Assistant Secretary General of the OAS
Ambassador Nestor Mendez
Presentation to the OAS Permanent Council
February 12, 2020

Thank you Mr. Chairman:

Distinguished Ambassadors, Permanent and Alternate Representatives, personnel of the General Secretariat of the OAS, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to explain some essential elements for what I hope will be an additional term serving the member States of the OAS as its Assistant Secretary General.

Five years ago, I appeared before this Permanent Council to share my thoughts and vision about the role of the Assistant Secretary General and I asked for the opportunity to assume such a role. Today I wish to begin by thanking you for the invaluable support you have extended to me and my office during this period. It has certainly been an incredible voyage of learning, of team building, and of delivering under conditions that you only get to know and understand once you are INSIDE the organization.

I have had the privilege of working at the political level on ALL FOUR pillars of our institution, and with a focus on critically important issues such as youth empowerment, innovation and competitiveness, climate change and building resiliency against natural disasters including
improving the capacity of the member States to respond to natural disasters. We also focused on the multidimensional security pillar from the perspective of prevention, such as working with at risk youth before they fall into gangs, and generation of opportunities for them, among other things. I have worked to bring visibility to important cross cutting issues such as those related to Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples. In addition to several specific initiatives to strengthen the Permanent Council, such as the institution of orientation seminars for new Permanent Representatives and ongoing efforts to modernize the systems that support the work of the Council, we have endeavored to strengthen the coordination with other multilateral institutions in the Inter-American system and with our affiliated agencies such as YABT and PADF. Under my leadership, my office has improved the management of the National Offices network, and has worked to minimize the impact on these offices of the ever shrinking financial resources allocated to them. Clearly there is a lot more work to be undertaken and I am better positioned than ever to get it done.

I come before you now not only as a former Ambassador to the OAS, but also armed with the experience of the last five years, and equipped with a clear understanding and an integral perspective of what needs to be done to rectify some of the deficiencies of our institution, to fortify the areas that demand priority attention, and to continue shaping the OAS into what is required so as to respond to the ever-changing needs of our member
States. Today I am much better positioned to continue managing and delivering on the incredible responsibility with which the Permanent Council honored me over the last five years.

Ahora quisiera referirme a esos temas sobre los que propongo seguir trabajando, y los nuevos que propongo abordar. Como recordarán, las funciones del Secretario General Adjunto están definidas en el Artículo 115 de la Carta de la organización, el cual especifica que esta persona es el Secretario del Consejo Permanente y Asesor del Secretario General. Con el compromiso serio con el cual siempre he desempeñado estas funciones, propongo enfocarme en los siguientes temas teniendo siempre presente que la cabeza política de esta organización es el Secretario General:

**General Issues:**

1. Under my leadership, my office will take a more proactive and assertive role in proposing and implementing certain initiatives in direct response to needs and priorities signaled by the member States. For instance, in response to the statements by Caribbean leaders pertaining to the need for the Caribbean to become bilingual as a priority requirement for competitiveness, and calling directly for the OAS to step in and fill this niche, my office is finalizing a proposal to address this request in a very practical way with an initiative called “Idiomas como puentes.” Our
plan calls for this initiative to be anchored on a teacher exchange program at the kindergarten level, and we already have clear expressions of interest for participation from several Caribbean leaders as well as from Ecuador and Spain. In order to implement said program, we will work with the requisite experts from the General Secretariat.

**Working with the Permanent Council:**

2. As Secretary to the Permanent Council, I work closely with the Chair of the PC and all missions. From this vantage point, I am not oblivious to the climate of tension and divisiveness that stems from the difficult issues that confront the membership. We all work in a multilateral setting that can be complex, conflictive and slow to shift direction, and so we be must be innovative and practical in identifying and organizing opportunities for the representatives of the member States to engage in dialogue beyond the choreographed setting of the Permanent Council. *We need to decompress the environment in this critical political body.* Ambassadors will recall that in the recent past I organized several of these events with the individual sub-regional groups and we found the informal discussions and sharing of information in the private setting of my office most useful.

In keeping with the recommendations of the Working Group on Institutional Strengthening, I will promote and organize more opportunities for formal and informal dialogue, between the member representatives and with the General Secretariat.
I will also work with the Permanent Council to retool the General Committee into a point of convergence and coordination of the work of the Committees. These initiatives will be undertaken bearing in mind the Management Modernization Exercise of some time ago and the recommendations contained therein.

3. With a view to generating a new and more positive dynamic between the General Secretariat and the Permanent Council, and in order to foster collective ownership in our institution, we will present for the use of the Permanent Council, a new information product that we expect will enable the Permanent Council and the General Secretariat to work hand in hand to project a more holistic and positive view of our institution. What does this mean?

We have around this table a supremely impressive group of diplomats from all the Americas, who on a daily basis represent their countries at the OAS and promote and defend their national interests and the hemispheric well-being. As the OAS entity with the most direct contact with the Permanent Council, we will work to provide the representatives individually and on a regular basis with up to date information on what the OAS is doing in each of their States. This would enhance their capacity, where needed, to speak at a moment’s notice, to the press or otherwise, and in an informed way about what ALL the OAS is doing in their countries on any given day. The provision of detailed information about what the OAS is doing in its member States is also a practical way
for member States to keep an updated dashboard of the value, both tangible and intangible that the OAS brings to them on a consistent basis. This is would be beneficial for the representatives, their member States, and of course for the General Secretariat. This information product will also be distributed to our national offices so all of us are on the same page.

4. Also for the Permanent Council: we have embarked on and will continue with an initiative to update and modernize the archives and records keeping system of the Permanent Council and the General Assembly, by initiating a new user friendly video library archive system using state of the art technology. This system will also provide automated written verbatim reports of the Council meetings, and we are expecting to roll out this service in the coming months.

