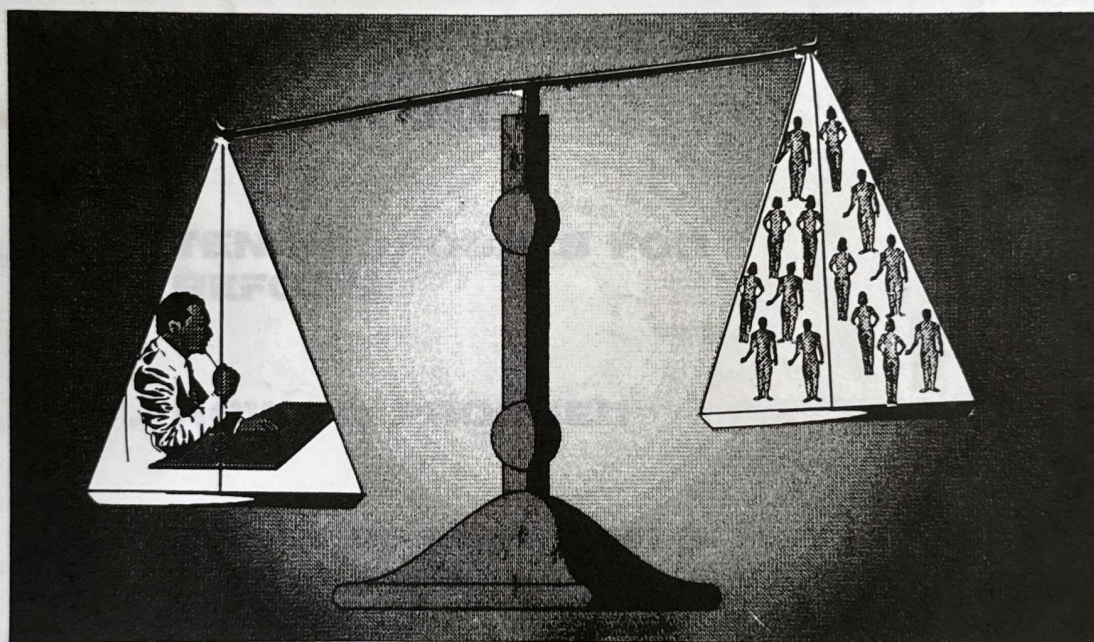


DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

I. INTRODUCTION

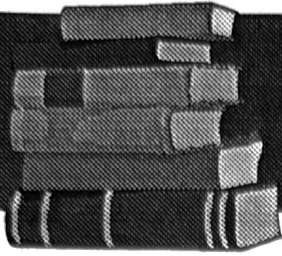


TEN PROPOSALS for POLITICAL REFORM

Society for the Promotion of Education And Research

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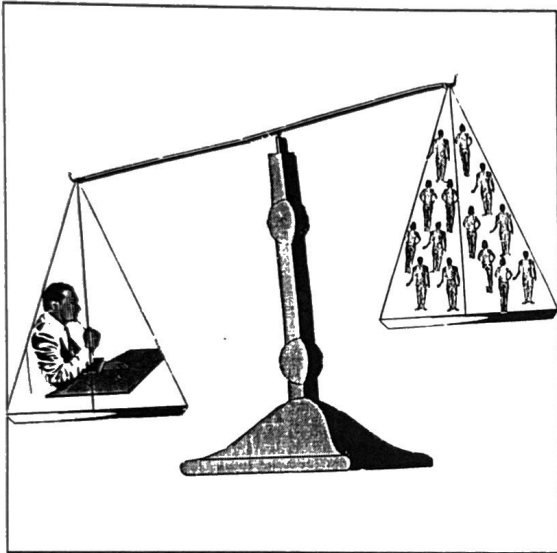


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INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Crisis



Democracy in Belize is in crisis. Excessive concentration of political power, rampant official corruption and growing public disillusionment permeate all aspects of the political process. Urgent reform of the system is essential if Belizeans are to successfully and collectively meet the new socio-economic challenges that face them in the new millennium. Governance of the nation must be based on a new vision of human and sustainable development and on principles of effective separation of powers, people's participation and accountability at all levels of authority. These are the informed conclusions of the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR) after two years of consultations with the people of Belize.

