

Message

Ms. Jennifer Liang,

Recipient of the 1st Niwano Peace Prize Visionary Award

It is indeed an honor to be one of the recipients of the first *Niwano Peace Prize Visionary Award*. Being the first runs the risk of being torch bearers and standard setters of what will hopefully become a grand legacy. Hence, it is with great humility that I accept this responsibility and thank the Niwano Peace Foundation and the people of Japan for deeming me worthy of this.

A visionary by definition has a vision and I find that I have not one but many visions – especially the many visions of what *I dream* as peace for the world, for communities, for organizations and institutions I work with, for all the people within that and for myself while doing all of that. If only visions were mere dreams, then the work would be much easier. But it not just dreams but *dreams in action* that separate out a visionary from a day dreamer. And in accepting this award, I am accepting the responsibility to *dream in action* i.e. firstly, having a **passion** to yearn for a better world that more peaceful, joyful, just, compassionate, equal and sustainable; secondly, having the **wisdom** to discern the gap between the dream and the current reality and thirdly and most importantly, having the **courage** to act in closing this gap. That is a visionary, a *dreamer-in-action*.

In India, it is our good fortune to have had and still have the finest of visionaries. Many seniors, colleagues, friends, comrades who have cared deeply for both planet and people; through their wisdom and experience have crafted solutions to tackle complex social challenges and who from their deepest being have gathered courage enough to act not just for years, but for decades in realizing their vision. Today, I salute all those visionaries and dreamers-in-action as in giving me this award, you are also acknowledging the passion, wisdom and courage of each and every one of them.

Today, my country and indeed many parts of the world, are dealing with very many crises that threaten our survival as a planet – poverty, hunger and struggle of millions for food and dignified work, refugees of conflicts and wars desperate to survive, climate change and storms, the struggle and shortage of water and polluted air in our cities that threatens to kill. While a handful in my country have grown unimaginably wealthy, a large section gets more vulnerable with each passing day, many becoming marginalized both economically and socially. While some women in India have done well in certain spheres, many women (not to mention trans-gender and non-binary people whose struggle is even more acute) are denied basic recognition as equal human beings with dignity, freedoms and privileges accorded to men. Hate against religious minorities has become weaponized by politics to inflict all kinds of abuse, torment, persecution and indignity against them. This has already caused irreparable damage to the social fabric of our country as a decent, just, humane, caring and tolerant society.

In the midst of all of these, when civil society should be getting stronger in action to support the state and our planet in tackling these immense challenges, unfortunately the reverse is coming true. In my country today, with a state extremely suspicious, wary and hostile to civil society efforts, it is increasingly becoming a challenge to be and to remain visionaries and dreamers-in-action. Excessive and constantly changing draconian laws make it difficult for most civil society organizations to continue operating effectively and to raise resources for our work. But even more than that, the constant efforts to tarnish the

reputation of civil society and the threat of criminalization hurts the morale and motivation of our teams and of us working honestly to transform lives of the poorest in our communities and of women, children, youth, farmers, weavers, mentally ill, forest dwellers and many other vulnerable groups.

So, the challenge for us dreamers-in-action today is to continue acting out our vision for what is right and needed even at the risk of our reputation, freedom, limb and perhaps even life. But not just that, while acting as individuals, we need to inspire others around us, especially newer generations to courageous action to realize and fulfil their vision for change.

With this prize money, I hope to take a step in that direction. I want to initiate the designing and development of a transformational programme to build more dreamers-in-action, especially from amongst women, trans-gender and non-binary people from civil society organizations of North East India. I want to help organize the capacities and build the next generation of visionary leaders who are passionate, wise and courageous i.e. my definition of dreamers-in-action. They use their *head* (knowledge and experience), *heart* (values, compassion, courage etc.) and *hands* (skills & competencies for action) to bring about a positive change in the lives of marginalized and vulnerable communities and of the planet.

In their hearts, they care passionately about the cause they espouse and lead but, in the process, they are also deeply self-aware and strive to grow and build better versions of themselves. They are joyful and while being aware of the big responsibility they have, are yet able to carry that burden lightly. With the disproportionate amount of challenges that the future dreamers-in-action face, they would have to be people who can look after themselves even as they work for others and for their planet. I hope the next generation of change-makers will value their own health, joy, happiness and peace as much as the health, joy, peace and happiness they want for others and for the world.

While they have the head (knowledge) to see and understand the complex realities around them, they will also have the tools to design solutions that have a chance to change and transform these complexities. Most importantly, their hands will not be paralyzed by inaction due to fear and loneliness. Along with skills and competencies for action, they will value team work and the power of alliances. They will build a strong eco-system of support around themselves and their organizations and when faced with challenges, will know how to rally together and work with others to take the needed and courageous action for change and for peace.

Once again, I thank the Niwano Peace Foundation for this recognition of the need for constructive and transformational work to build peace. While the hands that accept this award and the face that is projected is mine, there are many colleagues whose hard work it has been for me to get till here. It is their dedication, sacrifice and work that is also being honored. I thank the foundation and through the foundation, the people of Japan for your generosity, trust and belief in a world that can be a much better version of ourselves. This award for that building that vision of peace is the key of hope that binds us together in a world full of complex challenges. I thank you for that hope.

Jennifer Liang
Dated: 6 December 2022
Place: Assam