5. Señoras y Señores: Quisiera referirme ahora al tema de las finanzas de nuestra organización: Tengo muy presente la situación financiera de nuestra institución, su presupuesto cada vez más pequeño y el impacto directo sobre el número y nivel de personal que podemos mantener. En ese sentido, también reconozco que el ambiente político no es óptimo para iniciar una discusión sobre un incremento de presupuesto o al menos una redistribución de las cuotas. Esta situación pone en relieve la urgente necesidad de identificar y tener acceso a fuentes no tradicionales de recursos tales como los principales fondos internacionales, y yo utilizaré
la capacidad política de mi cargo para ayudar en los esfuerzos de movilización de recursos, trabajando muy de cerca con el personal que tiene la responsabilidad de gestionar recursos. Some essential elements that need to be in place for these efforts to succeed include ensuring that we have the technical financial reporting capacity (IPSAS), and a rationalized, industry accepted ICR rate and policy.

6. Turning to National offices – I am worried about the chronic shrinking financial base for this network, a unique asset of our institution, which needs to be optimized. Member States may recall that at their request, we prepared and presented to the CAAP a Comprehensive Strategy for our national offices, however, this document is still under consideration. But while we await political direction, the truth is that more and more of them are remaining without a titular representative. In order to address the lack of titular representatives, last year my office issued a call to all OAS staff at headquarters who fit the profile required for OAS National Representatives, and invited those interested in being deployed to our national offices to so indicate. The response was very positive, and opens an important potential source of national office representatives, while opening for OAS staff at headquarters an opportunity for professional growth and in a new country while retaining their anchor with our institution. In addition, in order to standardize and improve the management of our national offices, the coordination office prepared and distributed a detailed manual for the management of these offices. This
new tool, which we intend to keep updated as the institutional procedures change, will undoubtedly be of tremendous assistance to our new representatives in the National Office as they assume these important responsibilities.

Maximizing the potential of the Inter-American ecosystem

7. Much has been said about the importance of securing a better engagement and if possible, a basic coordination with the other institutions in the Inter-American network and with the other sub-regional organizations operating in our jurisdiction. Recognizing the tremendous potential of the OAS situated as it is in the center of this ecosystem, I initiated a series of meetings with a number of these institutions (SICA, SIECA, CARICOM, ACS, CAF, ECLAC, CABEI, IDB, PAHO, and the World Bank) to enhance cooperation, find synergies and complementarity in our work, as well as to avoid duplication. We identified five areas for collaboration: Social Inclusion, Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, Empowerment of Vulnerable Populations, Generation of Economic opportunities and Education. We agreed to focus first on two areas, Social Inclusion and the Implementation of the SDGs. We intend to resume these important exchanges this year.

8. Además de las instituciones antes mencionadas, la OEA también es la base de varias de nuestras agencias afiliadas tales como la Young Américas Business Trust, la Fundación Pan-Americana de Desarrollo, y
la Trust for the Américas. Durante los últimos años, yo he trabajado muy de cerca con estas organizaciones y les he brindado apoyo constante especialmente en temas que tienen que ver con la juventud, competitividad, la innovación, y la generación de oportunidades económicas para jóvenes en riesgo con especial atención a mujeres jóvenes. Yo reconozco que existe un gran potencial y grandes oportunidades para trabajar más estrechamente con estas organizaciones, y así lo seguiremos haciendo.

9. Ladies and Gentlemen – The Permanent Observers constitute an important strategic partner of our institution and we need to keep nurturing the potential of this relationship. In recognition of this, we worked very closely with the Permanent Council to lay the groundwork for it to finally formalize opportunities for dialogue and engagement with the Observers in addition to the usual interface at the General Assembly. In addition, as Secretary of the Permanent Council, wherein the Permanent Observers have their seat and engage with member States, I will propitiate additional opportunities for engagement with them, both formal and informal, to secure an even closer relationship of the Observers with the members of the Permanent Council and the General Secretariat. In fact, we already had an informal engagement and we found the exchange to be most useful.
Better and expanded press coverage

En conversaciones con varios Representantes Permanentes, una observación que he escuchado con cierta frecuencia es que como institución no hemos logrado demostrar a los Estados miembros un panorama completo del volumen y diversidad de los proyectos, iniciativas y actividades que hacemos en las Américas. La verdad es que los trabajos que realiza nuestra organización impactan positivamente la vida de millones de personas en nuestros países, y debemos encontrar la forma de darle más visibilidad pública a lo que hacemos. In this context, I will work closer with the department of press and information to explore ways in which we can work together to project a more complete view of what we as an institution bring to the Americas over and beyond the topics that generally captivate the headlines. The OAS is more, much more than only the big political issues with which we grapple.

As we look to the future, under my leadership my office will continue its pioneering work in those areas in which we have been engaged and to which we have brought structure and political attention. I will continue the work we initiated to make the important issues of Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples truly cross-sectional, and with a view to start implementing the respective Plans of Action in a pragmatic and consistent manner. I will also continue paying special attention to the matters related to youth, innovation, creation of opportunities, empowerment of women, natural disaster prevention and mitigation, among other important issues.
Damas y Caballeros: con todo el respeto y la seriedad con la cual siempre he tratado los temas que tengo a mi cargo, les pido su apoyo y la oportunidad de seguir sirviendo en esta organización como Secretario General Adjunto. Ustedes me conocen, y conocen mi vocación por servir a nuestros pueblos y nuestra gente, especialmente a los más vulnerables y necesitados de ayuda.

I look forward to the opportunity of working with you, all of you, as we steer our beloved institution to new victories and a better future for our people, the people of the Americas.

Muchas gracias. Thank you very much.