



# 2023 JOINT MEDIA PROJECT REPORT



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# STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

## PREFACE

By Ramesh Jaura

*Director-General of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate Group and Editor-in-Chief of its Flagship Agency IDN-InDepthNews*

We are delighted to present you a compilation of independent and in-depth news and analyses by IDN from April 2022 to March 2023. It is part of a Joint Media Project of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate (INPS) Group with IDN as the Flagship Agency in partnership with Soka Gakkai International in consultative status with ECOSOC.



The articles in this compilation appeared on IDN-InDepthNews ([www.indepthnews.net](http://www.indepthnews.net)) in the main category Sustainability and on the thematic website of the INPS's SDGsforAll ([www.sdgforall.net](http://www.sdgforall.net)). These can be accessed free of charge 24 hours a day and 365 days a year.

2022-2023 is the seventh year of the INPS Group's media project with the SGI, a lay Buddhist organization with headquarters in Tokyo. But IDN has been a party to the previous joint projects on 'Education for Global Citizenship' and 'Fostering Global Citizenship' respectively - as the result of an agreement between the precursor of the International Press Syndicate (INPS) Japan and the SGI. We are pleased that at the time of writing these lines, we are already in the eighth year of the INPS Group's 'SDGs for All' joint media project with the SGI.

This compilation comprises 33 articles analysing developments and events related to a sustainable world, peace and security on the whole and its 17 Goals with 169 targets at multiple levels - governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental.

Some of the articles have been translated into several European and non-European languages. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at an historic UN Summit - officially came into force in January 2016.

The SDGs, also known as Global Goals, are unique in that they call for action by all countries, poor, rich and middle-income to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection. All the more reason that countries recognize their primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the progress made in implementing the Goals, which will require quality, accessible and timely data collection.

Sincere thanks to Dr Kamolrat Intaratat, Founder and Director of the Research Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM) in Thailand for writing our Foreward.

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## MESSAGE

Alexandra Masako Goossens-Ishii  
Programme Coordinator, Environment & Climate Change,  
Soka Gakkai International (SGI)



As we enter the midpoint year of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN as a whole is assessing progress towards their realization and will report to a SDG Summit that will be convened in September 2023. Ahead of this gathering, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has released an advance edition of his report on the progress towards the SDGs, entitled “Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet”.

In this report, he shares that although after the SDGs were adopted in 2015, early efforts produced some favorable trends in reducing extreme poverty and child mortality, increasing gender equality, access to electricity in poorest countries, and renewables in the energy mix, this progress was fragile and too slow. In recent years, major global shocks including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, economic injustices and the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, have challenged our international institutions and seriously threatened the realization of the SDGs. The report shares a preliminary assessment of the roughly 140 targets: “only about 12% are on track; close to half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track and 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline”<sup>1</sup>.

The UN Secretary General calls on everyone: if we want to deliver a better life for people and the planet, we need to unite around our shared principles and common goal and take transformative action now. In this regard, the 2023 SDG Summit and the 2024 Summit of the Future represent crucial opportunities to carefully review progress and to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance.

Each and everyone has a unique role to play, whether at the family, community, national, regional or international level, to take action to transform our local communities, and to live better lives in harmony with nature.

That is also why the “SDGs for All” media project plays a crucial role as it introduces efforts to implement the SDGs around the world. As such, it contributes to inspire action at all levels, and to strengthen the global alliance for SDG across business, civil society, science, young people, local authorities and more that the UN Secretary General is calling for, in order to come together and break through to a better future for all.

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<sup>1</sup> [UN Secretary General Report: \*Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet\*](#) (advance unedited version) May 2023

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## FOREWORD

### Communicating the SDGs For All: Striving For People, Planet and Peace

*Dr Kamolrat Intaratat*

*Assoc. Professor, Faculty of Communication, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Bangkok, and the Founder and Director of the Research Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM) in Thailand.*



Communicating the *SDGs For All* is a formidable undertaking that needs to be taken collaboratively among civil society, the local and municipal levels, as well as other stakeholder groups who by outreach are informed on priorities. People, Planet, and Peace are interdependent stakeholders in reaching our goal of SDGs For All.

For example, People might start with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

For any kind of outreach activities with local start-up assistance, there need to be programs for basic service access and policies addressing poverty.

When you consider the Planet, it might start from SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG15 (Life on Land) to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy).

And for Peace, one might start with SDG 16 where Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions are the focus, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDGs (Decent Work and Economic Growth), etc.

To link People, Planet, and Peace, it is important in bridging the digital divide and increasing the impact of Digital Communication or Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for all. Since the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the 193 member states of the United Nations in September 2015, striving to achieve the SDGs for all has become the world's most pressing problem with an achievement target of 2030 – *for* ending poverty and hunger, addressing climate change, protecting the planet, living healthy fulfilling lives, creating just and inclusive communities, achieving gender equity, realizing quality education, among others.

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Digital communication and technology led by SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) would be the core of inclusive access to ICTs, especially the Internet. All national governments must provide universal access to basic telecommunication services to all its citizens, even those living in remote places.

Digital Communication can also help initiate and crafting of inclusive innovation for sustainable development, which could lead to understanding SDG audiences; forging new partnerships; maximizing the impact of digital technologies and innovations; and mobilizing resources for public engagement.

In line with this, Hubs could be devised for teen peer learning areas relating to the vision and strategy, people and partnerships, and tools, resources, and innovation involved in achieving the SDGs.

SDG 9 must be highlighted here. Communication plays an integral line to link and collaborate among all SDG achievements. Communicating the SDGs is a must, there is no way to attain the SDGs other than through digital communication and technology embedded with SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), to achieve all those SDGs For All commitments.

Digital Communication and technology is an essential ingredient in this endeavor. All sectors need to collaborate, interconnect and act responsibly under all kinds of active and partnership integration starting from awareness-raising, knowledge sharing, and communication strategies that are embedded in tangible and continuous communication employing digital technologies and digital communication aims to make sure for inclusive accountable and transparent partners and institutions.

IDN-IN Depth News's SDGs For All news reporting project supported by Soka Gakkai International is a valuable digital communication tool that could be utilized by communicators and communities to understand various aspects of striving to bring People, Planet and Peace together to chart a more fair, just and sustainable world for human and sentient beings to live together in peace and harmony.

*\* Dr Kamolrat is a specialist in the field of Development Communication especially in ICT for Community-based Communication for Empowerment (ICT4D). Her focus is on ICT4D for all marginal people both locally and globally. She has dedicated her life to empowering marginalized communities in Thailand and disadvantaged groups through projects such as Sustainable Agriculture/ Smart Farmer, Women and Technology, ICT and Disability, e- Learning MOOC programs.*

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### Japan Prepares to Sway Agenda Towards Green Development at G7 Summit

By Kalinga Seneviratne



*Soka University President Masashi Suzuki making the welcoming speech at a one-day international conference titled 'Advancing Security and Sustainability at the G7 Hiroshima Summit' held at the University on March 29, 2023. (From left to right): Hirotugu Terasaki, Director General, Peace and Global Issues, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), Audrey Kitagawa, President, International Academy of Multicultural Cooperation (IAMC), and John Kirton, Director, G7 Research Group. Credit: Katsuhiro Asagiri, Multimedia Director of IDN-INPS.*

SYDNEY | TOKYO — A one-day conference at Soka University in Tokyo on March 29 titled 'Advancing Security and Sustainability at the G7 Hiroshima Summit' discussed the complex problem of swaying the focus away from the Ukraine war towards green development and food and energy security at the forthcoming May summit of the world's advanced economies. These include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as the European Union.

The dilemma was amply illustrated when a speaker who was scheduled to address the meeting in person could not make it to the Japanese capital and instead made her presentation via zoom from Munich. She told the audience in Tokyo (and those watching the live streaming) that she could not make it because of industrial strife in Germany.

"I could not come to the airport because a nationwide strike by transport unions stopped all public transport, and the airline cancelled my flight because the airports were closed," Professor Miranda Schreurs of the Technical University of Munich said, speaking from her lounge room. "The reason is the high energy prices in Germany due to the Ukraine war."

During the day-long deliberations, the Ukraine war was mentioned repeatedly, but no one dared to question whether G7 member countries' arming of the Ukrainian military is contributing to the prolonged suffering of people globally. Germany and France with violent protests over the increasing cost of living.



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Schreurs pointed out that "G7 used to lead the promotion of democracy", but "it is not secure anymore in our own countries", she warned, asking, "what can G7 do to support democracy?"

In the keynote address, Takashi Ariyoshi, Deputy Secretary-General of the G7 Hiroshima Summit Secretariat, said that Japan chose to hold the G7 summit in Hiroshima because the city symbolizes the "world that faces unprecedented challenges today with some threatening the use of nuclear weapons".

He argued that when the fundamental principles of the international order are being questioned today, G7 countries need to understand why 35 countries did not vote against Russia at the UN General Assembly vote recently "in the face of blatant aggression".

"G7 cannot settle everything we want to (on our own) today, we need to work with global partners", he argued, noting that the Global South countries are important today, not only because many of them are suffering from the impact of the pandemic and problems associated with the Ukraine war, but also because "they are important players (in the global order)".

Therefore, he said that Japan had invited India, Brazil, the Cook Islands (chair of the Pacific Island Forum), Comoros (chair of the African Union), Indonesia (chair of ASEAN) and Vietnam to the Hiroshima G7 summit. "We have invited countries that are willing to play a positive role in protecting the international order."

