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Organization of American States: "Investing in Early Childhood: A Sure Strategy to Combat Poverty and Promote Social Development and Equality"

Under the heading, international experts and authorities today participated in a special session of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) and of the Permanent Executive Committee of the OAS Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CEPCIDI) at OAS headquarters in Washington, DC.

During the event's inauguration, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza stressed the significance of the subject of childhood to the Organization. "The OAS has since 1991 played a significant and important role in the formulation, development and implementation of hemispheric initiatives on early childhood. It works with Member States on regional, sub-regional, national and local activities, building experiences and shared lessons that have allowed for joint efforts with other organizations such as UNICEF, the Organization of Ibero-American States, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, UNESCO, the World Bank, the IDB."

The Secretary General added, "these efforts reaped their harvest with the approval of the Hemispheric Commitment to Early Childhood Education" made at the Fifth Inter-American Meeting of Ministers of Education in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in November 2007 and ratified by the OAS General Assembly in June 2008.

"Thanks to such joint efforts, today the Member States can identify concrete achievements. For example, Colombia created the Office of Early Childhood within its educational system; Trinidad and Tobago is conducting a large investment in infrastructure with the participation of the national government through its Ministry of Education, municipalities and parent associations; from Chile a series of workshops and meetings have been carried out in the Caribbean to advise and reflect on early childhood policies, curriculum building and alternative teaching methods; Brazil has incorporated in its curriculum at the national level the results of studies on indigenous and rural communities developed by the OAS with eight countries that were financed with the support of the Van Leer Foundation," Secretary General Insulza said.

"These are just a few examples of the progress we've made and can achieve. I can assure you that today the OAS will continue its efforts to keep that union of wills located at the heart itself of our Organization which is the expression of the spirit of togetherness, cooperation and solidarity of the group of States that make up the organization," he concluded.

The meeting was divided into two panels. The first one addressed the reasons for investing in childhood, featuring studies showing that the brain's abilities are shaped beginning in the gestation period. The second analyzed the experience of the United States. Representatives of UNICEF and the Van Leer Foundation showed how their institutions have adapted changes aimed at improving early childhood.

The panelists were Leonardo Garnier, Minister of Education of Costa Rica; Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute and professor at the University of Columbia in New York; Fraser

Mustard, Founding President of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research; Joan Lombardi, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Inter-Departmental Liaison for Early Childhood Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Estela Ortiz, Executive Vice President of Chile's National Association of Government-Funded Preschools (Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles or JUNJI); Nurper Ulkuer, Program Officer for Early Childhood Development, UNICEF; Leonardo Yañez, Project Officer for Latin America of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, of Holland; and Gloria Vidal, Education Vice Minister of Ecuador and President of the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE).