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Reflections on the Japan SYLFF Leadership experience.

First, the overall experience was extremely stimulating and I learned so much about Japanese culture, ways of life both urban and rural. I was amazed at how 'advanced' Japan is as a nation, in terms of technology and approaching the human aspect of life. In other words, taking care of the nation in all its complexities. The cultural experience of each of the workshops, while different, each had its uniqueness. Of course, I was overwhelmed by Tokyo, the buildings, the scale of the population, how care is exercised, especially around shelter, such a key human need. The exposure to the rice paddy fields was a phenomenon that I will always cherish (and on this note the cherry blossoms of the second workshop!). The second cultural experience had spiritual impact on me, with the visits to the temples, actual experience of the statues, among others, disrupting my western sensibility. As I mentioned in my speech, the conventional – western notion of leadership was disrupted. To listen to Mr Sasakawa in the second workshop was a humble experience. Again, his leadership style clearly seeps through the SYLFF secretariat, with each one of you displaying calm, concern and humility. I thank you graciously.

In terms of the scholars, there clearly was a richness of experience and wisdom in the group, with each one having such unique backgrounds and experiences, both at the professional and personal levels. Each in their own right exercises leadership in their respective fields, it was honour to be part of the group. I did feel as though we had not maximised the time to hear about our respective knowledge areas, experiences, and wisdom. In addition, my sense was that the social mission/vision value was somewhat uneven. I have no doubt in mind that there was total appreciation by each individual, for being afforded the opportunity; however, the translation of this investment into a structured societal value (and by implication, action) was held back.

The content of the workshop was significant, given the global dynamics of hunger and poverty. I must confess that before participating in the workshop I had thought of food as it is in its packaged form, on the shelf, but I came away thinking more deeply. Furthermore also, that food is a human right not a commodity, helped me to think in a constructive way how interventions can be made. The topic was/is extremely important. I wondered how the notion of 'food' unfolds in each of the countries from which the scholars originate or are located?

The facilitators, as I mentioned in one of my evaluations, had designed the workshop from a particular vantage point. At times, it worked, but it was too tightly designed, minimising substantive engagement among the scholars. This gets to me a final point.

My expectation was not fully met by the workshop, as I had expected, given the intensive and costly investment by SYLFF, that we would come away with vision/mission/project. My reason for this critique is that philanthropic organisations globally, make an investment in individuals, but the extent to which individuals then plough this back socially is always in question. I thought (and still think) that SYLFF is unique insofar as it has brought together a group of scholars who would be positioned to make an intervention at the global level in terms of food production, given that of the scholars have expertise that can of global significance. That was why I had suggested a Food for All campaign, not because I am individually tied to it, but that it is a global basic need. My engagement with the facilitators and the group, was about the fact that the facilitators were familiar with the content of the workshop to the extent that they could provide 1-2 references, but were not immersed in the social mission of Food Consumption. This was clear when we were placed in groups, that there was so much overlap, with which I am afraid, they could not engage. In addition, they set up the groups in a competitive manner, which defeated the aim and expectation of the workshop. I think this might also have to do with the lines between the facilitators and the SYLFF scholars were not clear. The SYLFF mission is unique, and when we accept sponsorship, we also accept the social responsibility that goes with this. In thinking through the next cohort, perhaps there are questions: is it about the criteria for selecting scholars? Or is it about the facilitators? Or both? Maybe: the scholars were not that excited to take the unique social intervention by SYLFF forward; a lack of experience? A lack of exposure? My hunch is that if the facilitators had a sustained level of social-civil society (even state) experience, the group mobilisation might have been garnered more coherently and effectively. Perhaps there could be further thoughts with the existing group?

All for now. I thank you graciously.

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