

Tuesday 22 September 2020

Address by World YMCA Secretary General Carlos Sanvee to YMCA National General Secretaries virtual online meeting

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*'The YMCA journey through Covid and beyond'*

Dear Friends,

Data are showing there is a rise in new Coronavirus cases all over the world. Ever tougher measures have been taken to halt the spread. Some of those measures include partial lockdowns. All over the world, governments are trying to prevent deadly waves of Covid.

And we all know that the impact of Covid has been very damaging for many YMCAs, and especially those whose business model is driven by membership and membership fees, the use of facilities as the core of revenue generation, and the running of seasonal camps.

We were not prepared for this crisis, but no one was. The question is: how are we preparing ourselves for the next 3 to 12 months, with or without a second wave of this virus?

We could just focus on getting our finances right, and keep going.

But you all know that this crisis is about more than just keeping our operations going. No: we are in the midst of deep societal and human disruption. Coronavirus may even have done us a favour, in shining an unforgiving light on all the dysfunctions, the inequalities, the polarization in our societies.

So, my friends, we have a choice. Either we just find a way to keep going, or we step up and play our part in what I am calling the world's great 'Reset', which is being planned and executed all around us.

And don't forget this: The YMCA is a dynamic organization that has always moved with its times, for 175 years now.

So if we choose to be actors in this great Reset, we would be reflecting the aspirations of our founders, who sought a just and equitable world where everyone counts, and where people live in a way that is at peace with and reconciled with their very selves, with their fellow human beings, and with the natural world around them.

Before I continue, let's try and look scientifically as the - admittedly limited - data we have gathered so far about the impact of Covid on our global YMCA Movement.

I'd like to invite Olga Lukina, a member of the YMCA Europe team. Olga kindly coordinated a survey on the impact of Covid on YMCA National Movements, and to that we have also incorporated data from the World Urban Network.

Olga is from Belarus, and let us be in solidarity with the people of Belarus at this very difficult time for them.

***[Olga Lukina presentation]***

Thanks Olga. I am very grateful for your dedication and hard work: we all are.

Over the past six months in which the world has been battling Covid, I have had the immense privilege of talking to almost all of you, at least once and sometimes more. I have been in your meetings, and I have been listening to your pleas. We have journeyed together.

Here are four things I have observed:

First, that the YMCA who are coping the best have these things in common: good leadership; good systems; and a clear long-term direction.

Second, that a significant number of YMCAs - and especially the local ones - may not survive this crisis, or if they do, they will not come back in the same shape and format that they knew before the crisis. We do not have the exact data, but we know that in some countries that proportion could be as high as 40%.

Third, that some of the global trends with which we are confronted are reversible, but some are not. Digital transformation is irreversible, for instance, and so is the awakening of minority and oppressed groups.

Fourth, that so much about our YMCA Movement is resilient. We have a built-in resilience, which most of the time is dormant, but when we are confronted with harsh realities we activate our resilience functions.

I have observed how - after the initial shock - many of you started gradually to turn around. You have initiated new activities, built new partnerships, expanded the frontiers of your natural operations.

Collectively, we have shown that we are far more than 'gym and swim'. We are gradually being recognized as essential players in the youth sector. We represent and amplify the voice of young people in our communities, and globally.

So this is the question: how do we navigate the next 3 -12 months?

2021 is going to be very uncertain, especially financially. A vaccine might be found, but the economy will take a much longer time to recover. So one way or another, we will all continue to suffer.

One thing I am hearing again and again is that 'Relevance drives Resources'.

So how do we remain relevant - and more! - in the midst of a deep and ongoing crisis?

I have one hypothesis and one suggestion to put to you today. Much of this comes from insights gathered at the 'Leaders Talks' on Resilience, and the series of Padare virtual round tables.

My hypothesis for navigating the next 3-12 months is - perhaps ironically - inspired by the protective and defensive measures we are taking to keep us safe from Covid. I had a bit of fun, and tried to link up the three main pieces of practical advice on Covid, with the three main topics of debate in the Padare talks.

So, first, how can we reinterpret 'physical distancing'? For us, it means being more adaptive, with a flatter structure, and faster systems. It means being adaptable in the use of our physical space. It means adapting to the 'low-touch' economy which will minimize physical contact and have a major impact on how we eat, shop, work, exercise, socialise and more. It means being agile in decision making, and balancing flexibility and stability.

Second, how do we reinterpret 'Hand sanitizing'? I call it financial cleanliness. It means taking appropriate measures; diversifying our sources of revenue, exploring new partnerships, managing crises. Remember: 'relevance drives resources'.

Third, how do we reinterpret the wearing of face masks? Masks hide people's visual identity - but we are not going to hide ours. Our identity is young people, and a focus on young people. YMCAs must become a relevant and trusted partner for young people, helping to build their own and their communities' resilience in the face of the global crisis.

Soon we will release the 'Adaptability Handbook' with more of this detail and wisdom which has come out of Padare.

And here is my suggestion for one action we can take in navigating this crisis. It is: to develop 'Coaching circles' - or mutual support groups - amongst National General Secretaries.

Coaching Circles are typically composed of a small group of five or six people who meet every six to eight weeks for 40-60 minutes. During these meetings, each person successively uses his or her own "airtime" (one person for each session) to present issues or challenges, and to receive coaching from the rest of the group. It's as simple, and as precious, as that, and there is a structure and process to it to ensure that the focal person is genuinely supported.

This is a new competency we can develop and master in order to help ourselves. I know some of you are already using this approach, and we need 5 candidates to start the first prototype.

Friends ... I want to thank you.

Specifically, thanks to my colleague and good friend Antonio for translating the meeting in Spanish.

But generally ...

Thank you for the fact that we are all journeying together.

Thank you for your guidance and advice - to me, to each other.

Thank you for being present at so many of our events, and for contributing so richly.

Thank you for contributing toward the YMCA Solidarity Fund - a practical symbol of our mutual commitment which has allocated money to make some 40 grants to struggling YMCAs.

Thank you for making your staff and resources available to support the collective work.

Please know my heartfelt gratitude.

And forgive me if I repeat what I said in my message to the Movement two weeks ago, a really important platform for me to look back over the last six months, and forward to the next six and beyond.

'We shall overcome'! What's more, we will 'build back better'!