



Symposia between OAS and GW Law School
Democratic Governance and Human Rights Challenges:
Equality, Non-Discrimination, and the Environment

Background

The Organization of American States' adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter (IADC) in 2001 was a historic moment for this institution.¹ It reflected a recognition of the paramount nature of democracy for the Americas and its connection with the social, political, and economic development in the hemisphere. The IADC alludes to several cross-cutting themes which are vital for the consolidation of democracies, including the respect for human rights and the elimination of all forms of discrimination as critical elements of representative and inclusive democracies.²

The OAS General Assembly also encouraged, in 2023, the creation of a Voluntary Group of Member States to promote dialogue, cooperation, and the sharing of best practices in fostering strong democracies in the Americas.³ Over the years, OAS Member States have reaffirmed the importance of the IADC and the paramount nature of strengthening and consolidating democracies and the rule of law. The Voluntary Group is serving a critical role in the OAS in identifying opportunities for cooperation and interventions in these areas.

In this vein, the Voluntary Group has developed a workplan including four thematic areas: 1) democracy and human rights; 2) democracy, integral development, and combating poverty; 3) promotion of a democratic culture; and 4) strengthening and preservation of democratic institutions.⁴ A gender perspective has been identified as an important priority in the implementation of all Voluntary Group activities.

Axis 1 of the workplan addresses the links between democracy and human rights.⁵ The first phase of the work plan will focus on studying the challenges to democratic governance since the adoption of the IADC. To begin this discussion, the workplan proposes a two-layered focus on discrimination. One prong explores the identification of challenges, strategies, and best practices in the protection of the rights of persons in situations of vulnerability. The second prong focuses

¹ See generally, Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001), [Inter-American Democratic Charter \(oas.org\)](https://www.oas.org/en/iadc/)

² See *id.*, Articles 3 and 9.

³ See AG/RES. 3004 (Strengthening Democracy), Section VI. Follow-up on the Inter-American Democratic Charter, para. 2.

⁴ See Voluntary Group for the Follow-Up of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, Proposed Guidelines, pp. 4-6.

⁵ See Implementation of the Work Plan of the Voluntary Group for the Follow-up of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, AXIS 1: Democracy and Human Rights, pp. 1-2.

on the elimination of all forms of discrimination, based on factors such as sex, race, ethnicity, and disabilities, considering the diversity in the Americas.

The Organization of American States (OAS) is well-positioned to address the linkages between democratic governance and human rights challenges, due to its wide range of instruments and treaties protecting numerous rights addressing discrimination and vulnerable groups. In addition, the Inter-American System of Human Rights has provided wide-ranging interpretations that further strengthen this approach.⁶ OAS entities have been addressing not only the content of rights, but also important contemporary problems which impact democracy governance, such as environmental degradation and the climate emergency, which are currently the subject of increased global and regional attention.

Event Proposal

Based on these considerations and history, this event will focus on equality and non-discrimination as contemporary challenges to democratic governance in the Americas. The participants will discuss ongoing challenges, best practices, and needed strategies to address these concerns, as they pertain to vulnerable groups. A cross-cutting theme in the dialogue will be challenges connected to the environment and climate change, to make the discussion more concrete and reflective of current priority issues.

The event will conclude with a set of recommendation on how to best address these challenges in the context of the Voluntary Group and the work of the OAS as follow-up to the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

This event will take place at the George Washington University Law School in Washington, DC. The International and Comparative Law program at GW Law School has a strong focus on human rights issues in the Americas and frequently convenes discussions, events, and symposia related to democracy, human rights, non-discrimination, and environmental and climate change issues.

Format

The format of the event will consist of a panel, including representatives from OAS Member States, the inter-American system of human rights, and experts from academia and civil society who are working on issues concerning discrimination, equality, the protection of vulnerable groups, and environmental concerns. The outcome of the event will be a set of recommendations for the Voluntary Group on how to address these concerns through the Inter-American System, in the future and how they challenge democratic governance.

This event will be open to the public.

⁶ See, e.g., American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948); American Convention on Human Rights (1969); Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994); Inter-American Convention against Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Related Forms of Intolerance (2013); Inter-American Convention against all Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance. (2013).

Logistics

Date: Wednesday, April 10, 2024

Time: 12:00 –2:30 PM

Location: Student Conference Center, Lisner Hall - Room 201; 2023 G St NW, Washington, DC 20052

Hosts: OAS; International and Comparative Law Program at GW Law School

Draft Agenda Outline:

[12:00 PM] Arrival and Check-in

[12:15 PM] Event begins:

1. Welcome remarks by Ambassador Francisco Mora in his capacity as Chair of the Voluntary Group for the Follow-up of the Inter-American Democratic Charter
2. Welcome remarks by Rosa Celorio, Burnett Family Associate Dean & Distinguished Lecturer for International and Comparative Legal Studies at George Washington University Law School
3. Panel moderated by Rosa Celorio
 - a) Liliana A. Ávila

Ávila is the Coordinator of the Human Rights and Environment Program of the Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA). A lawyer specializing in constitutional law, she has experience in international human rights law and international human rights protection systems. She is a professor of International Law at the Universidad Externado de Colombia and has worked as a legal advisor on human rights issues. Ávila holds a law degree from the Universidad Externado, and a master's degree in Legal Argumentation from the University of Alicante in Spain.

- b) Javier Palummo Lantes

Palummo Lantes is the Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (REDESCA) of the Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). He has more than 20 years of experience in human rights, public management, public policies for social development, and children's and women's rights. He was vice-president of the Advisory Committee of the UN Human Rights Council, and director of research and information management at the MERCOSUR Institute for Public Policy on Human Rights. Palummo Lantes holds doctorates in Human Rights and Law and Social Sciences.⁷

- c) Joaquín Vallejo

Vallejo is a Deputy Director of Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights at the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF). He has 10 years of

⁷ See generally Javier Palummo (Montevideo) (2023) [Javier Palummo \(Montevideo\) \(oas.org\)](#)

experience managing international development projects on issues such as transparency in extractive industries, judicial independence, and accountability and human rights in Latin America and the Caribbean. Prior to joining PADF, he was a consultant and Policy Fellow at the World Wildlife Fund project “Amazon Vision: Protected Areas as Natural Solutions to Climate Change.” Vallejo holds a master's degree in International Affairs from the University of California, San Diego, and a bachelor's degree in International Relations from the Universidad San Francisco de Quito.

d) Dinah Shelton

Shelton is the Manatt/Ahn Professor of International Law Emeritus at the George Washington University and author of multiple award-winning books and articles on international law and human rights.

She has served as legal consultant to the United Nations Environment Programme, UNITAR, the World Health Organization, the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Organization of American States, and is a former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. She has taught at the University of Notre Dame; Santa Clara University; University of California, Davis; Stanford University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Paris; and University of Strasbourg. Shelton studied law at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the University of Edinburgh.⁸

4. Facilitated dialogue between panel members and participants

5. Adjournment

⁸ See generally Dinah L. Shelton (gwu.edu)