

Peace, Justice, and Security Podcast Transcript

Katie Taylor: Welcome, my name is Katie Taylor and I'm the Executive Director of the Pan American Development Foundation, or PADF, it is my great pleasure to speak today with the Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States Ambassador Nestor Mendez. Ambassador Mendez is also the Vice Chairman of PADF's Board of Trustees, and I am grateful for his leadership and for our partnership with the OAS.

Today, we will discuss some of the most pressing development challenges that Latin America and the Caribbean are facing, what is working and what more could be done to address these – from the COVID-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding and increases in inequality and crime to livelihoods, migration, and climate change. We will also look ahead at what the future holds for the next generation of leaders. So, Ambassador Mendez, considering the diverse development challenges the region faces and that have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, what is the Organization of American States' vision for Latin America and the Caribbean for the years to come?

Amb. Nestor Mendez: Before I start, I do want to say a very special thank you to the Pan American Development Foundation for all the work they have been doing as we confront the COVID-19 pandemic together. Your agility and your ability to adapt and innovate is very important and significant what you guys are doing, and therefore I want to tell you, thank you, we value you as an OAS strategic partner.

What is the vision, we're living in unprecedented times, no generation that we know right now faced what we're facing, and I believe that all efforts have to be directed to the COVID-19 recovery. We have to look at how we will emerge as a better society, as a better region, as a more equal region. Therefore, if we look at what our four pillars demand of us, as mandated by the Member States, the issues of democracy, human rights, development. We have to see how what we're doing in each one of those pillars, and how it can be directed, or can be refocused to address the issues of the pandemic.

If we look at the issue of development, for instance. We have adapted our work to fit within what we're able to do during the COVID-19 pandemic. But now we have to focus on the economic and social recovery in all areas, and this is why the development pillar is central to this recovery. All the other pillars, all the efforts in human rights, in security, in democracy, they have to do the same thing, so the vision is how do we transform.

Taylor: Now there are also obstacles to the development that you speak of so articulately and some of those obstacles are in the space of rights and justice. Perhaps let's focus on how we can work together to advance rights and justice and what some of those challenges are. Because during the pandemic, as you know, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced a decline and homicides and violent crime as a result of strict lockdowns and quarantines. However, criminal groups have continued to expand and to profit from illicit economies. How can our region, prevent and respond to crime, which is an impediment to development, you know from street level violence to organized criminal enterprises involved in drug trafficking, transnational fraud, money laundering – how can we address that?

Amb. Mendez: When we discuss crime in the region, I believe it is important to frame the context within which our region has addressed security challenges, and how we, as an organization, approach the issue of citizen security. Now, we have two pillars that deal with this issue. When we talk about citizen security, we're talking about the work that is conducted by our security, our multidimensional security pillar, but there's also another side, when we talk about security under the multidimensional pillar, we're talking about the enforcement side. This has to do with the security agencies with the legal frameworks that are in place. And we also have the other part or a component which we deal with under our development pillar, and that is more the prevention side. How do we work with young people from the socioeconomic aspect to prevent

them eventually from moving into areas that lead them to commit crimes? Those are the two main areas which we deal with.

First, let me look at the work we do under the multidimensional security pillar. You will recall that in 2000, Member States approved the Declaration on Security in the Americas, which created a new concept of hemispheric security. So, the traditional concept was looking at the security of a state as responding to threats from outside of the national borders. Under the concept of multidimensional security, the state recognizes that there are several other threats that are equally as dangerous to the state and to the security of the citizens, and these new threats are such as climate change, food insecurity, transnational organized crime. In social instability, the threat of guns in society, all of these issues are issues that previously had not been considered as being issues of security to the state. Having recognized that there are several threats, our Member States have driven a conversation that recognizes that the state is not only concerned in conversations of our own security, but instead it represents only one part of the political nexus which bears the interrelationships among individuals, the state and public policy. And their collective role in maintaining law and order, so the work we're doing under the hemispheric multidimensional security pillar, where we have a Secretary for multidimensional security, has been able to make significant strides in improving security in the region. Their work is driven by mandates established by Member States and it has been able to continuously meet the changing needs and challenges of the region.