Launched on March 1, 1994, the national campaign for political reform had its genesis in SPEAR's contention that in the second decade of political independence and after three changes of government Belizeans are ready to examine how effectively the nation's political democracy has been serving the people of Belize.

The objectives of the political reform campaign (known as Project for Democracy since January 1995) have been clear: to stimulate public awareness, debate and action around political reform. After 50 nationwide consultations, SPEAR believes that the awareness and debate have certainly begun and that the prospects for action are becoming more encouraging.

This report is SPEAR's further contribution to the political reform debate. It outlines the process of the Project for Democracy, summarizes its findings, and presents SPEAR's proposals for political reform.

SPEAR believes that only people pressure can make political reform happen. This requires an informed public which actively participates in the political reform process and which gives real support to specific proposals. It is SPEAR's hope that this document contributes to further generating public interest, debate and support for enhancing our democratic process in Belize.

Involving Belizeans Nationwide

The process of arriving at this report had two main phases:

A. Identifying Concerns and Developing of Preliminary Recommendations. (March 1994 to January 1995)

In this phase, there were 30 consultations that reached Belizeans in all six districts. Consultations averaged 2 to 3 hours and 20 to 30 people. The methodology used in these consultations was participatory. A large board game was designed that tested people's understanding of how the system works and people were encouraged to openly share their concerns and recommendations. The end result of this first phase was a document outlining 27 preliminary recommendations which was shared with the public through press conferences and radio shows.



B. Sharing of Preliminary Recommendations and Developing a Final Report. (January 1995 to March 1996).

This phase had 20 nationwide consultations. The 27 preliminary recommendations were individually written up on large boards and distributed randomly to participants in the consultations. Also, a ballot sheet with the recommendations was devised for distribution to participants in the sessions. After presentation and discussion of each recommendation, people were asked to vote "yes" or "no" if they felt informed enough to do so. Additional recommendations were also solicited.

This participatory and consultative process used by SPEAR ensured that the Belizean people in all districts had several opportunities to give their input on the various issues of political reform. SPEAR is especially indebted to all the individual and organizational members of the Project For Democracy Advisory Committee (PRODEMAC) who provided advice and support along the way. SPEAR also expresses its thanks to CUSO (Canada) and HIVOS (Netherlands) whose support helped to make this advocacy activity possible.

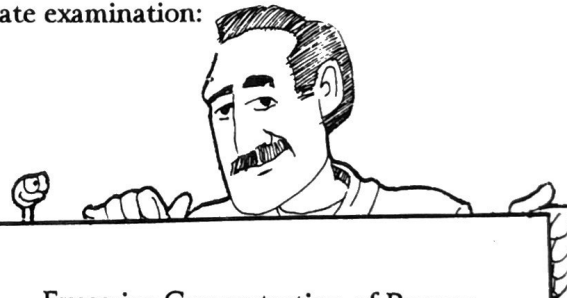
A list of all supporting documentation can be found on page 12. These are available at SPEAR.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE SYSTEM

The People Speak

People across the country were generally very responsive when asked about the concerns they have about the functioning of the present political system. The participants in the consultations welcomed the opportunity to openly express their opinions in a political process that was not organized and directed by one of the major political parties. Even as there was widespread lack of awareness of the detailed workings of political process and ready acknowledgement of this, people generally had a good understanding of real day to day politics and who made decisions in the system.

It is not feasible here to share all the concerns and recommendations of the public coming out of the two sets of consultations. What follows is a summary of major concerns and frustrations expressed by the Belizean people over the two year process. These have been placed in four inter-related broad categories to facilitate examination:



- A. Excessive Concentration of Powers
- B. Lack of Accountability
- C. Lack of People's Participation
- D. Low Levels of Political Awareness

A Excessive Concentration of Powers:

►The Concern:

Too few people hold too much power in our political system. The cabinet of ministers holds powers that are so complete and far-reaching that it becomes about the only aspect of the political

system that really matters. If the Cabinet wants to do something and the law allows it, it does it. If the law does not allow it, it amends or breaks the law. If there is no law, it creates one. So much power is in the hands of the Prime Minister and the other ministers, that the intense competition for that power corrupts the system, renders other aspects of the system ineffective, and creates a political culture based more on clientilism than on fair play.

