

RAMAKRISHNA MISSION - SERVING YOUTH FOR 120 YEARS

(Paper presented by Swami Sarvasthananda, Representative, Ramakrishna Mission at the UNESCO NGO FORUM 2017 Meet held at Riyadh Kingdom Centre, Saudi Arabia on 4 May 2017 at 13.10 hrs)

I am honored to represent my organization – The Ramakrishna Mission – here at the UNESCO NGO Forum 2017.

Ramakrishna Mission was set up nearly 120 years ago in Kolkata, India by Swami Vivekananda – who has been declared as the national youth icon by Govt. of India. In fact, his birthday is celebrated as the National Youth Day in India.

To quote from the Government of India's communication, *“it was felt that the philosophy of Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) and the ideals for which he lived and worked could be a great source of inspiration for the Indian Youth”*

The Ramakrishna Mission also has a close intellectual and moral affinity to the UNESCO. In fact, Federico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO from 1987-1999, had this to say, during his address at the centenary celebration of the World Parliament of Religions held in France: *“I am indeed struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the center of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage.”*

The Ramakrishna Mission, a universal and non-sectarian spiritual movement, carries out a number of human welfare and cultural activities including medical services, relief and rehabilitation, educational services, women welfare, rural and tribal empowerment, youth welfare, and preservation of culture through its various publications and conducting a variety of programs etc. These services, inspired by the ideal of serving the divinity in all beings, are offered to people all over the world

without any distinction of caste, creed or race. It maintains the great traditions of eternal India by helping to maintain a sense of unity in diversity among the peoples of the world not by suppressing or destroying alien cultures, but by integrating their best elements into the indigenous cultural fabric.

However, youth welfare and empowerment of youth remains one of the most critical goals of the Ramakrishna Mission, since it is the youth who create our future.

The Ramakrishna Mission believes that in every single youth, there is a vast, untapped and extraordinary potential. This potential refers not just to the talent or abilities of the youth, but also to their infinite capacity for goodness, for including others in their personal search for happiness and fulfillment, and their capacity for strength, heroism, and nobility in action.

The Ramakrishna Mission has more than 800 institutions engaged in child and youth development activities. We have our own university, we run more than 12 degree colleges for youth, and 150 schools for children in various grades. We also run 98 institutions aimed at building technical and vocational skills, more than 130 non-formal education centers, besides two schools for the disabled. We also run more than 100 hostels and orphanages to help youth from various economic and social backgrounds. Most of the centers have very nice auditoriums and necessary infrastructure to conduct a variety of cultural programs, exhibitions etc. regularly.

In the year 2014-15 alone, our direct engagement through all these institutions covered nearly 350,000 youth.

As you can recognize, the Ramakrishna Mission has a vast and active network/ infrastructure for serving youth not only in India, but also in several countries across the globe.

For several years, we have begun collaborating with universities, schools, NGOs and government agencies, to reach out to their students/ beneficiaries.

One example is a collaboration with Gujarat Technological University where we have introduced a program aimed at making every student a potential contributor and changemaker; being conducted as a compulsory 4-credit course in more than 500 colleges in Gujarat. We have covered more than ½ million students through this program. This course also aims to develop a deep technology driven innovation culture across all the campuses through strategic interventions at pedagogy and institution level. We believe that values, when combined with technology, will be a great enabler to bring further equity, access and inclusion and create a sustainable impact at grassroots level. It helps in incentivizing students and faculty members to innovate for society, especially the underprivileged in rural and economically backward areas. This was Swami Vivekananda's dream; to combine science and technology with spiritual values for the welfare of humanity

Our experiences with collaborative interventions such as this, has shown us that there is tremendous scope for complementing all the wonderful work being done by various youth agencies and educational institutions, with targeted programs aimed at unleashing the power of good in every young person. The UNESCO NGO Forum offers a wonderful opportunity for all like-minded institutions, especially the NGO partners of UNESCO, to share and benefit from each other's experiences and work towards true and sustainable youth empowerment all over the world.