He said that Japan is the only Asian country in the G7 and that China and Russia have understood the importance of the Indo-Pacific region. "How to deal with China is an important issue," he added. "Thus, the Hiroshima summit will be an important meeting to develop collaboration in the region on a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Ariyoshi emphasized that working on economic security will be an important agenda item at the Hiroshima summit, and Japan is proposing seven pathways to achieve it, which include resilient supply chains and infrastructure without making use of economic coercion and non-market practices, and controlling "malicious practices" in the digital space.



*Takashi Ariyoshi, Deputy Secretary General, G7 Hiroshima Summit Secretariat; Director, Economic Policy Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, giving the keynote address. Credit: Katsuhiro Asagiri, Multimedia Director of IDN-INPS.*

Pointing out that Japan has a good track record in healthcare, Ariyoshi anticipated that a major agenda item in Hiroshima would be "to strengthen the global health architecture",

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bearing in mind the lessons learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic. "Notion of health security is very important (and) universal health coverage is an important agenda item," he added.

"It is difficult to feel optimistic about the world today," noted Hirotsugu Terasaki, Director General of Peace and Global Issues of Soka Gakkai International, a co-sponsor of the meeting in an opening address.

"We can all agree that no nation should seek to construct its wellbeing and prosperity at the expense of other nations," maintained Terasaki. "To this end, the first step is for us, as individuals, to live with the awareness that we cannot construct our own happiness on the unhappiness and misfortune of others."

Ella Kokotsis, Director of Accountability of G7 Research Group, proposed eight recommendations for the Hiroshima agenda—including the need to ramp down on fossil fuel subsidies and the \$100 billion a year commitment for climate finance to be spent to support poor communities. She urged G7 leaders to do more to support green infrastructure and technological transfers to enable developing countries to adapt green technology at a faster pace.

Transparency and accountability (on these actions) are critical, she declared. "Hiroshima represents a very critical time to leverage its (G7's) influence on climatic action."

Schreurs warned that reaching a net zero target (of emissions) for G7 countries like Germany by the mid-2040s would be difficult in the current political environment. "In Germany, subsidies for fossil fuel use have increased due to the effects of the Ukrainian war," she noted. "We need to do things that it does not affect the function of democracy."

Showing a picture of a solar panel on farmland in Japan, she noted that trees might have been felled to set it up. Consequently, while adopting renewable energy like solar, policymakers must be mindful of the environmental impacts.

Mark Elder, Director of Research at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, emphasised that because of the Ukraine war, the climate crisis should not be downgraded. "Earth's ability to support human existence is at risk, not just because of the Ukraine war," he warned.

"Energy conservation need(s) to be strengthened, and rather than introducing electric cars (we need to) increase public transport." He pointed out that for electric cars, mining of critical minerals is needed, "which is a problem"—both environmentally and in terms of labour rights.

"We need to prioritise climate security, not the Ukraine war," Elder told the audience.

Ariyoshi said that at the secretariat, in preparation for the Hiroshima summit, they have done a lot of work on how to help people who the twin crises of the pandemic and wars have left behind.

"Development finance is important here," he argued. "We want to support SDGs focusing on vulnerable groups (and) some countries have recently received very opaque aid; we need to create an international norm to make development aid sustainable." [IDN-InDepthNews – 31 March 2023]

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### Forest Elephants Enhance Carbon Capture—Keep Them Alive

By Ngala Killian Chimtom



*African forest. Credit: Ngala Killian Chimtom*

YAOUNDÉ, Cameroon — While African forest elephants have traditionally been thought of as playing a destructive, negative role in forests, the big munchers are now seen as critical to saving a climate in peril.

Scientists now suggest that the perceived destructive nature of the African forest elephant through its feeding

habits is good for the forests' health and the global climate.

Ian Redmond, the co-founder of the NGO Rebalance Earth, who has been researching and conserving elephants since 1976, cites Italian Biologist Fabio Benghazi as having carried out a comparative study in the Congo Basin RainForest. “He [Fabio Berzaghi] compared two areas of the Congo Basin RainForest—one where there is a population of forest elephants and one where they were wiped out by Ivory poachers decades ago, and it turns out that the forest with elephants has between 7-14% more above-ground biomass—that is the weight of wood in the forest.”

He explained that forest elephants generally munch trees and plants smaller than 30 centimetres in diameter. Most of such trees die in the process, eliminating competition with the slow-growing, carbon-rich trees for water, fertilizer, and light.

The researchers used a model to predict what a forest where elephants had for years eaten those smaller trees would look like. They discovered that where elephants graze, the resulting forest has fewer trees with denser wood and higher above-ground biomass.

Redmond told IDN that is the type of forest that stores more carbon. In the real world, the researchers also found out that in forests where elephants graze, the trees have wood with a density of 75 grams per cubic meter more than those in forests without elephants.

“So, elephants, through their selective feeding, digest the vegetation that they have eaten and produce huge quantities of dung—one forest elephant produces roughly a metric ton of dung every week-52 week a year, walking through the forest—and of course, that dung decomposes into first-class organic fertilizer. So what the elephants effectively are doing is they are weeding the forest-feeding off the trees that don’t store much carbon and the plants and the lianas and the herbaceous growth and producing fertilizer which then gets used by the bigger trees which are storing a lot of carbon. The effect that has over many years is to enhance the ability of the forest to sequester and store carbon,” Redmond told IDN.

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But the Congo Basin Forest elephants have been dwindling at an alarming rate; demand for Ivory in Southeast Asia is driving poaching here, but the researchers say this also is a consequence of inadequate knowledge of how beneficial elephants are if kept alive.

The elephant population in the Congo Basin Forest once stood at 1.1 million. Deforestation and poaching have reduced that population to less than one-tenth of its former size.

Fabio Berzaghi estimates that if the elephant population were restored to its former size, it would increase carbon sequestration by 13 metric tons per hectare of forest. He said this would mean Africa's Forest elephants could capture well over 6000 metric tons of carbon per square kilometre, were the initial populations of the forest elephants to be restored—it is the same amount of carbon that 250,000 trees can capture.

The International Monetary Fund's Dr Ralph Chami, who has done pioneering work on the economic value of Forest Elephants, notes that poachers, communities and countries stand to draw larger economic benefits from keeping the big mammals alive.

"The poacher has a choice to make: he can kill the elephant and make some money, or he can keep the elephant and make a lot more money for a lot longer time," Chami told IDN.

He said a calculation of the total value of the services provided by forest elephants indicates that each elephant produces a service worth \$1.75 million. That makes a huge difference from the paltry \$40,000 poachers make on average for taking down an elephant.

"Poaching is the last resort of a desperate person," Chami told IDN. He suggested that "maybe those poachers can become citizen scientists, they could be retrained to look after those elephants, and make a yearly salary that far exceeds every money they can make from poaching elephants".

Redmond explained that his organization is working to "rebalance the earth", whose ecological balance has been distorted and made more dangerous by deforestation, industrial expansion, mining, roads and railways.

"Forests are not only about the trees. It's a whole ecosystem," he said, and forest elephants play a central role in that ecosystem. [IDN-InDepthNews – 11 March 2023]



*Female African Bush Elephant. Photo credit: Muhammad Mahdi Karim/Wikimedia Commons*

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### Latin America & the Caribbean Lack Access to Healthy Diet

By Rodrigo Pérez

SANTIAGO, Chile — As many as 131.3 million in Latin America and the Caribbean have had to forego nutritious foods in 2020 because of the higher average daily cost of healthy diets in the region compared to those in other areas of the world. According to the new [United Nations report Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2022](#), in 2019, the figure amounted to about 123 million.



Photo Credit: PAHO

While 22.5 per cent of Latin America and the Caribbean population could not afford a healthy diet, in the Caribbean, there were 52 per cent; in Mesoamerica, 27.8 per cent; and in South America, 18.4 per cent.

Equally worrisome is that between 2019 and 2021, the number of hungry people in the region increased by 13.2 million, reaching 56.5 million in 2021. South America experienced the highest increase in the number of hungry people. Between 2019 and 2021, hunger affected 7.9 per cent of the people in South America, 8.4 per cent in Mesoamerica, and 16.4 per cent in the Caribbean.

Pan American Health Organization ([PAHO](#)) Director Carissa F. Etienne said the lesson learnt is to "redouble efforts to address malnutrition in all its forms". This implies the need to promote public policies to create healthy food environments, "eliminate industrially produced trans fats, implement front-end warning labelling, regulate advertising of unhealthy foods, tax sugary drinks, and support healthy eating and physical activity in schools".

"Understanding the factors that determine poor dietary practices is key to finding solutions and ensuring that everyone in the region has access to healthy foods," she added.

For example, countries with higher levels of poverty and inequality tend to have more significant difficulties accessing a healthy diet, which is directly associated with a higher prevalence of hunger, chronic malnutrition in boys and girls, and anaemia in women aged 15 to 49.

The UN report finds that the inability to afford a healthy diet is related to a country's income level and, in turn, the incidence of poverty and the level of inequality.

The rise in international food prices experienced since 2020, exacerbated after the start of the conflict in Ukraine, and a regional increase in food costs above the

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general level, have increased the difficulties for people to access a healthy diet, notes the UN report.



