

### International Youth Forum, Bandung, 23-30 June 2008

The bustling early morning traffic of Bandung, Indonesia, was brought to a standstill on June 23, as a marching band led the participants of the International Youth Forum 2008 to the historic Asia Afrika building for the opening ceremony. Right from the outset there was a palpable sense of energy about the group and the cultural richness, colour and fanfare of the opening set the tone for a lively and engaging seven days. Co-hosted by Initiatives of Change-Indonesia and the Indonesian Center of Religious and Civilization Studies (PSAP), the forum met under the theme 'The role of youth: action on the Millennium Development Goals toward a peaceful world' and brought together an eclectic mix of 138 young people from 36 countries.

The organizing team had succeeded in assembling a stimulating array of speakers for the plenary sessions, including HE H Dede Yusuf, the Vice Governor of West Java Province, who opened the conference, Professor Amien Rais, former chairperson of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly, Sakhyan Asmara, Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports, Dr Habib Chirzin, from the Centre for Religion and Civilization Studies, and Sandra Van Beest, the Netherlands Youth Delegate to the United Nations. The plenaries provided a helpful context for the forum, presenting much of the relevant technical information on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as reflections on what will be required for their full realization by 2015.

K Haridas Nair, representing the International Council of Initiatives of Change, emphasized the global challenge as he addressed the forum in the opening session: 'The time has come to develop globalized minds and hearts that care for humanity as a whole.' He continued, 'people need to change and this factor cannot be wished away... The problems of today cannot be changed at the same level of thinking and living that has created them. A shift in our thinking and living will provide a shaft of light filled with possibilities for the future.'

With the scene set, the conference moved into focus group discussions using open space technology. Under the broad theme of 'Youth, Peace and MDGs', participants launched discussions on everything from HIV-AIDS to the political situation in Burma to 'youth and spirituality', and so the list went on – between the various groups, 22 discussions in all in the course of the day. The topics that emerged reflected the diversity within the group, and the intensity and depth of the discussions were an illuminating insight into the virtues of an agenda set by the participants themselves. [For more information on open space technology, see <http://openspacetech.googlepages.com/>]

Beyond the wide visions and big-issue thinking, there was also space provided each day for the more personal dimension of change. Morning times of silence were an opportunity to reflect on the implications of global challenges in individual lives:– 'What kind of person does the world need me to be? Am I that person? What are the obstacles?' Small 'family' groups spent time together sharing thoughts from these 'quiet times', and also met at various points in the program to hear each other's stories.

It can be hard to pick the relevant variable that sets one conference apart from another, but many of the seasoned 'conference veterans' found this forum to be unique in its spirit. It seems that the opportunities for honest sharing, as well as the participant-led direction of the conference, contributed to this uniqueness by fostering a genuine atmosphere of friendship and trust. Nguyen

Tuan Anh, from Vietnam, commented, 'what has touched me... is the celebration of diversity when young people from different backgrounds come, learn and share experiences, caring for each other.'

After five days in Bandung, the team set out for the village of Panawuan, where the group were all billeted among local families for two nights. The hospitality of the people, their generosity and care, as well as the smiles and enthusiasm of the hundreds of young children who followed the group wherever it went, gave everyone an experience to cherish. It was a tearful farewell as the group packed up to leave the village, but just as the IYF 2008 will no doubt be remembered for many years in Panawuan, so too Panawuan has left a lasting impression on the IYF team. The sense of community with the villagers over those days emphasized the common humanity that can unite people across the largest of cultural, economic and linguistic divides.

The week was not without its moments: As the conference progressed there were points where differences in expectations and priorities created some lively discussion. But where this may have led to acrimony, instead an unpredictable direction and spirit somehow emerged, with a real sense of moving on from the conference together. To what extent the outcomes will involve collective action from this IYF group as a whole remains to be seen. But there was an energy and sense of mutual encouragement in Indonesia this last week that left the participants with a strengthened resolve to 'be the change', as work continues towards the realization of the MDGs by 2015.

*Rob Lancaster, July 4*

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