> *The Causes:*

❶ There is, at present no real separation of powers between the Executive (Prime Minister and Cabinet) and the Legislative (The House and the Senate) branches of government. In the past two governments all members of the ruling party in the House have become ministers in the Cabinet. The small number of seats (29) in the House ensures that this will always be a problem. The Cabinet has become the de facto legislature.

❷ The Senate, as presently structured and in its operation, is powerless and a waste of resources. The majority party, by law controls the majority in the Senate.

❸ The Opposition in the present system is virtually powerless. Elected opposition representatives have less power to represent their constituents than officers who are politically appointed by government.

❹ The Statutory Instrument mechanism allows cabinet ministers vast powers to amend existing laws with the stroke of a pen.

❺ Central government exercises significant power over local government bodies. It controls subventions to the municipal bodies which have only minor financial and legislative powers. Elected Village Councils, which already have little power, can be totally ignored in favor of appointed political officers. The electorate has shown decreasing interest in these local levels of government.

❻ The independence of the Judiciary is being jeopardized by the practice of (i) the central government appointing judges on short term contract and (ii) of having magistrates who are public officers. The executive branch of government, which already is the de facto legislative branch, has therefore wielded increasing power over the judiciary.

B Lack of Accountability:

> *The Concern:*

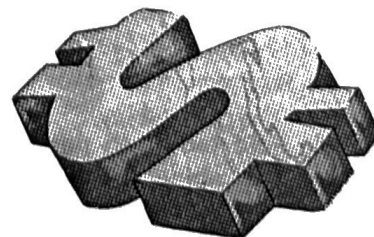
Concerns in this area were among the most intense during the consultations. In meeting after meeting, people expressed their frustrations about the corruption of public officials, waste of public resources and about victimization in the system. Mechanisms for accountability are, if they exist, inadequate or ignored. Examples given ranged from abuse of government vehicles, nepotism, high level officials being above the law, to kick-backs from bloated contracts. Some people feel that official corruption has become so rampant that it is becoming normal and expected behavior. Others cited their frustrations with corrupt public officials as the reason why they did not want to participate in the political system.

> *The Causes:*

❶ Non-existent or inadequate rules and regulations throughout all levels of the system. The existing ones are not effectively monitored nor enforced and tend to be ignored by many public officials. Eventually, ignoring them becomes the norm. The constitution, for example, mandates an annual audited financial report to be made to the House by the Minister of Finance. This has not been done for several years.

❷ Campaign financing is totally unregulated. There is a direct co-relation between campaign financing and official corruption. Once in office, elected officials are called upon for favors by those who give the campaign money.

❸ The public has not done its part to keep public officials accountable. The public even becomes a part of the problem when it accepts services or handouts coming through irregular procedures.





Lack of Participation:

> *The Concern:*

Generally, people feel powerless and left out of the decision-making process. This is related to the concentration of power problem where, apart from voting in elections, only a handful of people make most decisions that affect most people's lives. Limitations of participation in the political process are seen as particularly significant for women, youth and people in rural Belize. Lack of real opportunity for participation contributes more than almost anything else to the lack of interest in the political process.

> *The Causes:*

- ❶ Existing mechanisms for participation are extremely limited and when people do try to influence decisions they tend more often than not to be ignored. This is true of both national and local government. For example, while the constitution gives people the right to give input on impending legislation via the House Committees hearings, the organization of this process actually discourages participation. When changes are proposed, they seldom are seriously considered.
- ❷ Political decision-making has historically been urban biased. Rural people, who make up more than half of the population, have fewer representatives at the national level and most resources tend to go to urban areas.
- ❸ Traditional male-centered attitudes of gender relations have contributed to keeping women out of positions of political power.
- ❹ The political parties themselves lack effective participation and democratic process. Usually, the choices of the party bosses are the party's candidates and leaders. Party positions and manifestos seldom have real input from party

members.

- ❺ Even when informed and aware, sufficient number of Belizeans do not make the leap to participating in action for change. This is due partly to the prevalent culture of silence and to fear of reprisals.



