

WYP General:

Reflections from the ecumenical youth participants World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil January 24 – February 1, 2009¹

The World Council of Churches invited two young people from India and Armenia to participate in the World Social Forum *January 27 – February 1*. Preceding the meeting, WCC staff and the two youth participants participated in a three day pre-meeting of youth from January 24-25, 2009 organized by CLAI, YMCA, FUMEC, Methodist and Catholic youth networks in Latin America. The youth meeting was focused on the theme “Faith and Politics”. The meeting consisted of presentations, group discussions and regional strategizing on the role of church youth to work for social justice. The Latin American youth organizations organized a well attended panel presentation hosted by the Anglican Church in Belem featuring Marina Silva former Brazilian Senator working on environmental issues. The panel also included a Catholic Chilean theologian, Nicolas Iglesias, continental youth coordinator for CLAI and Tiago Machado, at that time coordinator for CLAI in Brazil. The intergenerational panel highlighted the role of socially engaged Christians, particularly youth, for social transformation. The church was crowded during this session and official greetings were brought from CLAI, CONIC and local church leadership.



During the meeting, the group was also joined by a youth worker from Rio de Janeiro working in the Favelas on the issues of violence and engaging the youth in a national structure working to influence government policy for youth empowerment and human rights. One noteworthy aspect of his session was the expert analysis of youth as a primary group affected by violence and the factors that contribute to this reality. He also introduced to us the language of ‘youths’ meaning that youth can never be treated as a homogenous group but we must pay attention to the specificities faced by youth according to their class, ethnicity, gender and other social status markers.



The diversity of the Brazilian people, the acute ecological concerns combined with the Amazonian region’s rich biodiversity, the social commitment of Christian youth organizations and the intense rates of violence facing youth in the region were all major factors that influenced the discussions during the youth meeting. These issues were particular areas that those of us from outside the region could learn from. For instance, for one of the youth part of the WCC delegation, it was the first time she was experiencing church as unabashedly involved in political issues. Since the theme of the meeting was ‘Faith and Politics’ we discussed as a group what do we mean when we use the term ‘politics’ and how our faith engages us in social concerns in our different countries. The group concluded that when we speak about politics, we do not mean that which is only connected to ‘government’ but all decisions, processes and issues which concern the well being of humanity and the earth. The two youth invited to participate by the WCC were able to give inputs during the meeting from their contexts concerning the theme and the work of their churches. This inter-regional interaction proved to be fruitful as youth expressed interest and gratitude to learn about the differences and similarities between their countries and churches. From the WCC side, we spoke to the group about the upcoming IEPC and how young people could get

¹ The participation at the World Social Forum, the support of two young participants from India and from Armenia to attend and the contribution towards the pre-meeting with youth organizations in Latin America was covered with budget from the World Youth Programme 2009.

involved in this event and furthermore contribute to the discourses on theology and violence based on the work they are all doing locally.

Most importantly for the Latin America youth, the group discussed what steps would be taken to continue cooperation between different youth organizations in the region. This is something the WCC Echos Commission on Youth in the Ecumenical Movement has been strongly promoting in all regions since 2007. Also, following the WCC Latin America Regional Meeting in 2008, it is clear that there is synergy and common commitment to increase the regional ecumenical cooperation among youth—a very positive development for the ecumenical movement. The challenges for the group will be to communicate this to others in their respective organizations and to expand the cooperation to include more Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical churches and youth from Central America and the Andean region that were underrepresented in the meeting.

It was very important for WCC to be there and follow these strategic networking discussions. The WCC suggested models for regional networking that exist in other regions and encouraged the youth to continue their networking efforts and also the cooperation with WCC and other regional ecumenical bodies. The meeting was a chance for the WCC to witness firsthand the good work being done by young people in Latin America.

The World Social Forum has always been a transformative and renewing experience to me. It is the opportunity to gain strength from a spiritual, intellectual and social perspective, since the encounter with peoples and social movements makes us revive our utopias.

I would like to stress the idea of the WSF as a sign. A gathering of around 100'000 people from different countries, cultures, organizations, religions and languages cannot be that a sign. This macro-encounter is a sign of the many individuals and organizations searching “a new possible world”; we could refer to it as a “new Pentecost”, in which languages mingle as they look for a common denominator in favour of life. It doesn't mean that each participant's specificities are erased, but that we have a common goal bringing the spirit and the harmony that flows through the meeting.

We could say it is a celebration of life, a celebration of organized resistance and fights, where tears for the sad events get mixed to hope, to singing and dancing and to the sharing of the struggles and the transformative experiences which are on the way.

I would like to outline the relationship between the themes and the importance of continue holding the WSF in South countries. Belem do Para as the Amazon's gate has everything to do with the relevance of the environmental issues worldwide and with the claim coming from the earth, “crying as if she was giving birth”. A clamour the world has urgently to deal with.

I also believe that this meeting has an important practical aspect in improving the coordination and the strengthening of the existing networks. A concrete example of this was our pre-forum youth gathering, one of the many taking place simultaneously to the WSF. This meeting became an excellent opportunity to articulate the work of many youth organizations with an ecumenical vocation in the continent and to settle a common agenda on specific issues. We reached some basic agreements on common actions that also will challenge our ecumenical march. I am convinced that for CLAI's pastoral and for the church as a whole this is an opportunity of acting as a public witness and of raising its prophetic voice.

I had been contacted by one newspaper with one of the highest rates of readers in Uruguay. They wanted to know if the protestant churches had taken part in the WSF. When I told them about CLAI's participation they would inquire “why are the churches interested in the World Social Forum?” For us this is a fundamental faith question that we are obliged to respond to. The church has to be present, speak out about what it is doing and what is its position towards the reality that surrounds it.

- Nicolas Iglesias Schneider, Youth Continental Coordinator of CLAI