Recognizing that to achieve citizen security, it is not true that we need more police, as I was talking about the enforcement side or military spending. But rather investments in innovative and inclusive policies to combat crime, this is the socioeconomic element which we managed to the development better. For example, one area in which we have been very successful is serving as a forum for sharing knowledge and best practices, throughout the four pillars of organization. We have the mechanism of ministerial meetings. And for the area of multidimensional security, we have, for instance, the meeting of Ministers of Justice, other ministers, prosecutors, and attorneys general of the Americas and they are work primarily to share information, to share best practices, but also to work towards the harmonization of judicial systems. Through legal cooperation between Member States, so that we're able to confront transnational organized crime, for instance, that is not confined within specific national borders. We have also done a lot of work and been successful in areas such as the design of narcotics policy rehabilitation programs, firearms reduction programs, capacity building, and in anti-money laundering.

Promoting and adapting and strengthening cybersecurity is a big field, Katie, and the OAS is a leader in the hemisphere in providing training and an institutional building support to our Members on the issue of cybersecurity. When the world was forced to migrate into the virtual world, everybody went online, which meant that the risk, the vulnerability, increased. Therefore, cybersecurity has been and will continue to increase in its importance, and we, as an organization, will continue to support Member States to develop their capacities.

Another issue that is affecting the region is organized crime, and it is a very complex issue. So, Member States have been strengthening their financial investigatory approach to combatting transnational crime. By developing technologies that can help to identify suspicious transactions that can be linked, for instance, to trafficking in persons, but to any other crime that results in high flows of financial transactions.

So, those are some of the big areas we're working on under multidimensional security. Now, in terms of prevention and working with youth, especially with young women, the OAS has done a lot of work with youth and with the creation of the small business development centers across the region and in offering opportunities for study, for the creation of small businesses, and in getting involved at the grassroots level, we have done a lot of work on that under the development pillar. And we believe that prevention is just as important as enforcement and, therefore, we must move together on these two areas if we are to effectively and seriously confront crime.

Taylor: One of the things that you mentioned that is so vital in our shift in mindset around justice and security is that these are not only threats that engage a single actor, but these are also challenges that engage all of us, all stakeholders, all parts of society, public, private, civil society, communities, citizens. As you outlined in your remarks on citizen security, another issue that affects us all is corruption. Corruption that takes away resources that could go to the most vulnerable, that could go to COVID recovery and other development efforts.

What can our region do to promote greater transparency and accountability and how do you see the role of each sector, public, private, civil society, differently, as it relates to reducing corruption and enhancing that accountability?

Amb. Mendez: We believe that transparency and accountability are extremely important factors in restoring citizens' trust in public institutions and fostering good governance. Therefore, through our department for effective public management, we have worked assiduously to help Member States strengthen their public institutions and build citizens' trust in the system. One of the main things being done is through our open government program, which is being implemented in several Member States. This program brings together government officials, the private sector, representatives of civil society to dialogue and understand the principles of open government and how it can be administered in your countries. Along the way, we have learned that a key way to promote transparency and accountability is for governments to offer user-friendly access to public information, for all citizens, through open data sources.

As we saw during the pandemic, and I think it's here to stay and will only grow, technology has certainly expanded the scope of possibilities in all areas of life. Especially for information sharing and for keeping citizens informed, it should be used as a platform for increasing transparency and building public trust in the system. To prevent corruption, public institutions should make their information and processes transparent and subject to public scrutiny.

Another way to promote transparency and accountability is to incorporate a wide cross-section of the citizenry in the design, development, and implementation of public policies. All the sectors, public, private, and civil society have a role to play, and especially now, as we seek to recover from the pandemic. All of these sectors have to embrace their rules, because it's only by working together that we will be able to emerge as a better society, hopefully at the end of the tunnel. So, even though the rules may differ public, private sector, civil society, as long as there is a shared commitment of achieving the end goal, this form of collaborative, inclusive approach is most effective, and it is most recommended.

Now, if we recall the last summit of the Americas, the Heads of State and Government agreed to promote the establishment of an Inter-American Open Data Program. Within the ways to strengthen open information policies and increase the capacity of government and citizens to prevent and fight corruption, we have been implementing this program. We have provided technical assistance to many countries to develop their open data national policies. We have also done a lot of work in the area of public procurement and helped governments to develop their capacities to make their procurement policies and their procurement mechanisms much more transparent. As you know, it is a big challenge, where a lot of corruption in many countries is tied directly to the issue of how government spends its money, well the people's money, really, on goods and services that are purchased in the name of the people. So being able to make those processes more transparent, more open to scrutiny, more competitive, is a must.