*A Brazilian supermarket without customers. Phot credit"  
Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0*

"There is no individual policy that can solve this problem independently. National and regional coordination mechanisms need to be strengthened to respond to hunger and malnutrition," said Mario Lubetkin, Assistant Director and Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) of the United Nations.

He added: "To contribute to the affordability of healthy diets, it is necessary to create incentives for the diversification of the production of nutritious foods aimed mainly at family farming and small-scale producers, take measures for the transparency of the prices of these foods in markets and trade, and actions such as cash transfers and improving school menus."

Besides, trade and market policies can play a fundamental role in improving food security and nutrition. Greater transparency and efficiency improve inter-regional agri-food trade by replacing uncertainty with market predictability and stability."We are talking about the region of the world with the most expensive healthy diet, which particularly affects vulnerable populations—small farmers, rural women, and indigenous and Afro-descendant populations—who allocate a greater percentage of their income to the purchase of food," noted Rossana Polastri, Regional Director for the International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)), also based in Rome.

"To reverse this situation, we must promote innovative solutions that diversify production and increase the supply of healthy food, and that improve small producers' access to markets and quality food, including digital solutions that articulate food supply and demand," added Ms Polastri.

The report also describes how some nutrition-sensitive social protection programs have worked and are essential to support the diets of the most vulnerable population, particularly in periods of crisis.

"Food insecurity will continue to rise due to the food and fuel price crisis caused by the conflict in Ukraine and the aftermath of COVID-19," said Lola Castro, Regional Director of the Rome-based UN World Food Programme ([WFP](#)).

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“We must act now, but how can we do it? Supporting governments to expand social protection networks because the pandemic once again demonstrated that social protection is useful to improve the affordability of a healthy diet, preventing crises like this from hitting affected populations even more,” she added.

Other food policies, such as nutritional labelling, subsidizing nutritious foods, and taxing unhealthy or non-nutritious foods that do not contribute to healthy diets, if well designed, can improve the affordability of healthy diets and prevent debilitating conditions and diseases related to overweight and obesity.

“For children to grow up healthy, it is not only urgent to ensure the availability of nutritious food at affordable prices. It is also necessary to develop public policies that guarantee adequate nutrition, in addition to nutritional counselling, focusing actions on the most vulnerable populations,” said Garry Conelly, [UNICEF](#) Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The socioeconomic panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean is not encouraging. The most affected population groups are children under five and women, who suffer a higher prevalence of food insecurity than men. [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 February 2023]

### **Thailand: 'Seeds of Hope' Aims to Ensure Community Food Security**

By Pattama Vilailert

KAEN MAKROOD, Thailand — With the belief that without seeds, there is no hope of sustaining food security to accommodate the global population, the 'Seeds of Hope' (SOH) project in Thailand aims to mobilize the community to be self-reliant in their farming methods and protect themselves from predatory agri-business companies.

The community at Kaen Makrood located in Uthai Thani province in lower northern Thailand is a village where most people are from the Karen Pwo ethnic group, and their culture and tradition are inseparably bonded with seeds.

"Our food is derived from seeds, and in various community rituals, seeds are



*The offering of seeds to monks. Photo Credit: 'The Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation'.*

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specially served to our guests and elderly attending the functions," Wannob Korsuk, community wisdom leader, told IDN. "Meesi, our traditional dish made from pounded steam-sticky rice mixed with beans and sesame, is given to guests participating in the Karen Pwo wedding receptions and other ceremonies. Another important ritual is the offering of seeds to monks."

Closely ingrained with Thailand's Buddhist culture, offering of seeds to monks in the community is a tradition where after chanting and blessing the offerings, the monks give away those seeds to villagers. "By doing so, villagers will have a variety of seeds and grow them on their land," said Wannob.

In order to sustain the bond of the community with seeds, Wannob is deeply concerned that modern farming technology could lead to the extinction of their seeds.

"I am aware that there are a few conglomerates that are trying to take over the world's food by developing unnatural varieties such as GMOs, thus, when villagers plant seeds, they have to buy these from companies, so they no longer have the opportunity to grow pure breeds. The varieties from these companies produce fast-growing, prolific, and beautiful fruits. Thus, it turns farmers into constant buyers," Wannob pointed out.

"Consequently, true vegetation began to disappear rapidly, and I used to buy seeds from a company and plant only tapioca, later in 2016, my land became arid, and I couldn't plant anything so I was thinking about how I could possibly feed my family sustainably," Wannob told IDN.

It is at this time that he watched a TV program about self-reliant and sustainable farming—an initiative by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej. "I was so desperate to change my farming to the sustainable one," he continued, "by chance, I expressed my will and difficulties to a staff member of The Royal Initiative Discovery Foundation, based in my community. He understood my situation and was ready to push my ambition forward".

PUN PUN Centre, a self-reliant farming education centre, estimates that no less than 20 types of crops disappear from our planet in one day. The world used to have almost 20,000 kinds of rice, but now we have less than 200. According to the Centre, the extinction of seeds will result in a loss of food security for both humans and animals.

IDN spoke to Hatairat Phuangchoei, Manager, Knowledge Management Foundation (KMF), to find out more about how villagers can translate self-reliant and sustainable farming theory into practice.

"It is our mission to accelerate and expand rural development by integrating the King's guiding principles," she said. The Foundation works in collaboration with communities, local authorities, and academic institutions across the country to materialize projects.



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"In the past, Kaen Makrood villagers encroached on the Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary since the village also functioned as a buffer zone for the sanctuary. We have our staff stationed in the village to create alternative careers, and that would only come when the irrigation system worked well on the land."

KMF was not reluctant to give a hand to Wannop in realising his aim to make his farming sustainable and self-reliant. They took him along with other villagers to attend a course run by the 'Agrinature Foundation'. "We paid for their transportation, accommodation, and food. After the course, Wannob started his sustainable farming right away, the first thing he did was make a ditch in his land with the support of our network," said Hatairat.

She pointed out further that the sustainable development approach KMF has supported has also proved helpful during hardships like the COVID pandemic. "The agricultural products that had been farmed under this concept were able to feed 80% of the locals," she noted.

"During the pandemic, when the lockdown was announced, there were plenty of pomelos in my farm, so I told people in my village and outside to come and take them for free, and I gave them to nurses treating COVID patients in lieu of expressing gratitude to their hard work," Wannob told IDN.

Hatairat explained further that the foundation has a three-fold program to help a community to rely on itself. First is to make agricultural products enough to feed one household; second is a united community where members take care of each other's well-being; and third, are the community networks with outside organizations to increase income.

Kaen Makrood is now in the third phase, where villagers have officially established a seeds-saving enterprise called 'Roy Pun Ruksa Community Enterprise' in 2019. "We realized that the community's members had been very enthusiastic about seed savings, so we enrolled them in a seed-saving course in Chiang Mai in 2017; after that, they conducted seeds savings, surveyed for new vegetation, and discovered over 100 different seeds in Kaen Makrood," said Hatairat.



*Direk Srisuwan (left), the chairman of the Roy Pun Ruksa Community Enterprise (RPRCE) and (right) Wannob Korsuk, Community Wisdom leader*

To explore how the Kaen Makrood community saves seeds to ensure food security, IDN spoke with Direk Srisuwan, the chairman of the Roy Pun Ruksa Community Enterprise (RPRCE).

"I was a director of a Karen school in Kaen Makrood, I had witnessed villagers buying vegetation and fruit

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seeds to plant, then I thought that in the long term, they must rely on vendors, so I began to teach students to grow vegetables that are indigenous, on our school land. I also implanted sufficient economic approach and sustainable farming knowledge in them," explained Direk.

Later, villagers joined forces with the community enterprise, so they could enlarge the group to network with villages in other provinces exchanging seed savings and plant-growing knowledge.

After establishing the RPRCE, "we approached the Biodiversity-Based Economy Development Office to financially support us in surveying new plants that could be herbs or vegetation," explained Direk. "Our purpose is not only to ensure food security in our community and in our network but also to disseminate knowledge and exchange experiences in local seed conservation among farmers, other communities, and external agencies."

'Seeds Of Hope' organised an event on 21-22 January to explain their activities. More than 200 participants attended the event, Direk said.

Yura, a participant from Nakhon Sawan, a province located 35 km from Kaen Makrood, told IDN, "it is my first time here, and I am very much impressed by the work of the 'Agrinature' organization. I knew that people work collaboratively, the ways they preserve the land and seeds are so diversified. I have never seen something like this before; it is wonderful. This community is small, but they have organized 'Seeds of Hope' very well, and they are united".

"Before I came, I expected to see diversified seeds, and what I saw here was more than my expectations. I will come again and join as an organizer. I will convey what I learned from this event to the people in my community and its vicinity. In Nakhon Sawan, we work together but not as united and solid as this," she noted.

Another attendee, Mamiew, also emphasized: "I didn't expect the 'Seeds of Hope' would get a large number of participants, I think the unity of the Kaen Makrood community helps to strive the event. I want the new generation to help conserve, carry our culture, and know the values that are close to them. These are the elements that help them to rely on themselves."

Hatairat considers their work as a "social lab", and she is aware that with changing global trends and with the ongoing climatic change-induced weather affecting traditional cultivation, their traditional ways of farming could change.

