

UNION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (UIA)

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Opening Lecture – Cyril Ritchie, President of UIA

‘Future Roles for International Associations’

(Preface)

Dear Colleagues: My opening remark has to be an alert. My statement today will not be inspired by my Visiting Professor status at a prestigious Korean University, but rather will be based on what I have learnt from my Association Practitioner life. Be warned!

Now to my subject.

- A. As academics know well, when looking to the future it often helps to look to the past. So let me start in the year 312AD, when the Sovereign Constantinian Order was founded. This was (presumably!) the prototype of an association, and many varied orders, societies, associations and organizations have followed over the centuries. The variety of associations is infinite, and their diversity is at the same time their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. I shall elaborate on that, since it is fundamental to the future.
- B. Associations’ ‘Greatest strength’ lies in their contributions to improving humanity’s lives in every area imaginable. Associations include humanitarian actors and philanthropists, advocates on every political issue under the sun, setting of standards (for example for scientists, psychologists, dentists, lawyers, nurses, and naturally teachers). Associations have been created by environmental activists, by human rights defenders, by proponents of breastfeeding, by molecular biologists, by publishers, and a thousand more. Another attribute under the rubric ‘Greatest strength’, equally important for the future, is the number of associations set up to combat evil practices. Examples include combating human trafficking, recruitment of child soldiers, drug abuse, antisemitism and islamophobia, and the perpetuation of patriarchal systems that deny women their rights.
- C. As to associations’ ‘Greatest weakness’, we should not overlook the tendency to work in silos, the difficulties of creating – and financing – functioning networks, the occasional take-over of associations by

persons whose first priority is their own glorification. But in addition, what is highly important for the future is the inability of associations to stand up to what has become known as 'shrinking civil society space'. I shall elaborate on that because of its importance to the immediate and long-term futures of associations.

- D. It was the Russian Federation that first invented the term 'Foreign Agent' and applied it by law to associations operating on its territory with funds coming from other countries. Associations were inspected frequently for conformity to the law, and those found 'guilty' (often without proof in a court) were gradually forced to close down. The agony here is that this 'Foreign Agent' concept has been adopted in one shape or another by more than a dozen other countries, and watered-down versions are being tested in another dozen. The chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of opinion and freedom of assembly is palpable. As the number of authoritarian governments increases throughout the world, such laws undermine democracy and the exercise of human rights, widening the hazards confronting associations. Of course the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and several subsequent UN or regional Conventions and Covenants proclaim – indeed in many cases guarantee – the exercise of people's fundamental freedoms, but there are few courts established to ensure governmental conformity with the Rule of Law. And when we see on a daily basis the propensity of some powerful governments to neglect – indeed, defy – the Rule of Law, we in the association world will need increasingly to Stand Up and Speak Up to counter these morbid constraints and illegalities.
- E. It is obvious that the 'Future Roles for International Associations' will be affected by many other factors. The spread of Artificial Intelligence is one, and I have no expertise in that area. Perhaps even more immediately pressing is the decline in governmental funding for programmes and activities that are at the heart of so many associations' purposes. This has been and is disastrous for many many associations active in welfare and human services. When USAID was closed down abruptly, thousands of headquarters and field staff lost their jobs, which is evidently painful and regrettable. But the real 'victims' are the women in developing countries who can no longer get medical care or contraceptives, or the children in developing countries who no longer can go to school because no teachers can be paid. Many associations working in these areas no longer have a 'Future Role', and their decline or dissolution will simply add to the number of

world trouble spots where renewed poverty prolongs instability and the ensuing likelihood of insurrection.

F. As a natural optimist, I cannot leave my theme solely on this gloomy note. There is one fundamental point that underpins the Future Roles for Associations, namely that they are groupings of citizens who have joined together in an association structure in order, as outlined above, to promote a good cause or combat an evil one. By organizing themselves in a structure, these citizens enhance their potential to influence governments to take better-founded, better-researched, better-implementable policy decisions. Associations must continue to bring to governments their grass-roots knowledge, their community experience, their scientific or technical or professional competence, their willingness to devote time and energy to thinking ahead, their enthusiasm for the advancement of the good functioning of national and international society. When that is the case, then the outcome will surely be that the resulting government decisions will have more beneficial and lasting effect.

G. If I were to have the temerity to identify the 'Future Roles for International Associations' in just a few words it would be something along these lines:

Whatever the ill winds blowing increasingly at national and international level, associations must continue to represent and uphold
AND PRACTISE

- the highest principles of the human conscience;
- the values enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the relevant UN Conventions;
- and the ideals that motivate people everywhere to leave the world a better place for future generations.

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