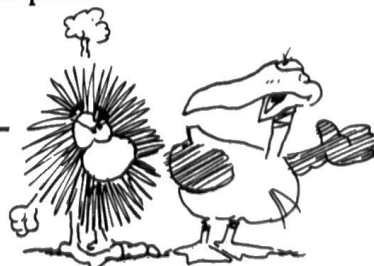
Low Levels of Political Awareness:

> *The Concern:*

Throughout the consultative process, people readily admitted that their understanding of the working of the political system and of the issues of the day was lacking. They also made the connection with this and their limited participation in the system.

> *The Causes:*

- ❶ The educational system has failed to prepare Belizeans for effective and informed participation in the system. From primary to tertiary levels of schooling students get little real exposure to political education and are not developed into critical thinkers.
- ❷ Access to information needed for meaningful debate and decision making on issues has historically been poor. Even information that should be readily available to the public is treated as top secret and can be difficult or impossible to access. Some of the more partisan media deliberately set out to mis-inform and confuse the public for partisan gain.
- ❸ The local media have not done enough on a sustained basis to educate the public about our political institutions and about the major issues of the day.
- ❹ In an increasingly multi-lingual society, most information and education are still in English.



TEN PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

A

The Selection Process

While it is clear that only the Belizean people can make any reformed political system work better than the present has, it is also true that reforms of political structures and procedures can go a long way in stimulating people's participation and enhancing democracy.

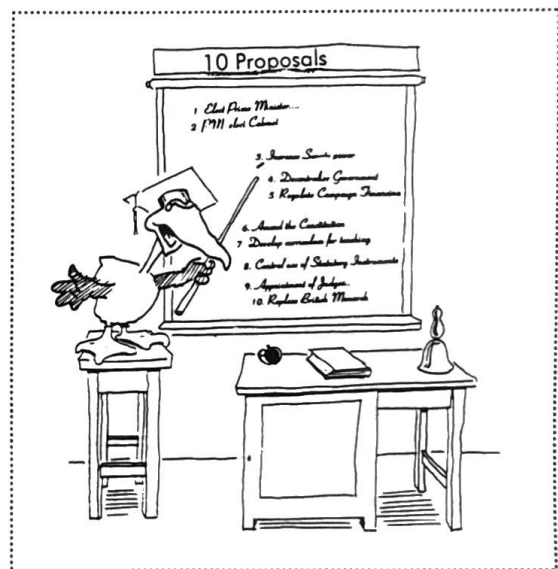
Selecting specific proposals for reforming the political system has been a difficult process. There have been dozens of recommendations coming out of the consultations and many of these have had several variations. All the recommendations cannot be presented here, but we need to start from somewhere.

The ten recommendations for reform were chosen by SPEAR based on:

- (i) The extent to which they address the four major concerns that have been presented.
- (ii) Their relative degree of public popularity in the consultations.
- (iii) The advice of the members of the Project for Democracy Advisory Committee.

In reading and studying the recommendations, there are those who will be tempted to place labels on the type of government being proposed. Is it proportional, parliamentary or republican

people will ask? Because there are several variations of each of these and because the naming of a political system is not an objective of this exercise, SPEAR advises that people resist the tendency to label. This can create unnecessary confusion and place unwanted limits on the debate. The objective is to create our own Belizean democracy to the best of our ability.



Implementation of the recommendations will require either (i) an amendment of an existing law by a minister, or (ii) a new law being passed by government, or (iii) a constitutional amendment. Which of these is needed is indicated after each recommendation as well as what the reform should accomplish.

**B**

The Proposals

① ELECT THE PRIME MINISTER THROUGH NATIONWIDE ELECTIONS IN WHICH EVERY VOTER IN EVERY CONSTITUENCY IN EVERY DISTRICT HAS THE RIGHT TO DIRECTLY PARTICIPATE IN CHOOSING THE NATION'S LEADER.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will remove the Prime Minister from the National Assembly and make this a truly executive leader who presides over the Cabinet and is ultimately responsible for executing the laws and policies passed by the House. It should enhance both people's participation and the check and balance process between the executive and legislature.

② HAVE THE PRIME MINISTER APPOINT THE CABINET OF A FIXED SIZE OF TEN MINISTERS FROM OUTSIDE THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND FROM THE CITIZENRY AT LARGE.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will effectively separate the executive and legislative functions of government since the Cabinet ministers will not be the majority in the House. The likelihood of having ministers of higher quality will also increase. The legislature will then play its true constitutional role of proposing, debating and creating laws and policies for the country.

