

Keynote speech: Commonwealth Ministers of Youth Meeting 2008

By Pregs Govender

Thank you to the Commonwealth Secretariat for inviting me to present the keynote address – I am deeply honoured. It is significant that the short discussion preceding this focused on the issue of budgets. Budgets are not arbitrary allocations – they reflect our policy priorities, our values and our choices – whose lives we value, whose work we value and who and what we don't value. The Commonwealth theme of Peace building is relevant in a time in which youth face huge challenges of economic and religious fundamentalism, unemployment and other factors that deepen poverty, increased militarisation, war and violence as well as diseases such as HIV/ Aids. The combined consequences of these factors for youth, across our world, are devastating.

Lessons from my country:

Martin Luther King said "Injustice anywhere affects justice everywhere". It also works the other way around – when good people refuse to be silent in the face of injustice anywhere in the world; they inspire others to do the same. I hope that the lessons I share will be of relevance to your deliberations on peace-building. I come from a country where the policy of the Apartheid government for many decades perpetuated the ideology, through its education system, of black youth as the "hewers of wood and drawers of water", in the words of one of Apartheid's prime architects, Verwoerd. Black children were to be trained *not* to aspire for anything beyond. They were expected to passively accept an inferior position. State media, through television, radio and newspapers perpetuated the message that black people were inferior and that whites were superior. Apartheid's budget prioritised military spending for its war against SA's citizens. The ANC was labelled, by the apartheid state and its supporters, including US President Ronald Reagan and Britain's President Margaret Thatcher, as a terrorist organisation and its leaders as terrorists. (Perhaps it is not surprising then that US President Bush introduced the 'war on terror' that is seen by many as a 'war of terror'). The leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, was imprisoned for 27 years and his words and image as well as the policies of the ANC, were not allowed to be seen or shared by South Africans, young or old. South Africa was divided into homeland areas and townships designed to ghettoise and ensure tight control. These areas had high malnutrition, poverty levels etc could also easily be cut off from communication with the outside world. Some of Apartheid's bloodiest and most brutal vigilante forces operating in these areas received training from the security forces of Israel. During the state of emergency, South Africa had the highest number of children in its prisons, who were brutalised, tortured and raped. In all these ways and more, Apartheid attempted to destroy the sense of humanity and the sense of self of South African people. That was the intention.

What happened? Did South Africans become passive recipients of an unjust state policy or of Apartheid's propaganda? No – a large movement, often catalysed by young people, exercised their own agency to reclaim their own story – they developed theatre, newspapers, radio, pamphlets, dance, music, study circles...and many other creative ways of communicating. The world saw the emergence of creative humanity against terrible odds and an affirmation that the people in our country, the youth especially were not just damaged goods. It is true that we are all damaged, all across our world – but it is also true that we are all much, much more than the damage we sustain.

Scientists call Africa the cradle of humanity. Every single one of us, whatever our skin colour, whatever the texture of our hair or the colour of our eyes, can be traced back to a common ancestry that unites each and everyone one of us despite the geographical divides. In Africa that common humanity is embodied in the philosophy of “Ubuntu” – I am because you are, you are because we are. The unique beauty and power of every single human being, the inter dependency and inter relatedness of every single one of us. Yet the dichotomy of black as evil and white as purity echoes around the world – from SA to this small beautiful island on which we are meeting.

Priorities

In the world many wonderful commitments have been made to the young men and women, the girls and boys of our world. A number have arisen from the Commonwealth itself. If these commitments were able to be effected, there would be significant change – the kind of change that we hope for, the kind of change that our vision inspires us towards. And we sometimes despair at the lack of change and wonder why things remain the same or sometimes get worse.

The fact is that these commitments cannot meet their human rights objectives because of the contradictions that exist between them and the rights of capital. A few examples: Everyone says they are committed to decreasing the spread of HIV/Aids and that prevention is as important as treatment...that affordability of treatment is central to enabling poor countries to sustain providing medicine to those who need it. In the 2001 Doha Round of the WTO negotiations of TRIPS, poor countries won the right to ensure affordable generic medicine. Yet the bilateral trade agreements they signed with rich countries often write out these rights and give far greater patent protection than is required by TRIPS. Another example – everyone agrees that women and girls work far too many hours and that this affects their well-being. Yet many poor countries conforming to global agreements such as the General Agreement on Services have privatised basic needs such as water. The result is that after privatisation, women in these countries spend many more hours looking for sources of free, clean drinking water for themselves and their families, than before privatisation.

