Focus on the "pro bono chain" – the mutually dependent relationship of bar associations, law firms, law schools and NGOs in providing legal services to the poor; and
- Identifying mechanisms for greater collaboration between bar associations in different jurisdictions.

Small working groups organized around the "four pillars", which reported back to the full body on the last day, accomplished much of the substantive work and made recommendations on how to advance these. In addition to specific ideas to be pursued locally, two principal regional projects were identified and agreed to:

- Draft a "Pro Bono Declaration for the Americas"; and
- Research and publish a book identifying the laws, rules and practices that govern the ethics, professional responsibility and public service obligations of lawyers in a number of jurisdictions in the Americas, titled "Model Rules of Professional Responsibility in the Americas."

Summit participants also agreed that Mexico will host the next regional conference on pro bono and access to justice programs, which will take place in late 2006, at which time the delegations from the various countries in the Americas will report back on their progress in implementing the objectives of the March 2005 summit.

"The Strategy Summit for the Americas was a watershed in terms of the degree of collaboration and willingness to partner and share ideas among lawyers throughout the Americas. Just as human rights lawyers of recent decades reached across borders to find support for their ideas, today, advocates for an expansive concept of access to justice are developing international networks to enhance their efforts," stated Ms. Plevan.

The Vance Center for International Justice Initiatives is currently working on a report that will contain information about the historical developments leading up to the summit, objectives of the conference, day-by-day summaries of its discussions, and an Agenda for Action or work plan structured around the agreed-upon objectives. This report will soon be available on the Association's Vance Center website, along with background papers and other conference materials.

Upper left: Association President Betsy Plevan and Vance Center Advisory Committee Chair S. Todd Crider

Lower left: Vance Center Executive Director Joan Vermeulen addresses the Summit

Below right: One of several Round Table discussions