③ MAKE THE SENATE A 12 MEMBER ELECTED BODY BASED ON TWO SENATORS PER DISTRICT AND INCREASE THE SENATE'S POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES TO INCLUDE: APPROVAL OF 2/3 OF THE SENATE BE REQUIRED FOR SUCH IMPORTANT NATIONAL DECISIONS AS BUDGETS, TAXATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will further share the power of government and make the Senate a real player in the political process. It will also increase people's participation in choosing leaders to represent them without the urban bias that exists in the House.

④ DECENTRALIZE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT POWER BY GIVING GREATER FINANCIAL AND LEGISLATIVE POWERS TO THE MUNICIPAL BODIES AND HAVE DIRECT ELECTIONS FOR THE MAYORS OF THE BELIZE CITY COUNCIL AND THE TOWN BOARDS.

This will require the revision of the body of laws governing local government and ideally the addition of a section to the constitution on local government. It will decentralize power to the local community levels and increase the people's role and participation in the political process.

⑤ ENACT PROCEDURES AND MECHANISMS TO REGULATE CAMPAIGN FINANCING SUCH THAT (I) POLITICAL PARTIES AND INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES FOR ELECTED PUBLIC OFFICE MUST DISCLOSE ALL CONTRIBUTORS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEIR CAMPAIGNS AND (II) THAT LIMIT ANNUAL FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO BOTH POLITICAL PARTIES AND INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES.

New legislation will need to be enacted. This will contribute significantly to the monitoring of the relationship between campaign contributions and political corruption by providing regular and publicly accessible information on campaign contributions. Exact maximum limits will need to be agreed on.

6 AMEND THE CONSTITUTION TO REQUIRE REFERENDA ON (I) TREATIES WITH OTHER NATIONS OF SIGNIFICANT NATIONAL IMPORTANCE, (II) CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS TO CHAPTERS I AND II OF THE CONSTITUTION, AND (III) ISSUES OF VAST NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE AFTER 15% OF THE ELECTORATE HAVE SIGNED A PETITION TO THE PRIME MINISTER.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will provide people with more opportunities for participation in decisions of crucial importance to the nation.

7 DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM FOR THE TEACHING OF POLITICAL EDUCATION IN ALL LEVELS OF SCHOOLING IN BELIZE.

This will require reform of the educational system. Such a curriculum should be developed by a national task force with representatives of political parties, the business sector and civil society.

8 LIMIT AND CONTROL THE USE OF THE STATUTORY INSTRUMENT MECHANISM BY MINISTERS OF GOVERNMENT BY (I) MAKING SELECTED LEGISLATION IMMUNE FROM CHANGE THROUGH THIS MECHANISM AND (II) BY HAVING THE ELECTED SENATE APPROVE ADDITIONS AND AMENDMENTS TO LAWS BEING PROPOSED BY MINISTERS.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will remove some powers from ministers of

government to amend legislation without consultation with the elected representatives of the people.

9 DISCONTINUE BOTH THE SHORT-TERM APPOINTMENT OF JUDGES AND THE CIVIL SERVICE MAGISTRATE SYSTEM BY (I) AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION TO HAVE ALL JUDGES APPOINTMENTS BE UNTIL THE AGE OF 65 AND BY (II) ENACTING LEGISLATION TO HAVE ALL MAGISTRATES (A) CEASE TO BE CIVIL SERVANTS ON APPOINTMENT (B) BE APPOINTED FOR AT LEAST A PERIOD OF 7 YEARS.

This will require a constitutional amendment. It will contribute to further ensuring the independence of the judiciary and to people's trust in the system of justice.

10 REPLACE THE BRITISH MONARCH WITH A BELIZEAN HEAD OF STATE (TO BE RENAMED) WHO HAS SIMILAR POWERS TO THE PRESENT GOVERNOR-GENERAL AND WHO IS ELECTED BY A 2/3 MAJORITY IN A JOINT SITTING OF BOTH THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE SENATE.

