

Opening Remarks at the

Seminar on Strengthened Democracies and Engaged Youth in Brazil and Canada

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Good morning and welcome to IDRC!
Bonjour et bienvenue au CRDI!
Bom-dia e ben-vindos ao IDRC!

A very special welcome to our colleagues from Brazil who arrived in Ottawa on Saturday. I hope that you had time to rest and recharge for today.

We have quite an agenda!

And an impressive, diverse list of participants!

All of us here today are committed in one way or another to engaging citizens in public life and policy decisions, in particular our young citizens.

Recent events in France remind us how important it is to engage our youth in policy decisions; how their views must be considered before governments announce and implement new policies that concern their livelihood. Employment, health care, and the sustainability of our environment directly influence their quality of life. We know that youth can quickly mobilize and react to policies that they see having negative impacts on their future. Governments should use youth's sense of solidarity to their advantage by consulting and engaging them in policy decisions. With support from IDRC, that is exactly what the Government of Brazil did last year!

Canada Policy Research Networks (CPRN), in collaboration with two Brazilian NGOs, the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (Ibase) and the Pólis Institute of São Paulo, engaged Brazilian youth through the *Brazilian Youth and Democracy – participation, public spheres, and policies dialogue*. The initiative was intended to contribute to the Brazilian Government's national plan for public policy on youth. This series of dialogues was undertaken in seven metropolitan regions of Brazil and the Federal District of Brasilia. An astounding 8,000 young Brazilians between the ages of 18 and 25 participated, leading to a second, concerted, qualitative component that brought together 913 young people in 39 dialogue groups.

Partly inspired by the success of the Brazilian dialogues, CPRN held its first *National Dialogue and Summit for Young Canadians* in Ottawa, in late November 2005. The voices of 150 young Canadians ranging in age between 18 and 25 were heard. They discussed the kind of country they want and the means by which they propose to make this vision a reality. An initial dialogue among delegates led to a second dialogue with 40 decision-makers from the public, community, and private sectors.

IDRC and CPRN want to make the most of the findings from these two dialogues. The purpose of the seminar today is twofold:

- First, to share the results of the two dialogues, including comparative analysis of young people's perspectives on democracy, participation and society, and methodological learnings and lessons.
- Second, to deepen understanding of the policy implications and to identify possible policy interventions and instruments flowing from the research, and identify the potential for replication and tailoring of the methodology in other contexts and countries.

In Brazil, young people aged from 15 to 30 years account for almost 30% of the population. Approximately 80% of them live in urban areas. In spite of great efforts made by the current government, Brazilian youth feel that much remains to be done for them to have better access to basic services such as health care, education, or the means to gain employment. Young Brazilians are concerned about their fate, and despite obligatory participation in the electoral process, the level of abstention is high. The next federal election this year will again test the engagement and interest in elective democracy.

While it might be difficult to compare an electoral system where vote abstention is punishable by penalty with another where the vote is perceived as a civic obligation, parallels can be drawn between the Canadian and Brazilian systems.

In Canada, young people aged from 15 to 30 years old account for only 20% of the population. According to Elections Canada, in 2004, the voting rate for first-time voters from aged 18 to 21 was at 38.7% compared to 60.9% for the general turnout.

There are only preliminary numbers available for the 2006 election, but generally, the general turnout did increase slightly to about 64% overall. Youth turnout is also thought to have increased, but the rate is still much lower than that of the general population.

Même si le contexte électoral du Canada et du Brésil est très différent, plusieurs similarités existent entre les jeunes Brésiliens et Canadiens. Les constatations qui émanent de ces deux dialogues démontrent des attentes semblables face à leurs dirigeants. Ces deux groupes nourrissent des inquiétudes communes au sujet de leur avenir, surtout en ce qui concerne l'identité, les débouchés, l'éducation, le travail, la santé, l'environnement, la justice et les affaires civiles.

Le rôle essentiel de l'engagement citoyen pour un véritable renouvellement de la démocratie a été au cœur même des deux dialogues.

Why such low voter turnouts when young Canadians and young Brazilians have expressed such concern over their fates? How do we renew civic engagement among our youth? We hope that the findings of the two youth dialogues we are discussing today will help us identify some solutions.

We count on all of you to help us find opportunities and initiatives where this dialogue methodology could be applied to re-engage youth and citizens in civic participation.

We especially count on our two young participants, Verena Conceição Da Costa, a Brazilian youth dialogue participant, and Christian Béland, a Canadian youth dialogue participant, to remind us of young citizens' priorities.

We have kept participation to a limited number of people – approximately 40 – so that each one of you will have the opportunity to contribute. So, please do not hesitate to intervene.

We hope that you will all gain something from today's seminar and that you will remain engaged citizens!

Before we move on to our next speaker, I am asked to remind you that, to facilitate our exchange today, we have simultaneous interpretation. So, please, do not speak too quickly when intervening through out the day.

Lunch will be provided at 12:00 noon in the adjacent room. And, when we reconvene after lunch, we will view a video of the Caracas World Social Forum highlighting the participation of our Brazilian and CPRN colleagues in a session where they shared the results of the dialogues.

Je vous souhaite un bon colloque!
I wish you a good seminar!
Eu desejo-lhe um bom seminário!