But I would also like to step back a little. Also tied to the last Summit of the Americas, if you remember, there was this tremendous focus on the issue of corruption. And I think that the conversations around that summit pointed to an important issue that is more of a long-term objective. And there is a recognition that in order to eventually get rid of corruption, we have to change the culture. And we can only change the culture that by focusing on actors. Now, yes, we have to do that, but we have to start farther back with the upcoming

generations, teaching them that living in a democratic society, being respectful of the laws, is just as important as ensuring that your rights are being protected. So, we have to step back, we need to build that culture that is free of corruption and we have to do it, step by step, through the young, upcoming generations.

Taylor: Absolutely agree with you, Ambassador Mendez. Those are excellent points. Now, you mentioned the vital importance of democracy and rule of law, and the OAS for decades has been an extraordinary forum for the Member States to promote democracy through various charters, declarations, and active work of the of the OAS and Member States. At the same time, unfortunately, there are many parts of our region that are experiencing a democratic backsliding, with closing spaces for civil society and direct threats to human rights and fundamental freedoms.

What role can civil society and the international donor community, in particular, play to help strengthen the rule of law, that you so rightly mentioned as vital? And what is being done well already, and what could be improved?

Amb. Mendez: You know, it is such a huge challenge. It begins with building a democratic hemisphere, however, and you know, and we have to keep this always in mind. That the consolidation of democracy is a work in progress, it is a process more than a goal. It is a long-term effort that will see obstacles along the way, but I believe that we have the tools. And I believe that the Members, they are well equipped to address these challenges as they arise, and if we think back a little to our previous discussion, the open government initiative. It is an important tool for holding governments accountable and opening civic space for citizens, participation in the democratic processes. There is also a prominent role that civil society and the international donor community can play to strengthen the rule of law, so the open government partnership is an important initiative that we're working on.

Also, we have several instances where we, as an organization, work directly with civil society. We have the 51st regular session of the General Assembly coming up in November 10 through the 12th of November. And an important part of that event, although not formally part of the General Assembly, but one of the events prior to the General Assembly, is the dialogue between the heads of delegation, the foreign ministers, and the other heads of delegation and the representatives of civil society. And now I believe that we need to open more spaces as an organization for civil society. For us to be able to engage with them more directly, and I think that this is especially important right now, because civil society is an important partner, and they will have an important role to play, again a comeback, as we emerge from the pandemic.

This is one of the dominant issues of our time, we are going through a pandemic, and we have to work to get out of it. And for us to emerge successfully out of it, everybody has a role to play, civil society, the international donor community. Of course, I'm not only talking about economic recovery, I'm talking about all of those areas that need to be strengthened, how do we make sure that more people are able to vote, that more people have a voice in what is going on in their countries, and what it is that they want to see improved in their countries. As an as an organization, we have the tools to engage civil society, we have a good relationship with the donor community, and I think that we have to be clear as to what are the joint objectives and we have to also be very, very serious about how we complement each other's work.

Taylor: Our region is also facing challenges that predated the pandemic, but have, perhaps, been exacerbated. Let's talk now, if we can, more explicitly about how to address the needs of vulnerable populations in crisis, with a focus on security, certainly, but there are two issues I'd like to ask you about – one is migration and the other is climate change.

On migration, we've had flows across the region of various kinds, from Venezuela to neighboring countries, from the northern triangle to Mexico and the United States and others. These pose challenges for the host

countries, as well as for the transit countries, if you will, including an increased need for humanitarian assistance, we have the rise of xenophobia, discrimination, human trafficking, and other effects.

You've talked so eloquently about development. How can our region cope with these flows, what should we focus on, what can countries do to adapt to their different roles, whether they're a country of origin, a transit country, a host country, and how do we tie that into what you've already discussed?

