

Ecumenical Youth Participation at the World Social Forum 2009 Belem, Brazil

Why should Christians and churches participate in a global forum on social and political issues bringing together nearly 80'000 people from organizations, NGOs, unions, media and faith groups around the world? The World Council of Churches invited two young people from India and Armenia to participate in the World Social Forum from January 27 – February 1, 2009. A three day pre-forum youth gathering on the theme “Faith and Politics” was organized by the Council of Latin American Churches ([CLAI](#)), YMCA, World Student Christian Federation ([FUMEC](#)), Methodist and Catholic youth networks in Latin America to prepare for the World Social Forum and discuss the key issues facing young people in the region and address the question: why should christians come together on social and political issues?



The youth organizers prepared a panel presentation hosted by the Anglican Church in Belem featuring Marina Silva (former Brazilian Senator working on environmental issues), Juan Navarrete (a Catholic theologian from Chile), Nicolas Iglesias (youth coordinator for CLAI) and Tiago Machado (coordinator for CLAI youth in Brazil). The intergenerational panelists debated and discussed the role of Christians, particularly youth, for social transformation. In addition to the 20 youth leaders present for the pre-forum, the church was crowded with other local participants of all ages for the panel presentation and official greetings were brought from CLAI, CONIC and local church leadership. The message was a challenging one—especially for the young people present who were reminded of the “daily bread of ecumenism which is to ask oneself where are the poor sleeping?” remarked Navarrete from Chile. He emphasized the fact that ecumenism often turns into rhetoric and we forget the real life application of our goals for Christian Unity. Marina Silva remarked, “it is not enough just to love the earth, but we must protect it.” She reminded us of the rich gift that the Amazonian region is for the world—containing around 22% of the world’s species, where over 200 different indigenous languages are spoken, a region that provides rain and oxygen for the whole planet. Meanwhile, she reminded us of the trafficking of people and ecological exploitation such as illegal deforestation taking place everyday and the theological imperatives to take care of God’s creation.



In another session during the pre-forum youth gathering, the group was joined by Executive Director for the Institute of Religious Studies in Rio de Janeiro, Pedro Strozenberg, working in Favelas on the issues of violence. He engages youth in a national Brazilian structure working to influence government policy for youth empowerment and human rights. Young people in their adolescence and 20s are the primary group in society affected by violence in Brazil (as in many other countries). When trying to understand the factors that contribute to this reality Strozenberg stressed the importance to understand the concept of ‘youths’—meaning that youth can never be treated as a homogenous group but that we must pay attention to the specificities faced by youth according to their class, ethnicity, race, gender and other social status markers. Finally, the young

people worshiped together in a historical Lutheran church established by Brazilian missionaries in Belem. The church is well-known in the country for being a uniquely native church and for its dynamic youth ministry. The young people from the church hosted a brilliant cultural event filled with music, dance and fellowship.

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. In reaction to the theme of the youth gathering, ‘Faith and Politics,’ we discussed what do we mean by the term ‘politics’ (not limited to governmental or party politics but all decisions, processes and issues which concern the well being of humanity and the earth) and how might our faith engages us in social concerns in our different countries. For some of the youth, it was not evident to see the role the church could play in advocacy or ‘politics’. The WCC youth participants from India and Armenia were

able to share about the realities in each of their contexts. This inter-regional interaction proved to be fruitful as youth expressed their interest and gratitude to learn about the differences and similarities between their countries and churches.

WCC staff led a session to help the participants talk about different aspects of violence. Scenarios were given to help the group think of violence from interpersonal to structural levels (i.e. "A person hears a couple fighting in the apartment next door. The yelling and fighting seems to escalate into physical violence. The neighbour who hears the fight is not quite sure what is going on and does not intervene in the situation in anyway." Is the reaction of the neighbour violent or non-violent? Why? Can churches come together to speak and act against violence?) The group was introduced to the WCC's upcoming [International Ecumenical Peace Convocation](#) (IEPC) and how young people can get involved in this process based on the work they are all doing locally and furthermore contribute to discourses on theology and violence through the Peace Declaration.



Why are the churches interested in the World Social Forum?

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 that be 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 in with 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 continuing to hold the WSF in Southern 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 previously 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 will also challenge our ecumenical march. I am convinced that for CLAI's programs 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.

- Lic. Nicolas Iglesias Schneider, Continental Youth Coordinator of CLAI

The Latin America youth discussed what steps would be taken to continue cooperation between different youth organizations in the region. The WCC *Echos Commission on Youth in the Ecumenical Movement* has been promoting networking in all regions since 2007. There is synergy and common commitment to increase the regional ecumenical cooperation among youth in Latin America—which is positive for the whole 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.