A third and last example – everyone agrees on the need to build peace yet today the global trend is for increasing military budgets to the extent where the world is spending not just millions or even billions, but trillions on armaments. Unless there is coherence between our commitment to peace building and our budgets- unless we dedicate more for peace building than for military spending, we will not be able to build a lasting peace. Rich countries cannot continue to sell arms to poor countries, as aware as they are of the human rights violations associated with war.

Whose voices do we hear, whose faces do we see?

Shortly before the Iraq War I was part of an international women’s mission to Iraq. We met woman from all sides, from all religions and professions and from all walks of life. Yet the message was the same. Women repeated over and over again, the commonsense message that those with power seem unable to hear: “War is not the way to peace”. One of the women, after describing the effects of sanctions on her child who died of leukaemia, said: “I don’t want your tears – take my voice and spread it in the whole world. I want to hear the echo of what you do.” As Ministers of Youth you

have the power to ensure that the voices of young people are heard in the policy choices that are reflected in budgets that demonstrate whether there is a real commitment to building peace.

Choice and Power

The last President of Apartheid, FW De Klerk, is known internationally as the man who freed Nelson Mandela and unbanned the ANC, the man who turned away from the scorched earth policy of his predecessors which tried to eliminate ANC 'terrorists'. FW De Klerk was elevated to sharing the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela for the decision to end the war. With the end of the war, ordinary South Africans could begin the long hard work of undoing the damage and building a peaceful society. Many say that De Klerk and his negotiating team had no choice – that he was forced to act by the power of the general insurrection within the country (from youth organisations, community based organisations, workers in the trade union movement and women's organisations), by the ANC's armed struggle and by international economic sanctions to free Nelson Mandela, to unban the ANC and to enter into negotiations for a peaceful transition to democracy. All of this is true – but it is also true that De Klerk could have doggedly continued with the military 'solution' that the Apartheid state had been committed to. Yet De Klerk decided to end decades of Apartheid's bloodshed and violence in which young children like Hector Peterson and many others were killed by the state, of which he was a leader. Everyone has choices and I believe that each of you have choices. You can choose to travel the path of war or you can choose peace – you can choose what your legacy will be. I hope that you will use your choices to recognise the beauty and the power of young people in your countries so that they in turn can create the future that we all dream of: of a justice and peace in countries...societies...a world free of all kinds of war – not just military wars but wars of poverty, genocides, misogyny, xenophobia, racism...every single war. You have that power and I hope you will use that power with wisdom and clarity.

Voice:

The Secretary General spoke in his opening about giving 'youth a voice' Voice is central to power. But often we think that we can be the voice on behalf of others rather than creating the space so that those voices themselves can be heard. I believe that if we are true to ourselves in the telling of our stories we will release and recognise not just our own power but our collective power. I would like to end with a quote from my book: "Love and Courage, A Story of Insubordination" The title refers to being insubordinate to the power and politics of hate, greed and fear in ourselves and our world, that blinds us to the love and courage within ourselves and each other. With the power of love can come the courage to act in the interests of the poorest and most powerless.

"A lifetime ago I had answered laughing: "I do yoga, I bend but I do not break. The truth was that I broke over and over again. The worst experience had sent me spiralling, yet it had also deepened the journey within and awakened love from which courage flowed. Memory had surfaced and beyond it a glimpse of the truth that none of us are fixed in heroic or despotic moments of history. Life as it waxes and wanes always, always provides opportunities for our humanity to emerge... I felt life flows through me like the blood through my veins, like the air through my lungs. It danced through me and I knew that one day I would find my voice. One day I would let it sing the song of a

life not eliminated, of a voice not silenced. I would finish writing this story, even if in the writing of it I spiralled wildly...I would one day release it. I would trust myself as I danced on air”

We can use the power we have to make the connections between choice and consequence: to end war, to build peace, to value every single human being, all of life and our planet, in our words and in our actions. I wish you all the best in your proceedings and hope that you will not only tell your story but will use your power to ensure that every young person can share his or her story.

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