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POLICY WONK CORNER

Central America's Youth Leaders

Central America has come a long way since the civil wars of the 1980s. A new generation has come of age, growing up in a region that is at peace but confronting new challenges of crime, security, poverty, and inequality. Last May, 24 of Central America's best and brightest—ranging in age from 17 to 36—gathered in Antigua, Guatemala, to create a leadership network that would work toward cooperative, cross-border solutions to address regional challenges. The *Lideres del Presente* conference brought together

mentors and experts from Central America and abroad to discuss youth violence, disaster relief and civic youth engagement, among other topics. Organized by a group of Tufts University graduates and the Project on Justice in Times of Transition, the conference was funded by the FRIDE Foundation and the DARA Foundation. The young leaders are now working together to implement their action plans and commitments, and are expected to regroup in Panama in 2009. **AQ** highlights some of the new leaders that came to Antigua.



Mauricio Artiñano of Costa Rica is one of the young student organizers.



Denis Adisman
Nicaragua, 24

Dennis Adisman was only 14 years old when Hurricane Mitch struck eastern Nicaragua, but the rebuilding process helped him recognize the importance of preparation and teamwork to mitigate the effects of natural disasters. Adisman has since worked with the National System of Disaster Prevention, *Salud sin Límites*, the Red Cross, and Bridges to Community to educate others on the relationship between sound environmental practices and being prepared for natural disasters. Sustainable farming is a part of that formula, and today, at 24, Adisman runs the largest organic cacao farm in northeastern Nicaragua.

Karin Digbyana Baten Riquiuc
Guatemala, 27

Karin Digbyana believes improvement in the lives of Guatemala's indigenous people depends upon better access to public services like higher education. Since age 24, she has directed the *Asociación por Nosotras IXMUCAMÉ*, a non-profit in Chichicastanango (in the Quiché department), about 136 kilometers (85 miles) from Guatemala City, where she advocates for improved rural public education, among other services. Digbyana became a leading voice for the next generation of activists this year when she was selected to represent all the women's rights groups in Quiché.

Angel Cartagena
El Salvador, 23

Youth gangs are a sad reality in El Salvador. When Angel Cartagena was 17, a close friend was killed as a result of gang violence. The experience inspired him and a group of friends to organize the *Asociación de Jóvenes y Estudiantes de El Salvador* in 2003 to keep kids off the street. Counselors at the center organize community projects, athletics, adventure tourism, team-building exercises, and leadership training. Today, Cartagena is beginning to see the fruits of his labor. Some former gang members, who as teenagers turned to the *Asociación*, are now counselors there.

Estuardo Robles
Guatemala, 26

Estuardo Robles wants the world to see that Central America is changing. And he knows that the region's continued growth will depend on strong partnerships between the private and public sectors. After graduating from the University of Texas-Austin in 2004 with a degree in Marketing, Robles returned to Guatemala to promote foreign investment in the region. Robles has worked for the Guatemalan government and for a private consultancy to help to develop Guatemala City's medical tourism industry, and is currently heading up projects to establish intraregional call centers.