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The work of Neeleshwar Viveksingh Urjoon: Promoting gender equality, rights of youth living with disabilities and inclusive education

Neeleshwar Viveksingh URJOON and Kheeshwatee VIDOUSHEE

ABSTRACT

Neeleshwar Viveksingh Urjoon (Vivek) is a globally recognized youth activist who promotes gender equality, rights of youth living with disabilities and inclusive education. He is a trainer, public speaker and writer. For almost twenty-two years now, he has been actively involved in many community development projects after gaining much experience by travelling in Africa and Asia. At the forefront of two Non-Governmental Organizations namely Braille in Paradise and Zenfants Bondier, he contributes in good governance on as board members.

KEY TERMS: Africa, gender, youths, disability, inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Neeleshwar Viveksingh Urjoon (Vivek), a pan-African and an award-winning young person, has been selflessly promoting the rights of young persons living with disabilities for more than two decades now. His mission is to ensure that almost all of the youth with a disability have access to education and are able to find a job to earn a decent living. He has thus set up the 'l'Odyssey de la Connaissance' where he teaches visually-impaired young people what they wish to know and learn. Topics vary from leadership, self-discipline, motivation to core subjects on history of specific countries. These are not usually covered at school or college for disabled students. As a result, l'Odyssey de la Connaissance' assists in responding to a wider need of young curious students. Similarly, for young adults who wishes to acquire work experience or need career advice, Vivek assists in approaching large corporations to employ the youth in need of training and jobs.

CONTRIBUTION TO DEVELOPMENT IN MAURITIUS

Empowerment of visually impaired youth and reducing extreme poverty – Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 No Poverty & 4 Quality Education

Vivek is the co-Founder of Braille in Paradise, a unique educational platform for visually impaired kids where books in Braille, are sent to visually impaired kids by post without any cost. The project was accepted after presentations done to the Mauritius Post and this was very welcome as an innovative concept. Braille in Paradise enables the visually impaired kids to enjoy their favourite books without having to travel long distances to libraries services are free of charge, thus, eliminating the need to travel long distances which might be a risk to the safety of the young boys and girls living with disability. Vivek provided support to the educational needs of visually-impaired youth during the COVID-19 pandemic through online classes. Vivek believes that a good education will be the key success in reducing poverty.

Assisting the homeless, sex workers and drug addicts – SDG 2 Zero Hunger & 10 Reduce Inequalities

Through one of his non-government organisations (NGO), Zenfants Bondier, Vivek has introduced the 'Share a lunch-share a story' concept. The idea is also to spot homeless people, drug addicts, sex-workers and those who, having been rejected by their family due to contracting the Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and share a hot meal with them and make them feel part of that society which once rejected them. Up to now, Zenfants Bondier has catered for around 2,000 needy people by providing them with food, clothes and other amenities. Thus, aiming at a hunger-free Mauritius.

Emancipation, training of visually-impaired young girls and job placements for deaf youngsters – SDG 5 Gender Equality & 10 Reduce Inequalities

Likewise, another project, which Vivek pioneered, is the running of the renowned Duke of Edinburgh's International Award with disabled teenagers and young adults. Vivek not only trains the youngsters but also, inculcates leadership skills in them, motivates by making them believe in themselves. He teaches financial literacy, inculcates leadership and soft skills and does motivational talks. He further mentors young visually-impaired to become more confident and instils in them the sense of patriotism. He further finds job placements for the latter, empowering them through technology and bridging trainers / employers with the young adults for their training through Ability Paradise, a unique platform for youth living with disability.

Nation building, peaceful co-existence and world peace – SDG 19 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Vivek has also founded the ParadisMoris, a group of youngsters who voices out their thoughts to combat racial hatred, violent extremism and work together for a better, peaceful Mauritius. He believes that the tiny island-nation that Mauritius is, can be used as a role model for humanity for peaceful co-existence. Thus, Vivek contributes in achieving the SDGs of the United Nations. He furthermore continues to inspire the youth through coaching of young girls especially the visually impaired in leadership and soft skills; he set up the platform 'EduLead' to ensure more sustainability in the development of the girls in Mauritius & Rodrigues and in Africa through his extensive network. He wants to create an equitable society with gender parity in Mauritius and the outer islands.