"(But), we must seek ways for the seed not to mutate and be more productive without using GMOs," she noted with a determined look. "It is our plan to use the area where success can be a source of learning for others (and that is why) we called this as a 'social lab'." [IDN-InDepthNews – 01 February 2023]

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### Economic Crisis Threatens Sri Lanka's Education Gains

By Hemali Wijerathne

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka's free education system, which was judged to have achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for education and is considered a post-independence success story, is now under threat due to the present economic crisis in the country of 22 million people.



Malalasekera Foundation chairman Ashan Malalasekera presenting schoolbooks to a student at a function in Kataragama recently. Credit: Manoj Divithuragama.

The rapidly increasing price of paper is impacting the affordability of school textbooks and exercise books (students use them to take notes and do class exercises). These are becoming out of reach of many poor families. The cost of exercise books has shot up from Rs 50 (USD 0.14) for an 80-page and Rs 450 for a 400-page one last year to Rs 120 and Rs 920, respectively.

As students return to classrooms for the new term this month, parents are grappling with the increased prices of school stationaries. The needy parents who are living in remote villages in Sri Lanka have a great challenge of how they can allocate such an amount of money for their children's education as most of them lead a hand to mouth existence. They have to take the painful decision of which child could be sent to school or not.

A villager in southern Sri Lanka who wanted to be named Athula told IDN that his five grandchildren schooling in grades 2 to 6 are finding it difficult to continue their education. His son's income as a bus driver was not enough to cover the children's educational costs.



School children in classroom in white uniform. Photo Credit: Lake House

"The children need to be dressed cleanly and neatly when they go to school. One of my grandsons has been going to school crying every day because his shoes are broken. What can we do?" asked Athula, adding, "this is not something that is happening only to us. This is the situation for most Sri Lankan children".

A parent of two school-going

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children noted that the skyrocketing expenses of almost all school supplies had added a further burden on an already strained household budget, with prices having risen to unimaginable heights.

“Earlier, not even two months ago, I used to buy a glue bottle for Rs100. But when I went to buy one recently, I had to pay Rs 300. The price of a box of twelve colour pencils has increased from Rs to Rs 580,” she noted. Further, workbooks required by the school curriculum too had increased in price, with one Sinhala language workbook costing around Rs 500 compared to the old price of Rs 225.

Free education was introduced in Sri Lanka in 1945 in a policy that stated every child above the age of five and not more than 16 is entitled to free education, and it was extended to university education in the 1950s. In the mid-1950s, with the introduction of the national language policy, education became accessible to the rural poor in particular. Before, it was a privilege for English-speaking urban families only.

Sri Lanka’s literacy rate has increased from 13.5% in 1951 to 92.6% by 2022, which is considered a great success story in sustainable development that enabled Sri Lanka to succeed in achieving the MDG of universal primary education.

Sri Lanka has had a great education tradition going back many centuries, with the temple-based Pirivena education tradition dominant before the European colonial era. Now many educationists fear that the literacy rate would go down rapidly because of the prevailing economic crisis.

Working under tough economic conditions, local charities have stepped in to save rural families from falling into the illiteracy traps prevalent in most low-income countries across the world.

One such charity is the Malalasekera Foundation, a reputed social service foundation named after the great Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar Dr G.P Malalasekera and currently chaired by his grandson Ashan Malalasekera. The foundation has been focusing on helping rural children with their education needs for many years. The foundation gave these students free data facilities for their online education during the time of the spreading of the coronavirus. Now they are implementing a program of delivering school books as the new school term begins.

“Our foundation, since its inception, was at the forefront to aid the children who needed support to receive their education. Malalasekera Foundation does not collect funds to carry out its programs. We use our own resources to carry out our mission of assisting the less privileged,” national organizer and the chief executive officer of the Malalasekera Foundation, Manoj Divithuragama, explained to IDN.

In this endeavour, they also get the help of charity organizations such as the Foundation of Goodness (FG), which was set up by Kusil Gunasekera and

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supported by cricket great Muttiah Muralitharan. “With their support, we were able to carry out different programs that uplifted the lives of the people,” says Divithuragama. “Our initiatives in education did not commence with the current economic turmoil experienced or the Covid-19 situation, but these run back to the date when the tsunami hit our beautiful island, disrupting the mental well-being and the education of our children.”

At this time, the foundation established a resource centre for children in the Hambantota area in 2005. “We were able to directly intervene to rebuild the lives of children who lost their parents in the tsunami disaster and to provide counselling for their mental well-being,” Divithuragama added.

Since then, they have also opened three more such centres in Ambalantota, Suriyawewa and Kataragama, the latter a very poor rural community in the south. “At the commencement of the Kataragama children resource centre, we were able to cater to around 300 children who were in need of our support to continue their education and build their lives. We taught English, Mathematics, Sinhala and Music for these children free of charge,” he explained, also pointing out that they help Tamil and Muslim villages in the east of the country as well.

“We did not look at the education of these children only from the surface. Instead, we wanted to look after these children from their conception,” explained Divithuragama. “Thus partnering with FG, we launched a program to provide a pack of nutrient and essential food items to pregnant mothers.”

As a Buddhist charity, Malalasekara Foundation is concerned about the spiritual development of children. They have launched several programs for the children who attend the dhamma school (Sunday temple schools) across the southern provinces of Sri Lanka. This includes providing books and dry rations to families of the students.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when the continuous education of children from poor families was disrupted due to the digital divide, the foundation set up online access facilities mainly through village temples and gathered children. In Kataragama, the foundation has set up a permanent online education centre for poor children with 40 computers at the historic shrine of Kataragama Devale, where over 600 students are catered for with support from the DP education platform.

“I haven’t a permanent job. I work in labour, and I usually earn Rs 2500 (USD 7) daily. I have no chance of working every day. I get labour work for 10-15 days a month. I have three children. Two of them are schooling. I cannot afford to buy all the exercise books as their present prices are very high, and they exceed my earnings,” Dayal Kapila Gamhewa, a father who the Malalasekera Foundation helps, told IDN.

Another recipient of the foundation’s help is Nadeesha, the mother of a child who received exercise books. “My husband is an electrician. He has no daily fixed income. His earnings are not enough to buy our daily needs. I have two children,

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one in grade 10 and the other one in grade 4. After we spend our earnings on our food, we have no money to buy books for our children’s education. Then how can we send our children to school? It is a great problem we are facing at this moment,” she says.

Such experiences are not uncommon, with people from all socio-economic backgrounds struggling to balance their household living expenses while funding their children’s education.

“Our free education system is under threat,” says Divithuragama. “Education would be impossible to become a reality for many families in the midst of this present economic crisis. Foundations (like ours) may have to step in to help”. [IDN-InDepthNews — 22 January 2023]

### ***Unprecedented Drought Emergency in the Horn of Africa: Catastrophic Consequences Feared***

By J Nastranis

NEW YORK — The United Nations has warned that the Horn of Africa is facing an unprecedented drought emergency, which will unleash catastrophic consequences. Communities in the region are in the midst of a likely fifth consecutive failed rainy season. They may face a sixth failed season in March-May 2023.



A face of hopelessness. Photo Credit: United Nations

Across the Horn of Africa, at least 36.4 million people will be affected by the most prolonged and severe drought in recent history in the last months of 2022, including 24.1 million in Ethiopia, 7.8 million in Somalia and 4.5 million in Kenya.

This includes over 9 million women of reproductive age (15 to 49 years) who face dangers to their health and aggravated risks of gender-based violence due to the drought, according to [UNFPA](#)-United Nations Population Fund.

About 11.9 million people in Ethiopia are severely food insecure due to the drought. In Kenya, some 4.35 million people were expected to face acute food insecurity. With the October to December 2022 rains having begun poorly, food insecurity was expected to rise in the months ahead.

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Between 23 and 26 million people are expected to face acute food insecurity due to the Horn of Africa drought by February 2023, according to the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) —a regional platform, currently co-chaired by [ICPAC](#) and [FAO](#)-Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN.

UN Children's Agency [UNICEF](#) has urged the international community to "commit to responding now for what might hit the Horn of Africa" in 2023, "and in the years to come".

In fact, the entire region—comprising of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, parts or all of Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda—is facing an unprecedented drought emergency, which is expected to unleash catastrophic consequences. Communities in the region may face a sixth failed rain season in March-May 2023.

[UNICEF](#) Deputy Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa Lieke van de Weil said on December 22: "We need a global effort to mobilize resources urgently to reduce further devastating and irreversible damage to children in the Horn of Africa. We must act now to save children's lives, preserve their dignity and protect their futures."

In 2022, UNICEF and partners reached nearly two million children and women with essential life-saving health care services, vaccinated almost two million children between the ages of 6 months and 15 years against measles, and provided safe water for more than 2.7 million people for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene.

UNICEF's 2023 emergency appeal of US\$759 million to provide life-saving support to children and their families will require timely and flexible funding support, especially in the areas of education, water and sanitation, and child protection, which were severely underfunded during UNICEF's 2022 response.

An additional US\$690 million is required to support long-term investments to help children and their families to recover and adapt to climate change.

According to UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, the number of children suffering dire drought conditions across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia has more than doubled in five months, according to around 20.2 million children are now facing the threat of severe hunger, thirst and disease, compared to 10 million in July, as climate change, conflict, global inflation and grain shortages devastate the region.

"While collective and accelerated efforts have mitigated some of the worst impact of what had been feared, children in the Horn of Africa are still facing the most severe drought in more than two generations," UNICEF Deputy Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, van de Weil.

