

**Canadian Youth Delegates' Report
1st UNESCO Americas Youth Forum
9 September to 15 September 2007**

Presented by:

**Kimia Ghomeshi
Benjamin Powless**

To:

Canadian Commission for UNESCO

INTRODUCTION

The 1st UNESCO Americas Youth Forum took place from September 9th to September 15th, 2007 in Acapulco, Mexico, with the theme Young People and Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures, and Peoples. The participants of the Forum numbered 127 with a diverse delegation from 33 countries across the Americas and observers from several Mexican states and other countries. The Americas Forum is the third regional UNESCO Youth Forum to be organized in the past two years, in response to recommendations made by participants at the 2005 Youth Forum in Paris.



At the opening plenary session, speeches were presented by Marie-Helena Henriques Mueller, Chief of the Section for Youth at UNESCO, Kimia Ghomeshi, youth delegate from Canada, as well as some Mexican functionaries and the head of the UNESCO Mexico office. The presenters placed much emphasis on the role of dialogue in achieving UNESCO's key objectives in the areas of education, science, culture and communications, and most importantly the role of dialogue in breeding understanding and joint actions amongst America's youth.

THE YOUTH DELEGATION



Kimia Ghomeshi and Benjamin Powless, members of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO Youth Advisory Group.

Selections were determined by a steering committee comprised of: Clarisse Kehler-Siebert, Canadian representative to the UNESCO Youth Forum in 2005, Danika Littlechild, Vice-President of the Sectoral

Commission Culture, Communication and Information, David A. Walden, Secretary-General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and Cynthia Lacasse, Youth Program Officer for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE YOUTH FORUM

The Americas Youth Forum was a space provided for youth from across the region to collectively analyze the issues and opportunities that are faced by youth across the continent. Through various deliberations, concrete action-oriented initiatives were developed that placed much emphasis on the importance of capacity-building opportunities to foster personal and social development, not only to enrich youth, but more importantly their societies.

During the six weeks prior to the Americas Youth Forum, the delegates participated in a online list serve administered by the Section for Youth, Sport and Physical Education at UNESCO who posed one question each week to encourage discussions around six particular themes: Pan-American identity, Education, Youth-Inclusive Projects, Youth and Sustainable Development, Health and Addictions, youth participation in public policy and the role of information and communications technologies. The discussion questions were thought provoking and drew attention to key issues that were relevant to all the delegation of their respective communities. The listserv provided an excellent space for delegates to share their individual ideas and experiences in relation to the aforementioned themes, and as well allowing each delegate to observe the commonalities and differences in challenges facing youth from across the region. Furthermore, the Section for Youth, Sport and Physical Education created a summary of contributions for each theme in order to highlight key points that surfaced from the discussions. The list serve and summaries helped to prepare delegates and the Forum facilitators for discussions to be held during the Forum around the themes in question.

After presenting their conceptual tree diagram, each small group would create a proposal that was often local in scope and emphasized the leadership of young people in its implementation.



The Final Declaration of the Americas Youth Forum shares the recommendations put forth by the delegates. Several of the proposals would often propose similar recommendations to those in other issue-based working groups. This would suggest that there are certain practices that should be adopted across sectors to address various social issues. The following is an example of popular recommendations: creating networking spaces and opportunities in order to foster ongoing collaborations between various actors, knowledge exchange, and to build stronger youth-adult alliances; providing youth-friendly versions of political, health-related and educational documents; local skills-building programs to encourage youth entrepreneurship ; mentorship programs that encourage intergenerational dialogue; youth volunteerism; cross-sectoral cooperation; sharing success stories to inspire and guide local initiatives; harnessing ICTS as a tool for development; and placing emphasis on art-based initiatives to promote youth participation in communities.

YOUTH DELEGATES' CONTRIBUTION



The Canadian delegates made great contributions in their working groups and brought a perspective that differed from that of the Latin American and American delegates. In particular, the delegates focused on developing strategies with their peers that could be led by youth and thus address the need for youth entrepreneurship and empowerment. Also, the youth delegates raised questions around the lack of education (formal, informal and nonformal) around sustainable development and global environmental problems such as climate change. The delegates shared many ideas on how sustainable networks could be achieved and particularly amongst youth. In addition, they placed much emphasis on the need for well developed action items that were in line with UNESCO's objectives and highlighted UNESCO's programmes as

valuable resources whenever possible. Finally, the youth delegates often provided input on the need to build on others' assets and leverage existing resources to implement projects in a collaborative and proficient manner.

Canadian delegate Kimia Ghomeshi presented during a plenary session on an existing online resource, TakingITGlobal.org that provides young people worldwide with the information and tools to create and sustain social networks. Ms. Ghomeshi provided examples of how TakingITGlobal could support the Americas youth delegation to maintain communications and carry their collective proposals to fruition. She used the Canadian Commission for UNESCO Youth Advisory Group project page as an illustration of an existing network on the TakingITGlobal website.

Canadian delegate Benjamin Powless provided great support to the organizing committee at the Forum by translating several documents for both internal use and to be shared publicly with the delegation.

Furthermore, Mr. Powless acted as the Master of Ceremonies and main translator at a cultural event when several delegates presented on their countries, highlighting traditions including food and dance that were of great importance to them.



