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### **ENHANCEMENT OF PROBITY AND THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN THE HEMISPHERE**

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**Working Group on Probity and Public Ethics of the  
Organization of American States**

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On behalf of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, I would like to thank the members of the Working Group for the opportunity to discuss anti-corruption efforts in the Hemisphere. As you may know, for 15 years NDI has worked in partnership with political and civic leaders to strengthen democracy around the world. To date NDI has had the privilege of working with democratic activists in more than 80 countries.

NDI's work in Latin America and the Caribbean has paralleled the historic wave of democracy that has swept the Hemisphere. As many countries now face the challenge of consolidating democratic institutions, practices and values, NDI is increasingly focusing on ethics and accountability and the modernization of political parties.

As you know, corruption is antithetical to democracy and economic prosperity. As Nobel Laureate Oscar Arias has stated "corruption is best exposed, and best attacked in a democracy. Corruption can only be examined and eradicated in an environment of pluralism, tolerance, freedom of expression, and individual security – an environment that only democracy can guarantee."

Corruption also distorts economies, inhibiting growth and transferring resources from the needy to the rich. These distortions compound the challenges of economic reform and aggravate the income gap between rich and poor in Latin America – the widest such disparity of any region in the world.

NDI has attacked corruption on several fronts including working with political leaders and legislators to develop ethics codes that provide for disclosure of assets and legal sanctions and negative publicity for violators. NDI has also organized events in Argentina and Paraguay with the World Bank, Transparency International and civic groups to look at case studies of successful anti-corruption efforts. These efforts range from the

spots for broadcast throughout the Hemisphere. NDI is exploring pilot projects to develop ethics training for municipal workers in Asuncion and ethics codes with the Paraguayan Congress. In Mexico, NDI is working with civic groups to monitor local government spending.

Based on the lessons learned through these activities, I would like to offer five observations:

First, analysts who have studied corruption point out that it flourishes in countries where “enabling environments” exist. In some countries, this environment can encompass the society as a whole. In an NDI focus group study conducted in a South American country, it was found that the population had a distinct view of what constituted “corruption.”

In that survey, citizens said they expected all public officials to steal. This practice was considered “normal.” What was considered “corrupt,” was to not share “the take” widely enough. One lesson from this survey is that anti-corruption efforts must focus on changing popular attitudes that enable corruption to flourish. One approach may be to include civic education on ethics and accountability in school curricula.

Second, however difficult, it is in the self-interest of political leaders to champion the establishment and enforcement of ethics codes. These rules help guide the behavior of public officials and respond to public demand. And while setting up clear rules is an important step, providing ongoing education is critical. Explaining ethics guidelines with concrete examples that can be applied to day-to-day work helps remove doubt of what constitutes an unethical or illegal act.

Third, in many countries political leaders and anti-corruption watchdog groups view each other as adversaries. In reality, some of the most hopeful anti-corruption efforts in recent years have occurred when these mutual suspicions are overcome and both sectors work together. The collaborative efforts of the Argentine civic group Poder Ciudadano and political leaders in monitoring campaign spending is one example.

Fourth, it is critical for the international community to continue to set ethics and accountability standards. In this respect, we would commend the OAS for its resolution adopted in Caracas in 1996. Efforts such as these help articulate standards. We hope that the OAS will continue to play this role by putting anti-corruption issues high on the agenda for the next Summit of the Americas.

Fifth, citizens look to national leaders to set ethical standards in their country. In recent years, we have seen political leaders pursue strong anti-corruption programs. However, there are those who also display a

judiciary to bolster their power.

These leaders have succumbed to the temptation to short-circuit the time-consuming process that compromise and consensus require. They seek to arrive at a quick-fix for challenges such as the fight against corruption, terrorism and drug-trafficking. These leaders may also be intolerant of different strategies, diversity and dissent.

Over the long-term, this weakening of democratic institutions undercuts anti-corruption efforts. Launching ethics campaigns -- while simultaneously undermining the democratic institutions that serve as safeguards against corruption -- is disingenuous and ineffective. In

short, placing political interests above the rule of law and the checks and balances that make democracy function, poses a threat to both democracy and anti-corruption efforts.

Again, thank you for this opportunity.

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