Reducing extreme poverty through training of kids of the vulnerable groups – SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth

It was predestined that Vivek tackles the issue of extreme poverty since this has affected him the first time he travelled to Egypt. He thus assists several young adults mostly from the vulnerable groups, trains young students and offer guidance to them and their parents on career paths. He also liaises for job placement for the ambitious young persons, hailing from poor backgrounds. It is very crucial to give them back their dignity that was lost through the slavery period. He believes that there is a whole process of informal education that can change the mindsets and stereotyping of the different ethnic groups.

Environment conservation – SDG 13 Climate Action

Vivek spearheaded other projects for the protection of the environment. He was summoned as Grants Manager and Project Coordinator for an NGO for planting more than 2500 mangroves. The project was finalized by putting mangroves propagules in pots, monitoring their growth on a six months' period to finally put them in marshy land. He is currently working on planting 100,000 trees in the next five years to contribute in reducing the effects of climate change.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Being an award-winning pan-Africanist, Vivek was recognized for his tremendous efforts and bagged JCI The Outstanding Young Person of Mauritius in July 2016. Moreover, his commitment was also appreciated and thus, he was awarded Le Jeune Francophone de l'année by Francophonie3535 under the auspicious aegis of Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. In addition, to this, he was invited as Chief Guest at various seminars, is a committed Peace activist and motivational speaker. His recent talk at TEDx Abidjan & Kenya, were well-acclaimed.

He received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Council of Youth Leaders in December 2016. He has also participated in local literary and elocution competitions where he came out first. Likewise, he represented the Republic of Mauritius at various youth exchange programmes and forums in Japan, Kenya, India, Egypt, Greece, UAE and Turkey. He also attended a conference at the United Nations University, Japan through the Cabinet Office of Japan. He was part of Her Majesty, Elizabeth II's Queen's Young Leaders' Mentorship program and a member of the Crans Montana Forum of New Leaders for Tomorrow and YALI network.

He attended the Mo Ibrahim Foundation / SOAS University of London Governance week in 2019, was listed among the 60 Social Inclusion Heroes of Africa by World Bank in 2018 and was chosen as one of the three Changeleads in Africa for the Pakati Project by the African Leadership Institute, which serves as a data feeder to the African Union.

Vivek was selected as one of the 100 Most Influential Young Africans of the world at the end of 2019. Furthermore, having grown up in a multicultural society, he is fluent in four languages and other dialects. He has recently published a bilingual collection of 51 poems. Today, Vivek sits on the boards of several associations and acts as advisor for policy-making.

In 2021, Vivek received the African Social Work award from the Africa Social Work Network for the work he has done in Mauritius. He accepted the award on 27 May 2022 during the Africa Day Indaba on social Work and Development.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

How does your work respond to the work of the African Union, particularly Agenda 63 aspirations, goals and priorities found here <https://au.int/agenda2063/goals/>?

1. *A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development*

Through our work, we are ensuring that each member of the society is equally recognized for his or her contribution in society and that the latter can live a dignified life. Trainings are provided and jobs are matched with the demands of the young people living with disabilities

2. *An integrated continent, politically united based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance*

By empowering the youth, there will definitely have a new Africa being reborn – paving the way for Africa's renaissance!

3. *An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law*

Here, the projects at Braille in Paradise and other NGOs have been able to sustain the respect for human rights and good governance.

4. *A peaceful and secure Africa*

With more youth being employed, there will be less marginalized youth and thus, Africa will be transformed into a more peaceful and secure place.

5. *An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics*

Through the various projects implemented for the benefit of the community, we will uphold the values, continuously protecting our cultural identity and heritage, Africa is set to be the place to be in the years to come.

6. *An Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children*

7. *Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner*

There are several projects where there are interactions and collaboration among different countries on the African continent and this have been working very well. Therefore, I believe Africans are more connected than ever.

What recommendations do you have for social workers?