For the WCC, it was invaluable to be present and follow these strategic networking discussions. The WCC contributed by suggesting models for networking that exist in other regions such as the [Ecumenical Asia/Pacific Youth and Students Network](#) (EASYNNet) and encouraged the youth to continue the good work together.

During the WSF, all the youth attended the array of workshops and events and came together at the Ecumenical Tent to debrief what each had learned and how to follow up the experience back at home.

WCC youth delegation reflects on the World Social Forum

Samuel Philip Mathew,
Research Scholar, Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India

“So ultimately to one it seemed like there was a lot of talk and no solid way ahead. After four days of vibrancy and discussion, the forum definitely left one question unanswered at its end; what concrete step forward now?? Though the WSF Assembly of Assemblies was supposed to show the way forward, it essentially failed in two directions. On one hand no statement was made on what the forum decided to do through its constituents/participants to ensure that injustices are done away with. This in turn failed to show a commitment to the causes that brought the people together to the forum. Being a totally decentralized forum, there was little interaction within the participating bodies among one another in an organized manner to ensure that further networking was made possible. Though these criticisms would seem valid in terms of the organizing and implementation of the forum; for those citizens who came to be a witness to this great interaction, for those native people who came to shout out and enact their concern for nature, for those activists and academics who raised their voice against injustice and oppression the forum was ultimately a space they most longed for. It gave strength to their feeble voices and made one the fragmented lamentations. I guess this is where the World Social Forum really leaves its mark, in being able to function as a salad bowl of different cultures and problems and yet bringing forth a taste that lasts, a taste that goes well with those who were a part of the salad.



Now going back to the role of churches, to me it seemed that a space like this is an avenue in which church can take active participation as it shows that church is very much concerned with social justice and that it is not just in paper or in words. The fact that the ecumenical tent was also a human rights tent sends a message of difference to those



who view church history itself as a history of oppression. It also leaves a political statement on behalf of the church that we are against oppression. In countries like India where church is a minority, church is accused of being pro west/capitalist and hence anti national. Engagements such as in the WSF provide responses to those accusations. If Jesus questioned the existing social systems and if church has a prophetic role to play keeping in line with Jesus' life; then it becomes very essential for church to be rooted in the people, in movements close to their hearts. In Brazil the church takes an active role in standing up for farmers' rights to land and wages. Anglican Bishops marching along with the masses in the inaugural march was a heartening experience.

By sending a youth delegation to the WSF, WCC to me seemed to have taken serious note of the fact that youth is the present and not just the future. Next time around, if serious effort can be put into having a workshop focusing on the youth, it would be a beneficial for the Council and the participants/delegates. If the ecumenical tent had working office nature to it, like space to have a quick meeting or even so that WCC delegates can deposit their working material and collect it later when it was needed; the tent would have been more useful. Involvement in the Forum on behalf of the Council can be more coordinated in the future so that we can take serious note on what we

have learnt through it and how we plan to incorporate our new knowledge in our future activities. The World Council's involvement in the Gaza issue was lauded by democratic agencies that took part in the forum. WCC itself focused on ecology and economics, issues that lie at the heart of human existence today. It is not just at the international level but also at the local and regional level that churches have to stand with the people so that our practice falls in line with our preaching."

Satenik Haroutunian,
Programme Assistant, WCC Armenia Round Table, Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenia

"The WSF was remarkable not only by the engagement of youth, NGOs and faith-based organizations, alliances and movements but also for the active participation of scientists. International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES) conducted a seminar on the responsibility of science for peace research versus military research and warfare which works towards the contribution to the awareness of ethical principles and the specific responsibility of scientists in the international peace, ethics in science as well as responsibility of scientists for justice and sustainable development. Bringing the issue of values and responsibility for consequences of scientific works as brought by scientists during the WSF was a remarkable contribution and proved the importance of raising the issue of ethics at such forums and making involvement from larger segments of scientific society along with faith based and secular organizations into similar discussions.



The WCC participation in the WSF is an important one. Having contributed to the work of WSF by focusing on financial crisis and ecological issues, the WCC availed a good opportunity for the youth and representative of its member churches to be engaged in the social movement on one hand and ecumenically interact through sharing and experience exchange on the other hand.



This kind of gatherings as a rule exerts its influence not only on the society in general but on the individual basis as well, which is a crucial factor in the formation of critical and analytical thinking with especially young people. In my opinion, by engaging ourselves into more perceptive attitude towards the world that surrounds us we can at least establish preconditions for "Another world" and in the long run make the far reaching dream with another world possible."

For more information about the [World Council of Churches involvement in the 2009 World Social Forum, Belem, Brazil.](#)