

By the People, For the People

Keynote Address by John Coonrod, March 16, 2023 on the occasion of the launch of the Makueni County School for Community-led Development

Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Dear Friends – Mwamu Katya.

I deeply believe that the system of County Government in Kenya is a beacon of hope. It is a beacon of hope for Africa and the world. It is for this reason that I'm delighted and honored to be invited to join you today.

This month, nations such as yours and mine are participating in the Summit for Democracy in the commitment to strengthen democracy. We believe that democracy at the community level is vitally important. The counties of Kenya show that a diverse country can govern itself in ways that gives every community the opportunity to achieve its own aspirations.

The Movement for Community-led Development was launched globally at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, under the auspices of the Government of the Philippines. The Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil have all benefited greatly by establishing national programs for community-led development. Back in the 1970s, South Korea credits their national program of community-led development with moving them from the list of least-developed countries to becoming a major donor country in just 20 years. In fact, during that period, South Korea actually increased the income of rural people to exceed the income of urban people.

In the opening of that SDG Summit, Pope Francis made a statement that warmed the hearts of all of us championing a more bottom-up approach to development. He said:

“Above and beyond our plans and programmes, we are dealing with real men and women who live, struggle and suffer, and are often forced to live in great poverty, deprived of all rights. To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed. They must be built up and allowed to unfold.”

With its 2010 constitution, Kenya put itself on the road to join this group of success stories.

Since the launch of MCLD Kenya in 2019, Makueni County Government and the Movement for Community-Led Development have remained great development partners. And I'm thrilled to be back in Kenya, after four years, to join you in inaugurating the School for CLD, which is historic for Kenya and Africa. I'm also delighted that today we signed the updated MoU with the county.

Long ago, Community-led Development was the only form of governance on earth. People lived and worked within the distance they could walk. Then people invented the wheel, metal

weapons and war – and people started building nations, empires and colonies. Leaders far away stripped people of their power, their resources, their cultural traditions and their religions.

People everywhere resisted domination. Anticolonialism began the same day as colonialism back in the 15th century. Colonialism was not just a military struggle – it was an ideology that infected the minds of both the colonizers and many of the colonized as well – and it persists to this day. It can only be defeated by an ideology based on deeper and truer principles.

That ideology is the concept of human dignity. It was powerfully articulated a hundred years ago by founders of the modern liberation movements – Mahatma Gandhi, Marcus Garvey - father of Pan Africanism, Y.C. Yen of China and others.

As Gandhi said, we must think of the face of the poorest person we've ever seen and ask ourselves whether the action we consider taking will restore that person to control of their own lives and destinies.

That concept became the first principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that every human person is born equal and has equal rights. Article 21 states that every person has the right to participate in governance, and to have equal access to public services.

The struggle continues to make this a reality. In my country's most recent election, Senator Warnock, the pastor at the same church once served by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his victory address stated – ““I believe that democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea: the notion that each of us has within us a spark of the divine... We all have value. And if we have value, we ought to have a voice.”

The roadmap to realizing this right is the principle of subsidiarity. It states that the only way to structure society consistent with human dignity is to move decision making as close to people as is practicable. When a decision is specific to a village, say the placement and hours of a pre-school or clinic, the village should decide. If it's a service road or high school, the ward should decide. Colleges and hospitals, the county. Foreign policy, the issue goes up to the parliament, or even COMESA or the AU.

Then, in each of these levels, how do we ensure that the human rights of women, youth, disabled people and other marginalized groups are defended? This requires collective voice and action by those groups themselves – civil society groups of women, youth, disabled persons and any other marginalized group. For decades, they have expressed fundamental human dignity in the phrase – nothing for us without us. These groups can succeed when you combine their own wisdom and strength, with the wisdom of a government system that respects them.

Another key principle is synergy – the fact that the complex challenges communities face in terms of incomes, food, health, education, clean water and the natural environment are interlinked in and need integrated solutions at the local level. You cannot have health without clean water. You cannot educate children if they are hungry. You cannot have well-nourished

children if their mothers are forced into child marriage. Communities have to set their own priorities as to how to build up all these systems in ways that work best for them.

Finally, and the most courageous step Kenya has taken, is fiscal devolution – ensuring a fair share of the public budget to every county, ward and town. You cannot really Shift the Power unless you Shift the Money.

The result of devolution in Kenya as in other countries has been rapid, broad based economic and social progress. When every community prospers, the whole nation prospers.

If all of this sounds familiar it is because you are blessed to live in Makueni County, or any county that has worked hard to implement the mandates for citizen engagement in the 2010 constitution.

The shift from traditional top-down approaches to community-led development is not only a philosophy, it is a science. It is a set of skills in transformative leadership – leadership with rather than leadership over. Learning how to facilitate groups in discovering their own strengths and own vision, and organizing themselves for effective self-reliant action. Learning how to apply those skills to achieve sustainable progress in health, nutrition, family incomes, public safety and sustainable natural resource management is the role of the School for CLD..

The science of community-led development requires a school – a space where people work together to broaden their knowledge, sharpen their skills and make connections with the many resources available in Kenya.

That is why we are here today, and why my colleagues from all around the world are turning their eyes to Makueni County and to the launch of its school for CLD.

I congratulate all the people of Makueni for playing a key role in the quest for greater human dignity, and for the right of every person to take charge of their own development.

This is a wonderful moment, and I am so pleased I had the opportunity to be part of it with you.

Asante Sana