Amb. Mendez: This issue again is another extremely complex one, but it's a timely one. Migration has always existed, but there are periods of time when we see greater flows of migrants, and so there are many, for instance, if we look at our immediate region. Migration outflows from the northern triangle, which has made the news a lot recently, are not new and they have been occurring in waves over the last decade. But this past year, it is estimated that 170,000 migrants arrived in the US, this is the highest numbers since 2006. Now, what is driving it and what can be done? If we step back just a bit before we look at the specific technical issues about the complex problem of migration. We believe that a migrant is not stripped of his or her human rights by the fact that they are forced to leave their homes and travel somewhere else to seek a better life, so that that is that is very important for us to frame the entirety. These people have rights, they are human beings, and because they are migrants, they are not stripped of their rights, therefore, having said that let's look at the issues now.

There are many factors that influence migration, including high unemployment, and violence we've seen it in so many countries, weak rule of law and, recently, and I think is going to keep increasing. Natural disasters, tropical storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, all of these things often result in people being forced to move to another place and to seek a better socioeconomic opportunity for themselves and for their families, so we have the issue of law, how do we protect their laws as they migrate. And how do you work to make sure that people are not put in that horrible position, where if they want to be able to eat, if they want to be able to live a life in safety, that they have to move. Perhaps we need to look at more legal pathways for migration in the region, where people see opportunities. That is something that will require quite a lot of thinking, quite a lot of coordination, but it is something that we need to start thinking and exploring. Another thing to do is to look at what triggers the push factors, you know. Why are people leaving, how do you generate opportunities in the places of origin, so people are not forced to leave. So, we have to look at the generation of human capital, the creation of opportunities, so that people don't are not forced to migrate, but also from the point of view of curbing crime, from the point of view of empowering women, empowering youth, so we have to look at that closely. How do we tackle the challenges that are coming from migration? Some years ago, when we had a drought in parts of Central America that forced a lot of people to leave their farmlands, migrate to the cities and eventually start heading north. What can be done long-term to prevent these things, so we have to work closely with our strategic partners, the PADF is doing a lot of work in helping to generate opportunities and responding to needs as they arise, but we also have other members of the Inter-American family. The entire Inter-American Institute for Cooperation and Agriculture has a huge role to play as we approach the issue of migration, food security, and climate change, and how do these complex issues, how they're interwoven and how we can respond together.

Another thing that we have to look at is the harmonization or the establishment of policies where even if somebody is not forced to move, but the wishes to move, how can they do it safely, those are discussions that have to take place, that are ongoing. But we have to do it from a practical point of view, it has to be the human rights point of view, the human rights of our migrants. The point of view of the right of people to seek a better life, if they so wish, and also the rights of the people to remain in their homes, if they so wish, and how do we work with all of our partners to ensure that they get better opportunities and see the tranquility where they live.

Taylor: Thank you also for speaking of the rights of migrants, as well as for all that you're doing to try and engage the Member States in thinking through innovative solutions. Another global threat that doesn't only affect our region is climate change and often these two intersect, you just mentioned how some migration is

driven by the effects of climate change, be it drought or food insecurity or natural disasters that have been exacerbated by climate change. At PADF, as you know, we seek to promote sustainable livelihoods, with one of our large program focus areas being livelihoods, you know, to offer people livelihoods that are socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable.

As we look at a climate change that affects our whole region, but particularly could have dramatic effects in the Caribbean, what do you think are some of those solutions or the things that we should focus on, particularly in the next two to three years, if you will, to set the stage for what is certainly a long-term issue, but one where getting things done now, is particularly crucial to what the potential longer-term effects might be, what are your thoughts on that?

Amb. Mendez: It is undeniable that climate change presents an existential threat, particularly to small island states and low-lying coastal areas, which includes the countries of the Caribbean, particularly, but it's not limited to them at all, you know, we have seen rising global temperatures that in recent years have contributed to more frequent and severe natural disasters, which has resulted in loss of life and livelihoods. Recent hurricanes, tropical storms, volcanoes, and the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti. We are witnessing in real time how these disasters are contributing to food insecurity, economic decline, water shortages, and, again, forced migration.

So, if we look specifically at what we can do to mitigate climate change in the Caribbean region, I think there is a magic word that starts with R, and its resilience. It's not the only one, but it's extremely important. We have to look at how we can work with our strategic partners to build resilience in the Caribbean, and we are already doing it. For instance, we're collaborating with our partners and we're supporting the Caribbean region with numerous projects, such as one called Building the Resilience of Small Tourism Enterprises in the Caribbean to Disasters.

