



**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT
OF THE XXII PAN AMERICAN
CONGRESS AND DIRECTOR
OF THE FAMILY WELFARE
INSTITUTE OF COLOMBIA,
JULIANA PUNGUILUPPI**

Ladies and gentlemen, heads of delegations of the Member States of the Organization of American States, respected civil society representatives, friends. I should like to join the first lady and the presidential adviser, Francisco Barboza, in welcoming you to our country, especially to this land which is so dear to Colombians, Cartagena de Indias.

It is an honour for the government of President Ivan Duque to receive a delegation of persons of the highest level from across the American continent, who have decided to serve in one of the most difficult, but most rewarding jobs: safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents.

Colombia has a tradition of closeness with the Organization of American States, as Councillor Barboza mentioned, from its beginnings, 71 years ago. This hemispheric organization for multilateral dialogue and integration was created in our capital city on 30 April 1948. Likewise, also here in Colombia during one of these Congresses, a historic recommendation was made: to stop criminalizing children and adolescents in conflict with the law in the same way as adults.

I bring this recollection to your attention in order to emphasise the fact that this Congress has the ability to transform the lives of children and adolescents. When we set our minds to it, we can go beyond sharing experiences of successes or the most well-meaning criticism. These exercises in dialogue are fundamental, but sadly few, so we need to do them well.

I cannot fail to mention certain recent events that have made headlines repeatedly in the news in all corners of our region. In many of our countries we have witnessed angry protests from various sectors of society. We should read beyond the vandalism that obscures these claims, the visible protests added to the widespread unhappiness of our citizens on many fronts; we see it in the social networks, on the street and every time we talk to people in the street.

The citizens of our countries are speaking to us, and I wonder, are we listening? The fact is, we must improve the way we listen to each other, how we talk to each other and build societies: this is the strength of the Organization of American States, to create opportunities for dialogue.

We have seen how, thanks to the OAS, we engage in constructive discussion on the American continent, on the basis of the differences that bring us closer, in order to build solutions to the problems affecting our neighbourhood.

My invitation to you today is to take the next step. That this dialogue should allow us to gather the voices of non-State actors, effectively and without demagoguery. Opportunities such as this Congress are examples of the confluence of a number of different stakeholders. I should like to sow in you, the member States of the OAS, the purpose of raising the standard of the method and improving dialogue between all those here today.

The Forum taking place concurrently to the Congress, attended by adolescents from all over the continent dedicated to service, is a great example of how to bring representatives of children and adolescents from their countries in order to debate crucial issues with their peers. The next step is to find ways of including them at the same table as us, this is where we have a chance to improve.

The Civil Society Forum which this year was held yesterday, in this very room, is a body which brings together knowledge, experience and expertise of the highest standards.

Yesterday I had the opportunity and honour of addressing the Forum and closing the event and I received recommendations which will be shared at the close of today's activities. The next step is to find ways of adding the knowledgeable voices of organized civil society to this table.

Their recommendations to us, the States, are extremely valuable and we should have more time to react, to adopt them, to genuinely receive them and apply them. Time is not enough, the methodology is not adequate and their areas of intervention must transcend the traditional mechanisms of multilateral dialogue limited to State sectors; these are, very modestly, the government of Colombia's recommendations for us to improve our methodology.

Finally, it is key that debates on solutions to problems that severely affect children and adolescents in the region, should not be limited to organizations and agencies working on childhood and adolescence.

Yesterday, I was able to speak to Special Representative Najat Maalla, who will be addressing us shortly as the Congress's keynote speaker. Our conversation made me see that we must broaden our spectrum of knowledge to build solutions for children and adolescents. We should invite organizations that not only focus on children, but also those that work on gender, human rights and development, including those working on overcoming poverty.

It is no secret that the challenges we face as authorities responsible for safeguarding and protecting children's rights are framed by endless injustices that are shaped within an environment of vast inequality. The next step, therefore, is to involve private and public organizations, civil society and international cooperation working on gender and development, in our dialogue. We have already seen that the sustainable development goals may have objectives on several fronts, but are closely linked to each other. Likewise, our response must mainstream and be inclusive of the spirit of the OAS that we must honour.

All of these next steps are just a few points on which we can move forward expeditiously as a region.

The Inter-American Children's Institute creates opportunities that really transform the lives of our children and adolescents if we set our minds to it. I now wish to conclude with a personal anecdote. A little over a year ago, at a meeting of the Directing Council of the IIN, held in Panama, I had been in office as Director General of the ICBF for about two months. It was thanks to the conversations I had with other delegations that I learned from those experiences, but one of them led to what today is one of the priorities related to children and adolescents of President Ivan Duque's government.

It was thanks to a conversation I had in Panama with the delegation of Mexico that I became aware of the importance of the issue of violence against children and adolescents. Thanks to that conversation, one like others that we will surely engage in at this Congress, today in Colombia we have a National Alliance Against Violence Against Children and Adolescents as one of the ICBF's flagship programmes, and we are part of the GLOBAL ALLIANCE against violence, as a pioneer country.

And at the moment, we are moving forward in the design of State policy on the issue. Tonight, we shall launch a communications campaign that will cover the messages arising from this initiative.

I share this with you in order to conclude with the following: the international system has a transformative power in the States, a year ago, and within the IIN, a transformative policy took shape in my country. On countless occasions, UNICEF (to give one example) has provided invaluable support; we must move forward in dialogue, but in better dialogue, dialogue with the other, but including others in the conversation.

And most importantly, we must improve the venues and the methods for these dialogues to transform the lives of our children and adolescents; the street is talking to us, we need to improve our methods in order to learn and understand what is happening outside.

I invite you, therefore, to move beyond our mutual praise community; here today in Cartagena de Indias, we shall be part of the birth of the community of transformation.

Thank you.