"Humanitarian assistance must be continued to save lives and build the resilience of the staggering number of children and families who are being

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pushed to the edge—dying from hunger and disease and being displaced in search of food, water and pasture for their livestock.”

Nearly two million children across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are currently estimated to require urgent treatment for severe acute malnutrition, the deadliest form of hunger.



*Malnourished children weakened by hunger in Africa.  
Photo Credit: DFID*

In addition, across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia:

- More than two million people are displaced internally because of drought.
- Water insecurity has more than doubled with close to 24 million people now confronting dire water shortages.
- Approximately 2.7 million children are out of school

because of the drought, with an additional estimated 4 million children at risk of dropping out.

- As families are driven to the edge dealing with increased stress, children face a range of protection risks – including child labour, child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).
- Gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, is also increasing due to widespread food insecurity and displacement.

Thanks to the generous support of donors and partners, UNICEF continues to provide life-saving services to children and families across the Horn of Africa while preparing for further shocks, building resilience and strengthening key services. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 December 2022]



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### Three UN Agencies Call for Investments in Rural Employment

#### *Nature-Based Solutions Could Generate 20 million New Jobs*



*Women in Zambia work inside a greenhouse to increase the production of vegetables for sale at a local market. Credit: ILO/Marcel Crozet.*

By Jaya Ramachandran

GENEVA — A joint report by three UN organisations says that 20 million jobs could be created by further harnessing the power of nature to address the major challenges facing society, such as climate change, disaster risk and food and water insecurity.

According to the report by the International Labour Organization ([ILO](#)), the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature ([IUCN](#)), investing in policies that support Nature-based Solutions (NbS) would generate significant employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

The [UN Environment Assembly resolution 5/5](#) has defined Nature-based solutions as "actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits".

The joint report, titled [Decent Work in Nature-based Solutions](#), was launched at the UN's Biodiversity Conference, COP15. The 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations [Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#) is being held from December 7 to 19 in Montréal, the largest city in Canada's Québec province. The city is the seat of the UN CBD Secretariat.

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The report finds that currently, nearly 75 million people are already employed in NbS. The report finds that the vast majority of them (96 per cent) live in Asia and the Pacific and in lower-middle-income countries. However, the majority of global NbS expenditure occurs in high-income countries.

Many of these jobs are part-time, and total employment is estimated to be around 14.5 million full-time-equivalent (FTE) jobs. However, the report cautions that there are challenges in measuring NbS employment. Moreover, the figures do not capture the job losses and displacements that might occur as NbS are implemented.

However, the report warns that there are challenges in measuring NbS employment. Moreover, the figures do not capture the job losses and displacements that might occur as NbS are implemented.

The report continues that in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, nearly all NbS work (98 per cent and 99 per cent, respectively) is in the agriculture and forestry sectors. This falls to 42 per cent for upper-middle income and 25 per cent in high-income countries.

In industrialized countries, where agricultural productivity is high, NbS spending is concentrated on ecosystem restoration and natural resource management. Public services contribute the largest share of NbS work in high-income countries (37 per cent), with construction also representing a fair share (14 per cent).

An additional 20 million jobs could be generated worldwide if investment in NbS were tripled by 2030. This has been identified as a key step toward achieving biodiversity, land restoration and climate goals such as those set out in the United Nations' [State of Finance for Nature 2021 Report](#).

The report also cautions that, at present, there is no guarantee that NbS employment will meet the ILO's standards for green jobs. This requires jobs to be in the environmental sector and meet the standards for decent work, including being in line with international and national labour standards and decent work (defined as productive work that is fairly compensated and in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity).



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The ILO Enterprises Department Director Vic van Vuuren said: “It is critical that as we scale up the use of Nature-based Solutions, we make sure we do not also scale up decent work deficits, such as the informal work, low-pay and low productivity conditions that many workers in NbS currently face.” The [ILO’s Just Transition Guidelines](#) provide a framework to help us do this, he added.

“We welcome the emphasis given to Nature-based Solutions at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh. Not only are NbS a critical part of the mitigation equation—they host multiple co-benefits, including buffering the impacts of climate change. What this report brings to light is how to make NbS work for people and the economy, and this will be a key success factor. A broad-based coalition with youth at the fore, is needed to achieve this,” said Susan Gardner, Director of UNEP’s Ecosystems Division.

“When planned and implemented according to the IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions, NbS offer a scalable, effective means to address the interlinked climate and biodiversity crises while delivering important benefits for human well-being and livelihoods, including good, green jobs. This makes them an essential tool in the implementation of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework,” said Stewart Maginnis, Deputy Director-General of IUCN.

The report calls for the implementation of Just Transition policies, including measures to incubate and support enterprises and cooperatives working in NbS, appropriate skills development, measures to help workers prepare for and get NbS jobs, universities that integrate NBS in their mainstream curricula, and policies that help NbS comply with core labour standards, including minimum wages, occupational safety and health, freedom of association, and use of social dialogue.

The new [Green Jobs for Youth Pact](#), launched by ILO and UNEP at COP27, aims to create 1 million new green jobs and will be working to ensure the recommendations made in this report are realised on the ground.

"Just Transition" policies will also be needed to mitigate the risks to jobs and livelihoods that the transition to more sustainable practices will create in the short to medium-term—particularly, as the report points out, when current jobs and working practices involve unsustainable use of nature.

Such policies might include job placement services, public employment programmes, re-employment training, access to unemployment benefits, early retirement, and the use of and payment for ecosystem services (PES) programmes. [IDN-InDepthNews — 13 December 2022]

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### Urban Dwellers in Southern Africa Turn to Backyard Farming

By Jeffrey Moyo



HARARE, Zimbabwe — At unoccupied swathes of land behind houses in Bloomingdale, a medium-income suburb in the Zimbabwean capital Harare, numerous maize fields and vegetable gardens have emerged as urban dwellers enduring economic hardships switch to backyard farming.

Zambia, despite emerging from an economic crisis during former President Edgar Lungu's reign that ended last year, has dozens of urban dwellers taking up agriculture to supplement their earnings.

The same goes for Mozambicans east of Zimbabwe, who have scrambled for every vacant piece of land across towns and cities in the coastal nation.

Not to be outdone, Malawi, located north of Zimbabwe, has urban agriculture becoming a way of life.

In fact, as many Southern Africans contend with inflation and food deficits, hordes of urban dwellers across the region are fast switching to farming in their backyards.

All across the region, the media has been awash with reports of industries shutting down over the past decades, leaving many rural migrants to the cities and towns stranded.

For some, the option has been to shift to backyard farming in their city homes.

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As that happens, in Harare, urban farmers like 63-year-old Livias Gono of Mufakose's high-density suburb now send bags of maize harvested from his backyard fields to his relatives stung by hunger in his village in Mberengwa.

Mberengwa is a Zimbabwean rural district in the country's Midlands Province.

Almost yearly, Mberengwa villagers, who included Gono's relatives, have been stung by starvation amid growing climate change impacts.

"I spend most of my maize yields to my relatives in my village in Mberengwa because they always have droughts," Gono told IDN.

With 90 per cent unemployment in Zimbabwe, hunger has not spared the urban dwellers either, forcing many of them to venture into farming in their backyards.

Last year, hunger in Zimbabwe's urban areas left 2.4 million people struggling to meet their basic food needs, according to the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC) report.

ZimVAC is a technical advisory committee comprised of representatives from the government, development partners, UN and non-governmental organizations.

Annual inflation at 269 per cent has also clobbered Zimbabwe's urban dwellers.

In Zambia, even as inflation was curtailed at the coming of President Hakainde Hichilema to power last year, urban residents still have to carry on with backyard farming.

Such are many, like 47-year-old Laura Phiri, a widow with five children who live at the heart of the capital Lusaka, where she has made it a point to grow vegetables to supplement the family's diet.

"I'm jobless, and if I don't do this, my children will starve," Phiri told IDN.

Growing vegetables in her backyard have also enabled Phiri to earn some income which she has used to pay monthly bills.

"I earn about 3,000 Zambian Kwacha (approximately 180 U.S. dollars) monthly from selling vegetables, meaning this has given me a new lease of life," Phiri said.

In their backyards, a lot more other unemployed Zambians like 53-year-old Kennias Banda in Kitwe, Zambia's third largest city, have switched to livestock production in order to earn income.

He (Banda) said he rears chickens for sale—400 of the birds at his Kitwe home.

Zambia has 13 per cent unemployment. But the African nation has also had its urban dwellers grappling with starvation.

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As a result, the World Food Programme has been on record in Zambia, providing the poorest families in low-income urban areas with 400 Zambian Kwacha, about US\$ 22 a month, enough to meet half their daily food requirements.

With a population of about 19 million people, poverty has become a characteristic feature of urban living in Zambia, with statistics showing that of the 4.3 million people domiciled in Zambia's towns and cities, 34 per cent live in extreme poverty while 18 per cent are moderately poor.

Daniel Chanda, a Zambian development expert, said, "urban agriculture has helped enlarge the economic outlook of towns and cities through growing of edible crops in backyards".

With urban backyard farming on the rise in Zambia, he (Chanda) also said this has increased entrepreneurial activities across towns and cities in the southern African nation.

In Malawi, urban agriculture has also stolen the show, attracting many, like 45-year-old Lucia Bandawe in Lilongwe, the country's capital.

