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Community Construct, Youth and Creating Co-operative Competencies

As someone involved in the co-operative movement for over two decades, community and collaboration are not issues that are foreign to my scope of interrogation. Within this co-operative lens, several solutions are usually espoused; however, it is never without the construct of a community. One of the most interesting developments is the contemporary definition of a community, which has transcended a purely geographic space towards spaces (particularly virtual!) where persons concretize around common interests and common needs. Poignantly, just as principles and values underpinned co-operatives, communities are constructed upon a similar foundation, inclusive of social justice, empowerment, self-determination, collective action.

One philosopher suggests that *“Community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other. It is a sign that we don’t need a lot of money to be happy--in fact, the opposite.”* Within the most recent past, we were faced with the challenge of a global pandemic which struck at the very heart of our existence. The entire country, in fact the entire world, looked on for the response of the community in the face of what they termed “a major global crisis”. It was in this time of a major challenge, despite all the perceived darkness, that our communities were called upon to shine the brightest. It was truly the time when we as people portrayed our community spirit. Our spirit of resilience, a spirit of fortitude, a genuine representation of love. The present time is the ideal opportunity to once again remind ourselves what is meant by community spirit. It is an appropriate time to continue to highlight what can rise out of the embers of what is characterized as “hot spot” communities. It is a time to show that efforts of peace, love and industry can truly begin transformation in a transitioning world.

What better way is there to reestablish community spirit other than through youth. One African proverb states that it is the young trees that strengthen the forest. This analogy is very applicable to what the young people

represent in the community. It advocates that youth will solidify all that a community represents. Today I am saying that the youth play a critical role in re-establishing the spirit of the community. All that our community represents is reflected in our young people. The industry, innovation and survival are represented and depended on our youth. Therefore, we all should continue to utilize them to reflect all that we hope to be.

We all have a role to play in restoring our community spirit. Another philosopher states that *“If someone has the issues of youth at heart, then that person can be called a youth”*. This simply means that despite the mix of persons within our communities, we can all be young at heart. Significantly, what this also means is that within the theme of today’s proceedings, we must also accept our responsibility in returning our community to its core values. We must commit to establishing a support structure to emphasize the true meaning of community and the spirit which it embodies.

The past Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan said: *“No one is born a good citizen: no nation is born a democracy. Rather both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death”*. Let us consider this occasion of the New Year as the rebirth of the community spirit through continually engaging our young people. This time commonly celebrated as the end of old things and the beginning of new. Let it be the moment that we reconnect the “lifeline” across the generational gaps. Let today’s actions become one of the most daring moves any young person can make: creating stable communities. As a nation, we must make that commitment to truly be an example of what we hope to become.

The co-operative model remains one of the most appropriate vehicles to take communities collectively toward excellent outcomes. Youth have used this model to pursue innovative endeavours and build industries

in agriculture, sport, tourism and countless other sectors across the globe. The pursuit must swing the pendulum toward excellence. Excellence is the gradual result of always striving to do better. The construct of the community within vehicles such as the co-operative business model provides platforms, upon which youth can strive. Let us continue to build community using our time, talents and treasures. If some of us believe this is not enough, then let us rely on hard work. and genuinely put in that work. May our efforts truly build the character of the communities we hope for, and may excellence always be our reward.

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