CLOSING PLENARY SESSIONS

The drafting committee for the final declaration was comprised of two democratically elected delegates from each working group. The committee drafted a declaration that was presented to the delegation for review. The Canadian delegation raised several points during the final plenary session. These points included the need for further attention given to education and programming around sustainable development and climate change, mentorship programmes and their long-term positive impact on youth, and the importance of reinforcing existing structures and programs that have been successful.



During the final vote to adopt the Declaration, all countries were in favour apart from the United States, Venezuela, and Uruguay.

The Canadian delegation provided the English translation to the Final Declaration to ensure that all English speaking delegates would be able to review the outcomes of the Forum with their communities in due time.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:

- Considering that discussion amongst delegates had already began and common challenges and ideas for change that already been determined via the list serve, the Canadian delegation felt that less time within the working group sessions should have been dedicated to readdressing problems and more time allotted to the design of solid action plans and recommendations. This shift in process that would focus on tangible actions would have hopefully resonated more clearly with delegates post-Forum and inspire ongoing collaborations around concrete plans.



- Providing background documents to the delegates on UNESCO and their priority areas, as many of the delegates were unfamiliar with the institution and in particular what its capacity and functions were.
- Several of the delegates commented during the plenary session that the selection process for the Americas Youth Forum should be more vigorous and deliberate in order to draw candidates with an interest and experiences that are relevant to the Forum theme and UNESCO's priorities. Many of the delegates brought quite political views that were specific to the situations in their nations, and as a result it was difficult to reach consensus within the working group session on proposals that reflected the common challenges faced across the Americas. These views were also expressed throughout the plenary sessions in a manner that was not constructive in that expressed concerns were rarely complemented



with proposed solutions.

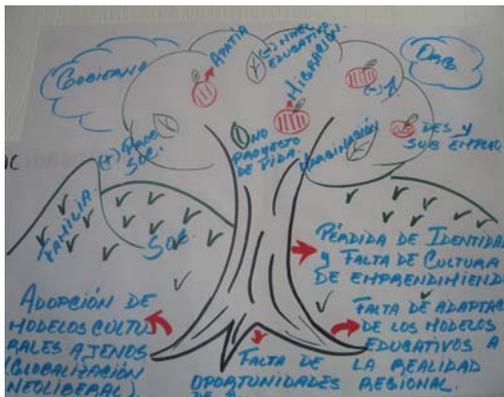
- Translation services: There was one translator present for the duration of the Forum with a limited number of headsets that served less than half the delegates and observers. Furthermore, the majority of delegates were Spanish speaking, so Spanish was primary language used for all communications. Therefore, it was decided that all English-only speaking delegates, which comprised of all the Caribbean countries, would use the translation services

during all plenary sessions, and participate in the working group sessions as one group and accompanied by the translator. This segregated the Caribbean and did not allow for the full integration of the delegation which was the premise for holding a Forum of the Americas. In the future, the Canadian delegation strongly recommends that translation services are coordinated in a manner that facilitates rather than impedes the integration of delegates.

- At least half of the participants at the Forum were Mexican observers who took part in all working group sessions and plenary discussions in the same manner as delegates. For this reason, many of the ideas and feedback put forth in the final declaration were heavily influenced by Mexican principles, local challenges, and political interests. Many delegates felt that though a Mexican youth presence was important, in some situations their perspectives seemed to supersede the opinions of foreign delegates due to the disproportional number of Mexicans present.



- What contributed to the above mentioned observation was the unfortunate reduction in travel budgets allotted to the Sector of Youth, Sport and Recreation, so that only one delegate from each country could be supported to participate rather than two delegates as originally proposed. This information was shared with the delegation two weeks prior to the Forum, and so many countries were not able to obtain the funding necessary to send a second delegate. Therefore, the delegation was reduced by approximately 15-20 delegates, and contributed to the proportionately large number of Mexican observers.



- At times there was a lack of transparency as to decision making on the part of The Sector For Youth, Sport, and Recreation, which stemmed conflict between delegates in certain instances. The Canadian delegates felt that this was a reflection of ongoing organizational challenges that could hopefully be mediated in future Forums.

- There was a level of flexibility given to the schedule for the Forum, which allowed certain delegates, including a Canadian delegate, to make presentations during plenary sessions regarding ideas for follow-up. This flexibility added definite value to the Forum outcomes and encouraged greater youth involvement and leadership.
- In favour of establishing a follow-up mechanism for such Forums, the Canadian delegates suggest that a group of delegates be selected to represent the delegation and administrate the implementation of the recommendations. Without a leadership body, it is uncertain whether tangible actions will be taken following the Forum.

FOLLOW-UP

The point was raised repeatedly throughout the forum that there was a concerted need for a follow-up process and for the recommendations in the final declaration to be held accountable and measured. With regards to the first part, the need for a follow-up process, one of the biggest recommendations to emerge from the forum was the creation of a youth parliament across the Americas, with delegates to meet in some form and be entrusted to carry on with the spirit of the forum. However, this is unlikely to emerge spontaneously. The delegates also expressed their desire for follow-up conferences, which in our opinion would continue to be a very positive and more feasible initiative.

Delegates also were very interested in using communications technologies to continue the follow-up process and stay in touch. Some of the working groups selected representatives from their groups to initiate online discussions and communicate with other groups in the future. As a result of this, many delegates are using information tools like TakingITGlobal and Facebook to continue discussions and networking. Ultimately it seems it will be up to the delegates to continue the deliberations in their own mode, rather than rely on a UNESCO youth parliament to be fabricated, and this is likely more sustainable and easy to facilitate.