"When I was growing up, there were no urban vegetable gardens, but now all that has changed as people farm at the back of their houses," she (Lucia) told IDN.

Yet of late, according to Bandawe, urban agriculture in Malawi was further necessitated by restrictions on movement introduced in the wake of Covid-19 two years ago.

Then, faced with food deficits as urban Malawians stayed indoors, Bandawe said many of them were forced to turn to agriculture.

Now, even with coronavirus restrictions almost gone, backyard farming in towns and cities has had to remain, becoming part of life for urban Malawians.

63-year-old Kumbukani Bvumbwe, a fisherman in Malawi's Blantyre, is one such urban farmer.

"I personally think if given the backing, urban agriculture can become a way of defeating poverty in towns here in Malawi because many people don't have jobs," Bvumbwe told IDN.

He (Bvumbwe) said this even as many Malawian civil society activists like Jimson Bwanali remain sceptical about the whole idea.

"Policymakers must dig out for more accurate information on how urban farming really contributes to fending off food deficits and poverty here. It's difficult to tell when just a few people are doing this," Bwanali told IDN.

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In Mozambique's Infulene Valley, which is the country's key green belt, the growing of vegetables there is massive, with farmers taking advantage of the Milauze river dividing the cities of Maputo and Matola and the Costa do Sol, with urban agriculture there practised by several people.

Statistics from the Mozambican government, in fact, show that in Maputo and the surrounding area, over 10,000 small-scale farmers practice agriculture within the city- the country's capital.

Ranked 181 of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Index and located in south-eastern Africa, Mozambique is a low-income, food-deficit country with a largely rural population of 28 million.

Meanwhile, in Namibia, the country's agriculture ministry has gone on record in the media, launching a special project on urban agriculture aimed at strengthening the country's food self-sufficiency.

This is happening at a time the UN has estimated that 66 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities by 2050, meaning backyard farming may become the sole answer to food needs in future.

In Botswana, faced with slow economic growth amid rapid urbanization, some people have already been forced to turn to urban subsistence farming as well as commercial urban and peri-urban agriculture.

In South Africa's Cape Town, small urban farms in Phillippi (an area that covers roughly 34 sq. km)—are being leased out to people growing food, earning income as a result.

A common practice now, urban agriculture in Eswatini (former Swaziland) remains an illegal activity that is not supported by municipal laws despite its known capacity to fend off food deficits.

In Lesotho, amid rural-to-urban migration, agriculture has increasingly been seen as the panacea to urban food insecurity.

In fact, Lesotho has regularly featured in the African and international media as a country devastated by drought, hunger and food insecurity. [IDN-InDepthNews – 30 November 2022]

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*In Harare, the Zimbabwean capital's medium-density suburb called Glaudina, west of the city, where a thick forest used to exist about a decade ago, is under construction, hordes of homes are emerging instead as trees have vanished. Credit: Jeffrey Moyo | IDN*

### **Growing Urbanization Chewing Away Forests in Southern Africa**

By Jeffrey Moyo

HARARE, Zimbabwe — In Harare, the Zimbabwean capital's medium-density suburb known as Glaudina, where a thick forest used to exist, homes under construction have emerged instead, with the trees vanishing.

North-West of Zimbabwe, just outside Lusaka, the Zambian capital, slums and shacks have also, over the decades, replaced the once flourishing forests.

According to the [UN-Habitat](#), in the absence of sufficient public low-cost housing in Zambia, urban growth has resulted in a series of housing crises and the growth of unauthorized settlements at the urban periphery.

That has not spared Zambia's urban trees, according to environmental activists.

“Population in towns is increasing as people abandon their villages to find better economic opportunities, cutting down the few remaining urban trees, setting up slums for accommodation,” an independent environmental activist, Nomsa Mulenga in Zambia, told IDN.

Such Zambians who have shown no mercy towards city trees are many like 56-year-old Pauline Chanda, a widow with six children.

Chanda said she lives on a piece of land from which she and her children destroyed trees that were there before they came to the city two decades ago.



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“We had to start by removing the trees in order to establish a home,” Chanda told IDN.

Every year, between 250,000 to 300,000 hectares of forests are lost in Zambia amidst growing deforestation, according to the country’s Ministry of Lands, Natural Resources and Environmental Protection.

Last year, Zambia lost 201,000 hectares of tree cover, corresponding to 78.3 million tonnes of carbon emissions, according to the [Global Forest Watch \(GFW\)](#).

GFW is an online platform providing data and tools for monitoring forests by harnessing cutting-edge technology, allowing anyone to access near real-time information about where and how forests are changing around the world.



*Radar for Detecting Deforestation (RADD) alerts on Global Forest Watch platform detect forest disturbances rain or shine using satellite-based radar data. Photo Credit: GFW*

According to the [Center for International Forestry Research \(CIFOR\)](#) in 2020, a non-governmental scientific organisation, about 90 per cent of Zambia’s households solely depend on wood fuel as many households remain unconnected to electricity.

In Mozambique, it is the same story as the growing urbanization chews away forests, with people scrambling for urban land spaces often to illegally erect their own dwellings as they flee from mounting economic hardships in remote areas.

In both urban and rural areas, Mozambique used to be rich in forests, but not anymore, with its forests gradually facing extinction.

Last year, the coastal country lost 278,000 hectares of natural forests, an equivalent of 109 million tonnes of carbon emissions.

Malawi, located north of Zimbabwe, has not been spared either as the growing effects of deforestation have hit the country’s towns and cities.

“In many urban areas here in Malawi, the growing demand of wood fuel has actuated the growth of deforested rings in towns up to 100-kilometre range,” Nicholas Kasongo, an independent environmental expert in Lilongwe, the Malawian capital, told IDN in a phone interview.

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With a population of about 20 million, 12 per cent of whom live in towns and cities, last year alone, the government of Malawi reported that the country lost 14.7kha of natural forests, equivalent to 5.30 million tonnes of carbon emissions.

Development experts in Malawi have blamed the increasing rural-to-urban migration for the deforestation that has hit its towns and cities.

“There is growing pressure on services offered in towns as more people choose to migrate to towns, and as a result, many apparently use firewood because their dwellings have no connection to electricity,” Azibo Bwerani, an independent development expert in Malawi, told IDN.

In Zimbabwe, as many rural-to-urban migrants hack trees to build their temporary dwellings while they search for economic opportunities, environmental defenders say these have threatened the existence of forests.

But such rural-to-urban migrants like 46-year-old Trynos Gava in Dema, a peri-urban area outside Chitungwiza, a town 25 kilometres south-east of Harare, have no regrets whatsoever even as many like him have caused the disappearance of hundreds of trees after settling in the area.

“We want to earn a living. We want to farm, plus we also want to sell firewood to nearby Chitungwiza town, where people have power cuts every day. I couldn’t get a job after relocating to this place when I came from my rural home 12 years ago,” Gava told IDN.

As growing urbanization takes down forests across Southern Africa, ecologists like Neliswa Chombe in Zimbabwe say the region’s natural ecosystem has also come under threat.

She (Chombe) said, “people coming to the cities and towns are setting up shacks to live in, just anyhow, and they are destroying trees, meaning even the natural ecosystem is being disturbed”.

According to Zimbabwe’s Forestry Commission, this country loses 262,000 hectares of forests annually.

These have included trees vanishing at the hands of rural-to-urban migrants like Gava in this country, desperate to have a roof above their heads while battling to earn a living selling firewood in towns.

But Zimbabwe’s big cities like Harare have also suffered from swift deterioration of its greenbelt, according to environmental activists.

This, said Liberty Museyamwa, a Harare-based environmental defender, can be explained by the capture of green spaces such as parks, paving the way for housing and industrial areas, this with zero afforestation plans in place.

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With the population rising in cities and towns in southern African countries like Zimbabwe, according to the United Nations, the global percentage of people living in urban areas is expected to increase to nearly 70 per cent by the year 2050.

Museyamwa said this is bound to fuel urban deforestation.

In fact, he said, “forests are being destroyed massively as even in towns, land developers clear land for construction, with wood poachers making money from the fallen trees”.

Currently, wood fuel accounts for over 60 per cent of Zimbabwe’s total energy supply.

According to the Forestry Commission, up to 11 million tonnes of firewood are needed for domestic cooking, heating and tobacco curing every year in Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, forests are covering about 45 per cent of Zimbabwe’s total land area. [IDN-InDepthNews – 18 November 2022]

### Bahrain Dialogue Forum Urges Action for Peaceful Coexistence

By Katsuhiko Asagiri

Manama — “Our world today is facing unprecedented challenges where conflicts are multiplying and people whose identities are defined by religion, culture, or ethnicity, continue to be besieged by hatred. Social and cultural divides are deepening; tribalism, ethnic violence, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, hate speech and ultra-nationalism, are in full swing.” said Miguel Angel Moratinos, the High Representative for the [United Nations Alliance of Civilizations \(UNAOC\)](#). He was addressing the opening session of the first Bahrain Dialogue Forum on November 3.



*Bahrain Dialogue Forum in session. Photo Credit: Seikyo Shimbun*

Moratinos said: “A holistic approach is the way to respond to global challenges of this nature. Security measures will not suffice to stem up the scourge of terrorism, sectarianism, and racist rhetoric. We need to counter these false narratives with a true one that offers human solidarity and hope.” He added: “[The document of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#) (Abu

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Dhabi Declaration) whose manifesto speaks volumes of this forum, is a shining light at the end of the dark tunnel, a blueprint for interfaith dialogue not only among one or two faiths, but it encompasses all faiths.”