When you talk about climate change and disasters, all of them are tied to the economy. And all of them are tied to the well-being of the people, so how do we help these economies to adjust so that the inevitable stronger storms don't put them out of business for six months or a year. How do we build the resilience, so that they can come out of these natural disasters as quickly as possible and with as little damage as possible? Those are some of the things that we have to look at. Also, as you know, micro, small, and medium enterprises are the backbone of any economy, and especially in the Caribbean. And unfortunately, these are more susceptible to natural disasters and shocks, therefore, this project, which by the way, is funded by the US Government, the Building Resilience in Small Tourism Enterprises, looks at the roots of the issues, at the base of the pyramid, where we have to focus in the Caribbean.

We're also collaborating and building resilience in basic services, including electricity, water, sanitation –and the critical important component of this is the promotion of renewable and clean energy, this is a huge element, as well as the use of microgrids that create a measure of redundancy in national energy grids, for decentralization of distribution across the large network. Another very important way, we can address the impact of climate change, and it's not just a way it's a must, is through innovation and creativity. One of our other strategic partners, the Young Americans Business Trust, for instance, has organized competitions for young people to devise innovative strategies to tackle the impact of climate change in their communities.

There are many things going on in the broader Inter-American System to address the issue of climate change, particularly in the Caribbean, but not limited to the Caribbean. The issue of climate change is here to stay, and we have to learn to live with it, and we have to help our people prepare for what is coming. And we have to ensure that, as they prepare for it, to safeguard their economies their businesses, but especially the well-being of our people.

Taylor: Thank you, Ambassador Mendez. A closing question, one that ties into what you just were alluding to. As you've often said, our children and our youth are hope for the future. As you know, we as your

partner, PADF, are fully committed to developing the next generation of leaders. We empower at-risk, youth, you mentioned the innovation part, we offer STEM education to students and STEM training for teachers, we promote access to education for migrant children. All of us work tirelessly to close the gender gap, so that girls have access to 21st century jobs and opportunities. What message would you like to share with our region's youth?

Amb. Mendez: Well, first of all, Katie and before getting into the substance of that, I really want to thank you and the PADF team for everything that you have done, and you keep doing in the area of youth empowerment. As I have said many times, and I will continue repeating it, the Pan American Development Foundation is an extremely valuable and cherished strategic partner of the OAS and we have seen many places in which our collaboration really has yielded extremely good results. One such area is the area of youth empowerment.

I am an advocate of issues that have to do with youth and what we can do to ensure that they have access to opportunities, to education. We offer an internship program, scholarships, training, and assistance with the development of small businesses and other programs, which have a direct impact on the lives of youth. I also think that we have to find ways to open the horizon for them, or maybe that is a wrong word, maybe, what we need to do is to allow them to dream and help them pursue those dreams. So, what is the message? The youth of today have been subjected, like the rest of us, the rest of society, to this unprecedented era, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed our world, and it has shaken it to its roots. However, in every disaster, there is opportunity.

I would like to challenge the youth to look for that opportunity, those opportunities that are emerging as our world comes out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Look for those things that are here to stay. Look at those things that will have a direct impact on you and your community. Don't forget to dream big. But you have to work towards achieving those dreams. It starts with being serious about your education, about starting a small business, about leading a community organization or anything else that will have a positive impact on you and your community. Look around yourselves, what are the opportunities that are there for you and for your community, how can you help. Remember that when you help, it makes you a better, stronger person. Also, always seek opportunities that will expand your knowledge and your skill sets, because this will lead to personal growth and, above all, believe in yourself. A lot of the problems that we're facing right now, and the new ones that we have recognized because of the pandemic, I think that those people who are in authority, right now, if they were able to solve them, they would have been solved already. However, we need new ideas, we need new ways of looking at the world, and that means we need you – so, look for those opportunities and believe in yourself.

Thank you, Katie.

Taylor: Oh, thank you for those inspiring words, that challenge to the youth to dream big and seize opportunities, while continuing to grow, to learn, and to help others. That's just beautiful. Thank you, Ambassador Mendez and thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. It's been an absolute pleasure, as always.

Amb. Mendez: Thank you, Katie. Thank you for the opportunity, and you know I do look forward to continuing to work very closely with the PADF. I think we have a lot of work to do, and we will see what the future brings, but I think it is going to be a good future.

####