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The President of the Swiss Confederation and the world of young people

Contact with youth is a key part of Swiss President Didier Burkhalter's presidential year. One young person was therefore allowed to accompany him to the UN General Assembly. A report on his experience.

DAMIAN VOGT

The high-level week at the 69th UN General Assembly in New York took place from 22 to 26 September. One of the highlights for me was the general debate with speeches by heads of state and government and other high-level state representatives. The since re-elected Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, obviously spoke in her address about the forthcoming elections and democracy in her country. The President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, on the other hand, focussed on the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Iraq.

Didier Burkhalter, the Swiss President, entitled his speech "Genuinely united nations inspired by and for young people". In his introduction, he mentioned a youngster from Switzerland who, when asked by the Swiss President what kind of world he would like or dreamt of, replied: "A world where people resolve their differences peacefully and without violence. A world of freedom and mutual respect. A world where all young people have the opportunity to find employment that enables them to live a happy life."

It is fantastic for us as young people to see the interest and acknowledge-

ment shown by the Swiss President. He told the other state representatives: "Young people rightly expect the representatives of nations to endeavour, with genuinely united efforts, to hand over to the next generation a world and a humankind where security, freedom and prosperity are not empty words." The Swiss President also declared that he sees young people with their great abilities as a source of inspiration. At the same time – and he also made this point clear – he expects young people to be aware of their responsibility and to show commitment to shaping the world they want.

Swiss President
Burkhalter and Damian
Vogt observed by UN
Ambassador Peter
Maurer in New York

Problems are resolved together

At the end, I was able to outline my vision, sitting beside the Swiss President at the press conference. It was important to me to set out my belief that sustainable development is only possible if people from all sections of society are involved in the decision-making process. That also includes young people. We are often faced with issues of a transversal nature, which also means that it is difficult for an individual group to achieve sustainable development. Viable results can only be attained in dialogue between the various age and interest groups.

As a former president of the organisational committee for the Federal Youth Session, I am aware that engaging young people in national politics represents a challenge. As a representative of Youth Rep, I have discovered that the challenge is even greater at international level. I am therefore pleased that Switzerland appoints three UN youth delegates each year. This gives us as young people a real voice at the UN. My aim during this week in New York was to ensure that this voice is also heard and respected.

Looking at the past and to the future

At a special session of the UN General Assembly during the high-level week,

What is a Youth Rep?

The Youth Rep (Youth Representatives) project is organised by the Swiss National Youth Council (SNYC) and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). As part of Youth Rep, young delegates can participate in various international conferences with the official Swiss delegation. Each autumn, a representative of the team travels to the UN General Assembly in New York. Participation in Youth Rep is voluntary and limited to a period of two years. The participants represent Switzerland's young people for a year and spend the following year coaching their successors.

Team member Damian Vogt was born in 1991 and grew up in Vaduz (Liechtenstein) and Hinwil. He studied International Relations in Geneva and was a member and president of the organisational committee for the Federal Youth Session for several years. From January 2015, he will work at the Diplomatic Representation of the Principality of Liechtenstein in New York.

www.youthrep.ch

Free & Equal Campaign

The first public meeting on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights also took place during the high-level week. The first closed ministerial event on the protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights had taken place in 2013. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addressed the ministers and the rest of the audience in a video message. He spoke out against the stigma, discrimination and violence that people have to suffer owing to their sexual orientation and sexual identity. The fight for human rights and against discrimination is a key part of the UN's mission.

The UN campaign Free & Equal aims to open people's hearts and minds, he said. The protection of human rights cannot be shied away from just because governments do not share the same view on this matter.

John Kerry, US Secretary of State, joined Mr Ban in emphasising the campaign's importance: Free & Equal is enabling obstacles to a fairer and more tolerant society to be overcome. People are still being vilified, attacked and even killed for being the person they are and because of the people they love. John Kerry was delighted that the event was public and had attracted such great interest as work towards a world without discrimination and for human rights begins not only in the General Assembly room but also in the hearts and minds of people.

young people were not just an important issue for the Swiss President. The session looked to the future but also at the past – back to 1994 when a Programme of Action was drawn up at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. Young people are referred to over 50 times in this programme. The state representatives constantly pointed to the importance of the younger generation. The programme stated, for example, that investment in young people was not an option but an obligation. However, there was some dispute over which forms of investment are effective. The state delegates identified improvement potential, above all in health (particularly sexual and reproductive health), education and rights. After all, well-educated and healthy young people also have a positive impact on the economy.

Meeting of members of parliament

On the evening prior to the special session, parliamentarians from various countries met with representatives of civil society. The most important item on the agenda was the International Parliamentary Conference on the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action, which took place last March. As nobody from the Swiss Parliament was present, I was able to represent Switzerland at this event. The pivotal role played by members of parliament in many developments was repeatedly underlined. They are, after all, responsible for the transposition of international resolutions into national law.

There was agreement, both at the UN General Assembly and at the fringe events, that major challenges exist and the Programme of Action is also of importance to the post-2014 period. Let us hope that youthful energy continues to be effective.