

## LEARNING CURVE PERSPECTIVE

## Kizuna, the way to sustainability

I LEARNT yet another Japanese word last week, building up my vocabulary, albeit slowly but surely.

I like the word *kizuna*. It has a positive ring to it. The word cropped up at an international symposium organised by the University of Tokyo under its Global Leadership Initiative.

The fact that *kizuna* is associated with a leadership programme is timely and appropriate; more so when it is focused on advancing a Graduate Programme on Sustainable Science. Themed How can We Build *Kizuna* for Sustainability? An Ecological Perspective, the symposium was the third in its series.

The meaning of *kizuna* includes "bond", "linkage" and "solidarity", and I had the impression that it has an in-depth meaning taking its cultural context and nuances into account.

This can be gleaned from the fact

*kizuna* reportedly emerged as the top choice of kanji character in a 2011 public poll.

The fact that the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plant happened in the same year gives the notion that *kizuna* has a lot to do with people coming together as a way to reach out and stay connected through a common "rope" (read: values) of being human.

Indeed the first half of the kanji character is said to represent "rope" or "thread" whereas the second half refers to "cohesiveness" and "strength" that weaves through each person to make him or her an integral part of the whole.

In other words, *kizuna* epitomises the spirit of togetherness, giving strength to the close col-

laboration that it is meant to develop.

The word highlighted this togetherness at a time when Japan was in a crisis. The courage and



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Image courtesy of <http://thekizunaproject.com/>

resolve of the Japanese were tested like never before.

Compassion, empathy and the uncompromising spirit of oneness transcended differences and bitterness, bringing about the much needed close relationship and inter-dependency.

Similarly, within the context of sustainable development, we need the same traits to cater for the millions who are under urgent threat of global warming and climate change.

The unprecedented occurrence

of crisis after crisis cannot be handled effectively without nurturing the bonds that bind people via a set of common values and ethics.

In this respect, the symposium organisers were rather persuasive in their choice of words, attesting to the reality that the world is "highly complex, dynamic and interdependent" where isolated, siloed, independent and conventional linear approaches are most likely to fail.

The need to untangle conventional thinking and both physical and mental structures is imperative so that we can effectively nurture new ones embracing the notion of *kizuna*.

Constructive relationships and networks are essential to allow for self-reliance and steadfastness in mitigating any form of sufferings. The aim is to create an empowering culture and capacity through *kizuna*. This also means that *kizuna* must be nurtured early in life as a community value to be cherished, protected and lived by.

Sustainability is not just a target to be achieved by attaining a certain set of numbers and figures

over a period of time (as in the Millennium Development Goals that will end this year), but it is also vital to the attainment of higher purposes in life that may have nothing to do with the amassing of material wealth.

Yet unless there are attempts to consider and build equally robust intangible foundation that can ensure sincere, equitable and cohesive partnerships, a good quality of life cannot be sustained in the long run.

The shocking news that the richest one percent are about to control a majority of the world's wealth come 2016, as predicted by Oxfam, is a clear testimony that concepts such as *kizuna* have long been neglected as an important component in the journey towards sustainability.

In a sense, *kizuna* is about "sustainable relationships" that will better ensure what is needed to correct imbalances while narrowing ever-widening gaps.

The question goes back to the theme of the symposium: How can We Build *Kizuna* for Sustainability?