

Remarks by John Coonrod PhD, Chair, Sarvodaya USA at the Funeral of Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne - 20 April 2024

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure and honor to be invited to participate today with people who have such devotion to their nation and to humanity.

Now, a famous Gandhian from my country, Dr. Martin Luther King, often quoted that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” In awakening individuals and communities and stirring their confidence, Ari was a person who really bent that arc of history towards justice. He was awakened to injustice himself at a young age and began organizing communities. And then he learned about Gandhi and Gandhi's success in India many years earlier, and he picked up that torch and adapted it to his community.

Now, it has been pointed out that many international organizations have honored him with awards, but I have to say that most of what is done in the field of international development does not follow his principles. It does not restore confidence in people. It does not build their dignity and voice and autonomy. Instead, it creates dependency and often hopelessness rather than community power and solidarity. That is the challenge before us, and we are living at a moment in history when it is beginning to look possible. The kind of principles that Ari have turned into a systematic methodology have now finally begun to be a priority among some of the big international agencies. Samantha Power, Head of USAID, for example, has said she intends to shift more than half of USAID's budget to community led programming over the next few years. Now, that's very, very difficult to do because the institutions of the international Order are still neo-colonial.

Agencies still have not freed themselves of the colonial mindset, of frankly racist principles that have to be pulled apart. Loving kindness – respect and solidarity – has to be instilled in all development actors. So that is our mission. That is our goal in Sarvodaya USA: not only to mobilize people in America to support Sarvodaya financially, but to convince the policymakers and philanthropies to shift power to local communities.

Mahatma Gandhi gave us all a talisman. He said, think of the face of the poorest person you've ever seen and ask “will the action we contemplate restore that person in control of their own lives and destinies?” That is what we need to do. This arc of the moral universe is a relay race. Mahatma Gandhi was one of the very first runners in that relay race. His torch was picked up by Ari and is continued by the thousands of community leaders that Ari trained and inspired. And there's a part of the race for every one of us here, and I hope that we all find in Ari's example, the courage and inspiration to carry that torch as fast as we can to ensure that all people can have lives of dignity, happiness, health, and self-reliance. Thank you very much.