This document was co-signed on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, by [His Holiness Pope Francis](#) of Catholic Church and [His Eminence Dr. Ahmed El-Tayeb](#), the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, which is considered the most authoritative theological institution in Sunni Islam.

At the heart of the "Human Fraternity" document, which the friendship between Pope Francis and Dr El-Tayeb birthed into existence, is a condemnation of the instrumentalization of religion for violence or terrorism and a call to work together on practical matters, such as for the care of the environment.

A photo of the two men embracing cheek-to-cheek at the signing ceremony went in the world as an "icon of hope" and the document has been widely heralded as a major advancement in the Catholic Church's relationship with the Muslim world. Furthermore, in December 2020, the United Nations General Assembly designated February 4, the date on which the Fraternity Document was signed, as "[The International Day of Human Fraternity](#)", a day dedicated to raising awareness and recognizing the efforts of people to promote peace, harmony, and intercultural dialogue throughout the world.



*The Bahrain Dialogue Forum was held at Isa Culture Center. Photo Credit: Seikyo Shimbun*

The Kingdom of Bahrain, consisting of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf, is a multicultural and multireligious society where foreign workers account for half of the population. In addition to mosques, Christian churches, synagogues, and Hindu and Buddhist temples stand side by side in the country. Although the royal

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family in power is Sunni Muslim, approximately 70 per cent of the citizens of Bahrain are Shia.

Against this background, the Bahraini government has emphasized a policy of "coexistence, tolerance, and openness" and has taken the initiative in creating opportunities for dialogue among religions and cultures. The first Bahrain Dialogue Forum follows this trend and is the result of King Hamad's official endorsement of the "Friendship of Mankind" document.

The two-day forum is within Bahrain's keenness to build bridges of dialogue between leaders of religions, sects, thought, and culture, was organized by The Muslim Council of Elders, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence. The event was attended by about 200 prominent religious leaders and scholars from across the world including Pope Francis and Dr El Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar.

The Forum's program consisted of sessions that addressed global coexistence and the promotion of fraternity, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence among humankind, and examined the role of religious leaders and scholars in addressing the challenges of the times.

Sheikh Khalid bin Muhammad Al Khalifa, Chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders, introduced the social background of Bahrain's (meaning two oceans) tolerance of diverse civilizations as a crossroads of civilizations since ancient times and Bahrain's practices toward peace and coexistence, including [the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration on religious tolerance](#). "In order to spread, maintain, and consolidate coexistence in communities, it is important to respect for religious and sectarian idiosyncrasies and to recognize freedom of religion", said Al Khalifa.

Al Khalifa pointed out that "Bahrain has the highest ratio of mosques and places of worship to population and area in the world, with everyone practicing their religious rituals in active coexistence". He noted, "Bahrain is a global model to follow in this area".

[His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew](#), Archbishop of Constantinople-News Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue as the Orthodox Church's response to the current situation of rampant religious fundamentalism saying that "Opposition to ecumenical or interreligious dialogue usually comes from fear and ignorance or intolerance of religious diversity. By contrast, authentic and sincere interreligious dialogue recognizes the differences among religious traditions and promotes peaceful coexistence and cooperation among peoples and cultures. This does not mean denying one's own faith, but rather adapting and enriching one's own identity and self-consciousness in the perspective of openness to others. It can also heal and dispel prejudice and contribute to mutual comprehension and peaceful conflict resolution".

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Former Niger President and Muslim Council of Elders Member, [Mahamadou Issoufou](#), explained that what the world is going through today in terms of political, economic, and security conflicts and crises, in addition to the issues of poverty, hunger and climate, have put people under enormous pressure that requires cooperation, rapprochement, and convergence through interfaith dialogues to achieve peace and security.

Kazakhstan's [Bulat Sarsenbayev](#), chairman of the board of the Nazarbayev Center for the Development of Interfaith and Inter-Civilization Dialogue, explained [the outcome document](#) of the 7th Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which was held on September 14 and 15 in Astana with the participation of many participants of the Bahrain Dialogue Forum, including Pope Francis and Dr El-Tayeb.

He said that the congress will continue to be a permanent platform for interreligious dialogues and hopes to deepen cooperation with participants of this forum. The congress is an initiative launched by Kazakhstan in 2003 amid religious conflicts throughout the world after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Kazakhstan prides itself on having renounced nuclear weapons after independence from the experience of more than one million victims of nuclear tests conducted in Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in eastern Kazakhstan during the Soviet era, and on striving to realize a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society living in harmony. The 7th Congress adopted the "Human Fraternity" document as part of the outcome document.

In a session titled "The Modern Crisis: The Role of Religious Leaders and Academics in the Face of Climate Change and the Global Food Crisis," Hirotsugu Terasaki, Vice President of [Soka Gakkai](#), a Buddhist organization based in Japan, referred to the words of SGI President [Daisaku Ikeda](#) who discussed the relationship between environmental and food issues, etc. and Buddhist thought. Dr Ikeda stated that "Buddhism emphasizes the importance of compassion for everything, everyone (all things). Since man enjoy the blessing of interdependence with and support from all things, it is correct that man do all he can to return these blessings by caring for other creatures as kindly as possible".

Mr Terasaki added that he is convinced that "our role as Buddhist believers is to expand the spirit of compassion in each of us, to take the initiative in dealing with problems, and to encourage the people around us to increase such initiative".

Mr Terasaki said that Soka Gakkai makes it a point to impart the message of "hope" that reality can be changed, and it also focuses on young people who are working to make a difference. "The more difficult an issue is, the more vital it is to make efforts to gain the understanding and support of the general public. Without this, progress becomes very difficult"—and it is only "when each of us stands up and takes action that these problems can be addressed."

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He said furthermore: “It is increasingly important that we view these issues through the lens of the suffering these problems inflict on actual individuals. And it is equally important that we take every opportunity to share this perspective in society.”

At the closing ceremony of the forum held the following day at the square of Sahil Palace, Dr El-Tayeb, referring to the three fundamental Qur’anic principles (① that people have differences, ② that there is freedom of religion, and ③ that the only way to establish human relations is through acquaintance), said, “The Qur’anic rules governing human relations are enumerated logically with no room for reinterpretation or distortion. Natural differences necessitate freedom of belief, which in turn entails a peaceful relationship among peoples”.

“They should be adapted into modern academic programs for teaching and convincing young people that there is room in life in the eyes of religious philosophy for those of different faiths, races, colors and languages, and that cultural diversity enriches civilization and establishes the peace that is lacking.” said Dr El-Tayeb who called on religious scholars and thinkers to put more effort into the education of youth about such indisputable facts about religious commonalities.

He further said: “There should be a focus on commonalities and meeting points, with an understanding of differences. Let us together chase away any talk of hate, provocation and excommunication and set aside ancient and modern conflict in all its forms and with all its negative offshoots.” and made a groundbreaking call for Sunni-Shiite dialogue.



*Panel discussion session in progress at the conference. Photo Credit: Seikyo Shimbun*

Pope Francis while noting that the country name "Bahrain" means "two seas", said that East and West increasingly resemble two opposing seas. We, on the other hand, are here together because we all intend to set sail on the same waters, choosing the route of encounter rather than that of confrontation, the path of dialogue

indicated by the title of this Forum: “East and West for Human Coexistence”.

Pope also pointed out that “catastrophic conflicts taking place in every part of the globe, and in the midst of accusations, threats and condemnations, we continue to find ourselves on the brink of a delicate precipice...while the majority of the world’s population is united in facing the same difficulties, suffering from grave food, ecological and pandemic crises, a few potentates are caught up in a resolute struggle for partisan interests. In the garden of humanity, instead of cultivating our surroundings, we are playing instead with fire, missiles

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and bombs, weapons that bring sorrow and death, covering our common home with ashes and hatred”.

He added that “We are here, as men and women who believe in God and in our brothers and sisters, to reject isolating thinking, the approach to reality that overlooks the great sea of humanity by concentrating only on its own narrow currents. We want the divergences between East and West to be settled for the good of all, without distracting attention from another divergence that is constantly and dramatically increasing: the gap between the North and the South of the world”.

The Pope further explained that "It is our duty to encourage and assist our human family, interdependent yet at the same time disconnected, to sail the sea together". He cited "a spirit of prayer", "education in the rights and duties of citizenship and brotherhood, including the protection of women and children", and "actions that clearly reject war and violence and work for peace" as necessary to achieve this. [IDN-InDepthNews – 18 November 2022]



*The Arctic Circle Assembly in Progress. Photo Credit: Arctic Circle*

### **Indigenous Societies Draw Focus of the Arctic Circle Assembly**

By Lowana Veal

REYKJAVIK — The Arctic region is a unique area among Earth's ecosystems. The cultures in the region and the Arctic indigenous peoples have adapted to its cold and extreme conditions. Life in the Arctic includes zooplankton and phytoplankton, fish and marine mammals, birds, land animals, plants and human societies.

Reykjavik—the capital of the Nordic Island nation Iceland—hosted the [Arctic Circle Assembly](#) (ACA)—nearly four weeks ahead of the UN Climate conference [COP27](#). The Arctic region is not on the agenda of the 2022 annual gathering in Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt).



