

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the VOIS Capacity Building workshop.

I am here to tell you a story. A story of belief, a story of hope, a story of trust, a story of persistence. A story, about four young people who dared believe that they could make a change in their society.

A story of four individuals who dared dream that they could found an organization to represent themselves and other foreign students studying in North Cyprus. I am here to tell you a story about VOIS.

On the 5th of February two years ago, Kavakure Fiona, Adeyinka Oladapo, Ezinne Favour Ogwuegbu and myself, took the decision to be our own voices, and the voices of many other foreign nationals studying here. We told ourselves; "We've had enough!" We said to ourselves; "it's about time, about time to take action".

Today, we find ourselves here. Look at this crowd, look at the numbers... And there are hundreds of others who could not make it today. But they are a part of this family too! This is the consequence of hope, a consequence of belief, persistence and determination.

Today VOIS is a big family with some of the most hardworking, smart, determined and skillful individuals I have ever come across. People who spend sleepless nights trying to represent you and I to the best of their abilities. Defenders of our liberties! People who give us so much hope in a better society, a better North Cyprus for international students, a better North Cyprus for all.

It is important to contextualize these efforts. To be honest, within the context of North Cyprus, this is an enormous task because the odds are stacked against us. There are so many people who want us to fail. It appears that the establishment prefers an international student who pays fees, pays for health insurance, uses public transport, pays for his or her house rent, and buys from shops without any complaints - Niet!!! - Such student that can be exploited; who when even after the premium for the health insurance or fees or house rent is increased will not complain. They don't prefer students, who when discriminated upon, will not remain silent. They want students who simply obey and do not question!

Simply put, they want cash cows! But we are not cash cows, are we? When the health insurance premium is increased, we ask questions, don't we? When one of us needs assistance, we are there, aren't we? When we see injustice, we raise our voices, don't we? We refuse to be exploited. And because we refuse to be exploited, the establishment does not like us. They do not want us to do what we are doing. They want us to be silent, but silence is not an option. This is why we hear members of the establishment state in the press that we are spies for the Greek Cypriots. What an accusation! If we were a spy organization, we would not have funding problems, would we? We would not have young local students –Turkish Cypriots- volunteering with us.

I mean, when a girl who has been abused contacts Rawaa in the middle of the night seeking for shelter and care, we would not be struggling amongst ourselves to raise 1000 liras to get a house for her to stay in for a couple of days. If so, then what kind of a spy organization are we? Or perhaps, my understanding of how spy organizations operate is wrong. You watch spy movies right? Because if I remember correctly, in these spy movies, the spies always have everything they need to be absolutely effective at their jobs. Resources equaling to effectiveness. Hold this thought, because I will return to the issue of resources and effectiveness a little bit later on.

Still on the issue of spying, come on now! Surely, there are better things they could accuse us of. For example, they could accuse us of telling the truth. That will make for a really interesting accusation. Well in any case, these lies being told about us are the least of our concerns. Our focus is representing you and being our neighbor's keeper.

A task, which we are successful at sometimes, and at other times, unfortunately not very successful. Not because we do not try, but because at this point in time, we do not have all of the resources that we need in order to attain all of our goals. But we will get there I promise you. This is a journey that ends in one way only; when we are treated by virtue of who we are, not where we come from or how we look or what religion we believe in or what our sexuality is. To get there, we need to act and think unitedly. We need to be strong, we need to believe, we need to trust one another, we need to be determined, we need to organize ourselves in groups such as this and put in the work that is necessary to attain justice and fairness.

I see the light at the end of the tunnel, the question, is do you? Do you see the light? And if you do, what are you doing about it? A few days ago, I put up a post on my Instagram saying that if you are an international student and not part of VOIS, then you are missing out on the experience of a lifetime. If you are seated in here, and you are not a registered volunteer for VOIS, then please do give it a thought. If we don't represent ourselves and advocate for our own rights, no one will. We are our only hope!