Being involved in the community, is more about using one's curiosity, pragmatism, one's emotional intelligence and in the end, all senses to comprehend people. A social worker needs to pledge in developing himself or herself these attributes and to sustain oneself by looking for advice and guidance. One can apply this philosophy to one's life and even throughout one's career. We should not forget that our ability to help those in need, can be related to our ability to look after ourselves first. We need to love ourselves, upgrade our self-esteem to be able to support other people. A social worker will definitely be faced with some dire conditions: some will be worrying situations, disturbing even; we might find other confusing, tragically deceiving! You need not be afraid to be in awe of people's ability to find solutions to their own problems with the right guidance. You should be resilient and stoic when faced with adversity. A social worker can be a good guide, a perfect advisor or simply, an excellent listener. Few qualities that I have learnt during my twenty-two years of working for the community:

Empathy

Each individual is different, unique and we should accept that each person will have different conceptions, views, ideas, acceptance or rejection of ideas. It is thus crucial for social workers to determine someone's needs, based on his or her unique experiences in order to efficiently provide services with all empathy.

Communication

Being able to communicate effectively, is an important skill for all social workers. The capacity to communicate clearly with all kind of people, is very essential. It is the duty of social workers to communicate correctly with needy people irrespective of their cultural background, age, gender, comprehension or disability. Social workers should also be able to report facts to the relevant authorities by using their judgement.

Organization

Social workers should be disciplined, very organized to be able to prioritize the community's needs in order to effectively manage cases and deliver satisfactory outcome. It should be the case to bypass or disregard someone's request as we are doing social service which might be free of charge. We need to be well organized and stick to being a professional as well.

Critical thinking

A social worker needs to be able to analyze the situation, give a judgement if need be without any bias. He or she should be able to objectively assess each case and pass a judgement with all rationality based on facts. Thinking critically and without prejudice will not only enable the social worker to reach informed decisions but also be respected by his or her peers and the society as a whole.

Be an active listener

A social worker must listen attentively, ask the right questions by engaging with the community to establish a level of trust.

Be non-judgemental

With different cultural backgrounds and unique identities, each individual in need, will act differently but the social worker should judge people based on racial difference, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, faith, age or even disability. One should possess a non-judgmental attitude and an appreciation for diversity.

Be patient

Social workers experience a wide range of situations and meet all types of people while carrying out their work. Whatever the condition should be, the social worker should keep his or her cool and be patient however complex the case is.

What recommendations do you have for governments?

The government of the Republic of Mauritius should be an inspiration for many governments. For instance, the Prime Minister, Honorable Pravin Kumar Jugnauth, has not only set an example for the Republic of Mauritius but also, for many African nations. Mauritius is a young Republic, yet it has achieved a lot in terms of democracy, ease of doing business, tops the Ibrahim Index for Good Governance and is regarded as a role model for many countries of the world. One simple example is how he has decentralized the different Ministries: there is a Ministry for the rights of children and family known as the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development And Family Welfare. There have been a number of Acts and Laws passed by other ministries as well. For instance, the other Ministry that fares very well is the one in charge of Sports under the appellation of Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Recreation. I had the chance for many years to collaborate with the latter by running the energetic and much appreciated, Duke of Edinburgh International Award with hearing-impaired youth. Though it was very challenging at the beginning, the teenagers successfully completed their Bronze Award and will soon complete the Silver Level. As such, most Governments should follow the steps and example of the Government of Mauritius.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, we would want to say, for community and social workers and other people doing the same as Mr Urjoon is doing, it is very important to be optimistic. For sure, problems come from all directions while solutions will also follow. So, one should remain optimistic! Treat others with respect and show genuine concern to the people in need. Follow one's intuition but do not be intimidated by others when you know you are right and have that gut feeling. Keep your passion on. Work with all politics and offer suggestions rather than being an anarchist. Center yourself and your work with core values. Core social work values of Human Dignity and Worth, Self-determination, Integrity, and Competence continue to ground the best and most satisfying work. Always look for help, accept with all gratitude people's support and expertise. Be humble by accepting that there are people doing the job much better than us. And lastly, learn from your failures and mistakes.

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