

Young people are not only tomorrow's leaders but also today's allies

The World Conference on Youth, organized by the United Nations and the Mexican government took place in Guanajuato, Mexico, with an attendance of more than three hundred youth delegates from civil society, the United Nations agencies involved in organizing the conference, 35 youth or education ministers from other countries, as well as representatives of governments and civil society from one hundred countries.

Two of the Latin American delegates attending the conference were from the youth department of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) – namely Jessica Mora and Nicolás Iglesias, who were part of the civil society delegations from Costa Rica and Uruguay respectively. Youth delegates from the World Alliance of YMCAs, the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, the Scout movement and the Student Christian Movement and others also took an active part. The conference was organized as part of the UN International Year of Youth and had as its theme 'Dialogue and Mutual Understanding'. The conference discussed a variety of issues, such as: employment, education, sexual health, gender, migration, technology, sustainability and poverty, leading into a two-day debate which produced a Declaration to be presented to the Governments' Forum.

Purnima Mane, deputy director of the UN Population Fund, congratulated Mexico on taking the initiative to hold the conference, and also on the bicentenary of its independence and the centenary of its revolution. 'I cannot imagine,' she said, 'a better way to begin a new period in the nation's life than working with young people.' She gave out two clear messages: 'Now is the time to invest in young people and now is the moment to foster dialogue and mutual understanding between culture and youth.' In conclusion, she stated that the Millennium Development Goals to end poverty and create a sustainable planet can only be achieved if there is intelligent investment in youth and alliances are formed with them.

After the opening ceremony hundreds of young people from tens of countries took part in a march of more than two hundred civil society organizations, including those representing the churches' pastoral work with young people. The youth organizations in the march demonstrated in favour of the ratification of the Ibero-American Convention on Young People's Rights, which is the only international instrument that recognizes young people as persons with full rights in the form of specific freedoms. They stressed the need for an international legal instrument guaranteeing greater respect for the rights of young people.

The conference produced two very important documents: the Guanajuato Declaration on Civil Society and the Statement of the Governments' Forum. Both documents were the result of high quality debates on thirteen important topics all dealing with issues that particularly affect young people.

It should be emphasized that both documents clearly stress how essential it is to invest in young people, not as the future but as strategic allies in achieving the Millennium Development Goals set out by governments and civil society, in which churches and youth organizations have a key role to play. We echo the words of the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan: 'Young people are not only tomorrow's leaders but also today's allies.'