**EDUCATION AS A PATHWAY TO PEACE**

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***(Introduction)***

My name is Arizza from the Philippines, and today I'll be talking about "Education as a pathway to peace".

I want to start with a story.

My uncle was a talented, ambitious student leader in university whose greatest dream was to become a lawyer.

Unfortunately, as a young man, he joined an Islamist extremist group based in Southern Philippines and hid this as a secret from his family. The details were never clear, but he disappeared sometime in the 90's to dedicate his life to extremism. He re-appeared many years later but as a completely different person: disillusioned, hurt, and perpetually struggling to start a new life. He died last year, with no job, no family of his own, and no possessions to his name.

***(Context)***

My uncle, my family, come from Sulu, an island-province in the Philippines that in past decades has become the location of terrorist attacks and activities by violent extremist groups.

His story is not unique; there are many others like him whose lives have been altered forever by their involvement in violent extremism. And unfortunately, this problem in the Philippines is showing no sign of slowing down.

Since 2017, there have been at least 22 attacks perpetuated by ISIS-allied groups in Southern Philippines. This has led to the death of thousands of fighters and civilians and the displacement of at least half a million people.

The data is not clear on the number of fighters who are presently members of these violent extremist groups, but one common finding in the literature highlights that majority of these members are young people.

***(Solutions)***

Why do they fight? The drivers of violent extremism are as diverse as the stories of those involved. Financial incentives, seeking a sense of purpose, discrimination, political factors, and religious influence are all valid drivers that make young people vulnerable.

And one of the solutions that remain uniquely positioned to address a variety of these drivers - especially among the young - is education.

One such solution in this field is Extremely Together (ET), a project by the Kofi Annan Foundation that has brought together 10 young leaders from all over the world, including myself, to prevent violent extremism and promote peace.

One reason why I am proud to be part of ET is encapsulated in its manifesto: *"Rather than telling young people what they should do, ET works to empower ten exceptional young leaders to carry their message to their peers and create a global movement of young people countering violent extremism from the bottom up."*

Since the launch of ET in 2016, we have published the world's first toolkit made by young people for young people outlining the tools and best practices we need to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). We have spoken in major events worldwide on the field, and have organized training programs on the subject. And we have taken to social media and the Internet to write, share our stories, and inspire other young people to take action.

Through all these, ET has served as a network of peers, an information campaign, and a global movement because we want to make sure that is a potent, comprehensive solution for P/CVE.

I've seen the effect of ET in the local work I do on P/CVE in the Philippines. Back there, I run a non-profit organization called KRIS Library that promotes peace through education. Our organization has built peace libraries, provided scholarships to young people from vulnerable communities, and campaigned for peace education to be included in school curriculums.

ET has been an enabler for KRIS Library, allowing me to find more opportunities to expand, find new channels to share our stories, and find allies – including the late former Sec. Gen. Kofi Annan - in this massively challenging task of P/CVE.

ET shows that at the core of any education solution in P/CVE is empowerment.

***(Insights)***

Before I close, I'd just like to say that for education to be an effective pathway to peace, we need to change how we think about education and the solutions we're currently taking in P/CVE.

FIRST: When we say education, it can no longer be just the passive transmission of lessons from a teacher to student. Schools and classrooms and "quality education" are incredibly important, but they form but a small part of the dynamic learning eco-system we need that will equip young people with the values to promote peace. Investing in education for preventing violent extremism also means creating targeted social media campaigns, engaging young influencers and vloggers to be part of the cause, enlisting the participation of media networks to give balanced and conscientious reporting that does not perpetuate stereotypes, working with religious educators, and making families a part of every child's positive learning journey.

SECOND: Extremists are extremely good at getting into the heads of the young people they target. They understand Facebook; they excel on WhatsApp and other chat groups; they lure them with the promise of fame, fortune, and glory; and tweak their techniques according to the specific vulnerabilities of young people.

This is why, on our end, we fight back by doing the same, or better. We have to know our young people more closely than ever and understand that there is no one-size-fits-all education program for P/CVE.

THIRD: In our drive to make peace an indispensable part of education, we have to make young people understand WHY it's important. The present education system drills us everyday with the importance of math, science, and English, but does it teach us the importance of peace?

The answer should be yes. Young people will never be truly invested in learning the values needed to sustain peaceful communities if they don't know how important it is to their everyday life. Peace is not just the vague concept of people of all skin colors in traditional attire holding hands around the world; peace is a means to an end, a coming together, a sharing of common goals, an ingredient that strengthens and improves societies. With increased understanding across diverse groups, we are improving our chances to address global problems such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, corruption, transnational terrorism and more.

FOURTH: The purpose of education should not only be to teach us things, but also to tell us to think carefully about what we are being taught. Young people must learn how to learn critically and independently in order to resist the pull of fake news, dangerous propaganda, and charismatic demagogues.

Apart from that, we should also be taught the importance of unlearning, of being able to unlearn things and help ourselves attain better habits, paths, and life views.

***(Conclusion)***

I started this speech sharing the story of my uncle from the Philippines.

I often think that if I were in his place, I could have suffered the same fate. He grew up in a province mired by decades of historical marginalization and political unrest. His father died early. This was soon followed by my grandmother’s stroke and eventual paralysis and the bankruptcy of their small business. His immediate family – my mom and aunts – had to leave him in Sulu to seek other sources of income elsewhere. He was poor, grieving, angry, and alone.

In each step of his life, he had been exposed to different vulnerabilities and violent extremism was what he chose to hold on to. To truly address this kaleidoscope of drivers, we need a kaleidoscope of solutions in education as well.

This is why I disagree with the phrase "Education as a pathway to peace" which I originally stated as the theme of my talk.

We need to think of education not as one path, but as a whole transportation network working for peace.

We need to employ different paths manned by different transport systems - as we do with trains, buses, bicycles, cars; we need to adjust to every community's particular topography and circumstance; we need hard infrastructure as much as we need IT and GPS; we need to teach values to make the roads safe places; and we need to make the system work for all types of people, but especially for the young.

My uncle, who dreamed of fighting for justice in the courts, fought instead for his belief in violent extremism. But with more opportunities that educate, support, and empower young people like him, my only hope is that someday vulnerable young people like him will be here today speaking in front of you instead of me.

Thank you.