This will require a constitutional amendment. This should increase people's sense of ownership and identification with the nation through a Head of State who is not the cultural and political appendage to another country's past but rather one who truly embodies and represents our values, experiences and aspirations as a people. Doing this will not jeopardize Belize's membership in the Commonwealth nor affect our relations with the United Kingdom.



HOW TO PROCEED

Throughout the political reform campaign so far, there have been people who have suggested that this exercise is a waste of time and that nothing will come out of it. It is the kind of attitude that has led many to inaction and that can even contribute to the persistence of injustice. Fundamental change is never easy, especially if it means less power for those who control the system. But the seed of change has been planted and SPEAR believes that reform will come.

While concrete action on reforming the political institutions will be the tangible measure of success in the process, there is an even more valuable benefit in SPEAR's eyes. Complacent political attitudes are themselves the biggest obstacle to genuine political reform and if this process contributes in any way to promoting the practice of people's participation in political activity outside of the political party process, it will have been more than worth the effort.

How do we advance the process towards political reform? While SPEAR did call for the establishment of a special Commission by government to develop proposals for political reform, it certainly did not envision the exclusion of civil society organizations as full and equal members of the Commission. Limiting the make up of this Commission to the major political parties undermines its effectiveness and jeopardizes the outcome of the process. SPEAR has protested several times but to no avail. It will continue to lobby for a truly national commission

SPEAR's work on political reform is far from over and goes beyond monitoring and giving proposals to any commission. For any reform to happen and to be meaningful will require much more public awareness and support. Constant people pressure must be placed on the policy makers. SPEAR's clear role is to facilitate the participation of civil society in the political reform process.

SPEAR's activities for the immediate future will include:

- ☛ *Making copies of this document widely available to Belizeans nationwide.*
- ☛ *Generating public interest and support for the proposals through public meetings, workshops, visits to schools and use of the media.*
- ☛ *Building a support coalition of civil society organizations and individuals.*

In the long run, SPEAR hopes that the issue of political reform will be central to the national elections of 1998. These elections could be a referendum on political reform and launch Belize into a new era of enhanced democracy. For any of this to happen, your support is crucial. If we leave it up to the politicians it could be over before it even begins.

For expressions of support or for more information call ☎ or write ✉ to SPEAR.

SUPPORT MATERIAL AVAILABLE

1. "Call for National Consultation on Political Reform," (Flyer). SPEAR, March 1994.
2. List of Political Reform Consultations in Phase A. (March 1994 to July 1994).
3. List of Political Reform Consultations in Phase B. (March 1995 to August 1995).
4. "Interim Report: National Consultations on Political Reform," SPEAR, June 1994.
5. "The Belize Reform Agenda: Recommendations From the National Consultations on Political Reform," Mustafa Toure, August 1994.
6. "National Consultation on Political Reform Categories," Mustafa Toure, August 1994.
7. "Preliminary Recommendations From the National Consultations on Political Reform," SPEAR, October 1994.
8. "Project for Democracy: Ballot." (Sheet). SPEAR, March 1995.
9. List of Members of the Project for Democracy Advisory Committee (PRODEMAC).
10. "Facilitator's Guide for Phase B Consultations," SPEAR, March, 1995.

Note: SPEAR also has a comprehensive collection of other materials on political reform which are available in the SPEAR Resource Center.



SPEAR

- ◆ **The Society for the Promotion of Education and Research is a non-partisan, not-for-profit, limited liabilities company that has, since its inception in 1969, been devoted to increasing national consciousness and participation in the making of Belize.**

- ◆ **SPEAR's mission is to empower people to struggle for justice, democracy and sustainable development. Since 1986 when SPEAR formalized its operation and opened an office, SPEAR has implemented three separate 3 - 4 year projects to achieve this mission, each building on the one before it.**

- ◆ **In its 1994 to 1996 programme cycle, SPEAR focused its efforts on furthering the concept of democracy in Belize through advocacy around political reform, through community organizing and through the strengthening of civil society's capacity to participate in national issues, for offering alternative views on public policy and for stimulating people to act for social change. SPEAR proposes a programme of work for 1997 - 2000 with five major goals which will be operationalized through five inter-related areas of work: Advocacy, Community Empowerment, Public Information and Education, Financial and Institutional Sustainability and Programme Management.**



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