A lot has happened since we last met in May 2019. We have lost many friends, many...many friends, one of them was Michael Mohammed Saliu. Michael died of kidney failure. He could have been saved, but the system failed him...and yes, we failed him too! We could have done more, we should have done more. Alas, he is gone, but his life and death should inform us, inform us of what is at stake when we stay silent as injustice reigns. Inform us that our struggle today is a matter of life and death. The stakes are too high, and they are stacked against us. But I believe in you, and I believe in VOIS. However, we need more than just belief, we need action! And now is the time to take action. Now, not tomorrow!

A few months ago, the health insurance premium drastically increased, and we as VOIS met with different state authorities calling for this premium to be reduced. We were not listened to. And we contemplated calling for a boycott. We really gave a thought to this, but we were unsure. A boycott is a serious issue, and when you do boycott, it must be properly organized and effective. We asked ourselves, if we called a boycott, how many students were going to boycott these payments. In fact, how many of you seated in here, would have boycotted this payment in order to force the government to reduce the premium? Those who could afford it simply paid, while some others couldn't. The fact that one can afford an injustice, does not make it less of what it is: an injustice. If you are meant to pay 5TL for something and are coerced into paying 10TL, whether you can afford it doesn't matter, neither does how cheap it still seems. The problem is in the principle behind the exchange. Thus, because we were unsure as to whether majority of students will agree and follow this boycott, we decided not to go ahead with it for fear of failure. Perhaps we shouldn't have. Perhaps we should have believed in ourselves more.

And this is our biggest problem; we are not united and organized enough. We don't trust each other and do not rely on one another. Today we all are paying the increased premium for health insurance, and come next semester we will still pay unless we do something about it. We remain

silent when our friends are deported because they are HIV+ or they have Hepatitis. We do not raise our voices when a student was prevented from writing her exams because she had Hepatitis C. How do we let this happen? Since when is a person living with HIV or Hepatitis a criminal? Do they not deserve our support and protection? Why then do we do nothing? Whenever you see injustice and stay silent about it, remember that my oppressor today will be your oppressor tomorrow.

Are you ready to do what it takes to stop exploitation? Remember that we are like a broom, stronger together and weak when divided. Whatever decision you take, remember that in the end, we all have to bear the cross of inaction. If you think that enough is enough, join VOIS and together we will effect change and make things better!

**ASK ALL VOIS MEMBERS TO STAND!**

Yes we do have other difficulties, one of which is the problem of financing our organization. A lot of the time, the money to run VOIS comes from the pockets of its members. This is why I say the sacrifices they make are enormous. They do not only devote their time, sleep and efforts to represent you and I, but they also have to part way with their pocket money just to be able to keep us afloat and operational.

**ASK THE AUDIENCE TO GIVE THE VOIS MEMBERS A ROUND OF APPLAUSE.**

Thank you, thank you for your efforts and sacrifices. I am pretty sure that if we had more resources and more devoted members we will be more effective.

That being said, we are extremely grateful to the European Union for funding our workshops through the Grow Civic Support Program. Please, kindly give them a big round of applause. Today will not be possible without them. In fact, we have Selen here from Grow Civic who will be addressing us shortly. Thank you Selen, and please extend our sincerest gratitude to your team.

To all of our other supporters like the Ombudsperson, Dr. Omur Yilmaz, Aycan Garip, Faika Deniz, Queer Cyprus, the Refugee Rights Association, the Patient's Rights Association, Dr. Nesil Bayraktar and some of our friends within the police as well as the countless people who have supported us from the very first day, we say Thank you! We are eternally grateful and know that you are always with us. Your support gives us hope, and strengthens us. Çok Teşşekürler!

Dear international students, now more than ever we have to take action. Inaction is no longer an option. My sleeves are folded and I am ready to do my utmost best to improve the living conditions of students here. I can say the same of every single member of VOIS Cyprus. Can you say the same of yourself? Look at your neighbor and ask him or her; are you, are you ready to do the needful?

Ladies and gentlemen, by the end of today, I sincerely hope, I really hope and I know that we will not fail ourselves. I believe in every single one of you. I may not know all of your names, but we share the same energy and we share the same fate! Together we will overcome!

Thank you!