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However, the Arctic Assembly drew the attention of 2000 participants who attended over 600 lectures and seminars. [Arctic Circle](#) organised the ACA (October 13-16), which has been deemed a "great success".

Besides the organised events, the format of the ACA in Reykjavik in October provided plenty of time for networking, including publicising and disseminating ongoing research and research results, as well as discussing social and environmental issues. Little-known research was disseminated to a wider audience.

For example, for the second year running, Swedish pharmaceutical billionaire Frederik Paulsen presented an [award](#) at the ACA. He donated the award for an action-oriented scientific initiative that aims to reverse the dramatic effects of climate change in a concrete way.

This year, the award went to Hanne H. Christiansen and Marius O. Jonassen, who are based at the University Centre in Svalbard in Longyearbyen. Their research centres on developing an advanced permafrost and climate change response system that is aimed at building resilience in Arctic communities in terms of extreme weather conditions and infrastructure.

Steinunn Thóra Árnadóttir, an Icelandic Left-Green MP and Chair of the West Nordic Council, which held a seminar titled "Green Innovation and New Opportunities for Young People in the West Nordic Region", admitted that nothing concrete emerged from the ACA. "The ACA is networking and chat—it's a place to get ideas and exchange opinions. But that's also the purpose of the ACA: to bring together politicians, academics, researchers and businesspeople," she added.

Árnadóttir was impressed by the number of seminars involving young people, where they talked about what they felt was important. She said that in one of the seminars, *indigenous knowledge* was mentioned. "Both how knowledge is transferred between generations and how it's important that indigenous people can bring across the learned knowledge of past generations in dealing with forces of nature to a 'language' that scientists can understand. And that science takes note of indigenous knowledge," she pointed out.

Ester Alda Hrafnhildar Bragadóttir from the Icelandic Youth Environmental Association is particularly interested in *indigenous communities* and *environmental justice*, as well as *eco-feminism*. She attended several seminars.

She noticed differences in attitude between those from *indigenous communities* and those from *Western nations* regarding technical fixes. At one seminar, "Indigenous people from Canada, Greenland and the USA were saying that Western solutions such as nature-based solutions, geo-engineering and such like were not integral solutions that take account of the problems they see and have to face". But then she went on to the next seminar led by "white, Western individuals who had nothing but praise for all these solutions".

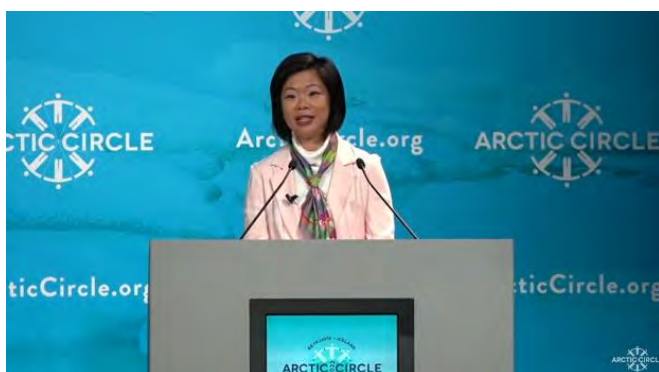
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Nevertheless, Bragadóttir said that some things have changed for the better. A number of events concerned indigenous peoples, and it was said at the meeting that “the situation concerning indigenous issues has come a long way since the inaugural ACA in 2013”.

The same applied to women, she says. Iceland’s Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, presided over a session on *gender equality* and women in leadership in Arctic countries. However, “I found out later that it took five years to find a place for this panel on the programme—which I find frightful—so it’s good that it happened this year,” Bragadóttir added.

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson started the ACA while he was still President of Iceland, a post he retained until 2016. During his 16 years as president, Grímsson met many political figures, and he always invites a number of high-profile speakers to the ACA.

Some countries represented at the ACA have Observer status as they do not border the Arctic. Take Singapore, for instance. Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Development, said that Singapore was at the ACA because of its geography.



*Sim Ann, Singapore’s Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development speaking at the Arctic Circle meeting.  
Photo Credit: Arctic Circle*

“What happens in the Arctic has a profound and significant impact on a small island State like Singapore. About 30 per cent of Singapore is less than five metres above sea level, making our country vulnerable to warming seas caused by a warming climate... Singapore is keen to set up a collaboration with many Arctic States in

managing the negative effects of climate change,” she said in a [presentation](#).

Singapore is aiming for net-zero emissions by 2050.

Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, still Chair of the ACA, said: “The nature of the Arctic Circle Assemblies is to create conditions and contacts which since its foundation has led to multiple actions and projects in many areas of importance to climate action, clean energy development, and a better understanding of the fast melting of the Arctic ice. The 2022 Assembly demonstrated once again the convening power of the Arctic Circle, where different partners, organizations, and governments come together to strengthen their actions in multiple ways,” he explained.

“According to the democratic nature of Arctic Circle, it is not the task of the organization to create action but to enable others to move forward in concrete

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ways. In addition, this assembly honoured the most important climate-Arctic research in recent years, the historic [MOSAic expedition](#), which received the Arctic Circle Prize,” he added.

The MOSAiC project was a year-long expedition on an icebreaker in the Arctic Ocean, close to the North Pole. The icebreaker was loaded with scientific instruments, and the aim was to take a closer look at the epicentre of global warming—the Arctic—and to gain insights that should help to create a better understanding of climate change. Hundreds of researchers from 20 countries were involved.

“Thus, the 2022 Assembly communicated the fundamental importance of Arctic science and the understanding of the climate threats,” Grímsson concluded.

Even tropical countries such as Singapore could benefit. Besides the annual event in Iceland, smaller forums are held elsewhere, often focusing on specific issues. The next forums are in Abu Dhabi and Japan in January and March 2023, respectively. [IDN-InDepthNews — 09 November 2022]



*Empowering the disabled – A global priority. Photo Credit: yachts and yachting.com*

### **Thailand: Education at Fingertips for the Disabled**

By Pattama Vilailert

BANGKOK — Quality Education and Reduced Inequalities are two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With 3.3 per cent of Thailand’s population categorized as “disabled”, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) has come up with an innovative program to provide a new lease of life to people who would otherwise be left behind in the sphere of higher education.

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There are an estimated 2.1 million disabled people in Thailand, and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPD) suggests that 855,025 Disabled are of working age (15-59 years old) that's 40 per cent of the total number of Disabled.

About 78 per cent of people with disabilities have a disability identification card that entitles them to certain government assistance. But, according to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 463,000 of them could work but don't have any occupational qualifications.

According to the latest report of the DEP, most of the persons with disabilities work in the agricultural sector (54 per cent), followed by general labour (23 per cent) and public or private sector employees (6 per cent).

The Disabled with identification cards are entitled to 800 baht (21 USD) allowance per month, and they could also borrow money from the Disabled Fund of up to 120,000 baht (3,158 USD). They are also eligible to attend vocational training free of charge at the Centres of the DEP and free education from primary to bachelor's degree along with technology, facilities, media, and educational support services.

Dr Thiraphat Iamnirun, Chairman of the School of Communication Arts at STOU told IDN that they offer education in eight areas that cover disabilities of students: Visual Disability, Hearing Disability, Physical Disability, Mental Disability, Intellectual Disability, Learning Disability, Spectrum Disorder, and Multiple Disabilities.



*Dr Kamolrat Intaratat (left) and Dr Thiraphat Iamnirun (right) talking to our reporter. Photo Credit: Pattama Vilailert*

“In 2020, there were 30 graduated Disabled students. Currently, there are 500 Disabled students making STOU a university with the most numbers of Disabled students in Thailand,” he points out, adding, “in addition, we offer scholarships to the Disabled provided that they have got all S (Satisfaction) in all subjects while they are studying at STOU.

In line with the law, Disabled people are entitled to free education. Thus, STOU established Disabilities Support Services to cater for disabled

students, added Dr Kamolrat Intaratat, Director of the Research Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management at STOU.

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“It has long been our motto to provide a happy learning approach to students so they graduate with quality”, Dr Kamolrat told IDN. “COVID came as a positive push for people to become more digitally savvy. Thus, this year (2022), we have launched STOU Modular program.”

This so-called ‘People Academy’ program allows everyone to study online and earn the degrees or certificates that STOU has tailored to best fit their qualifications and professions.

People Academy, which has just kicked off in 2022 under the School of Communication Art at STOU, is different from the old education system as it is a credit bank system. The credit bank is where students can accumulate their learning units and competency and later can transfer them to the STOU education system. If a student learns 1 module, it equals three units. To this, 15 learning hours equal one unit.

The students only need to be literate when they study in the program so they can accumulate their study credits. “We can tailor the level of study for students ranging from primary school to postgraduate degrees. We can transfer the level of degrees with our networks of Thailand Professional Qualification Institute, Vocational College or Thai MOOC (massive open online course is a model for delivering learning content online to any person who wants to take a course, with no limit on attendance). They can also transfer the credits to us,” explained Dr Kamolrat.

“Our network is large; we cooperate with both public and private sectors, the Redemptorist Foundation for People with Disabilities is one of our active networks.”

Dr Thiraphat said that ‘People Academy’ has extended from the existing long-distance learning of the STOU education system. “We have 3 learning types for undergraduate school: self-study, online tutorial with self-study, and blended learning (self-study, online tutorial with online practised activities)” he told IDN, pointing out, “our learning method emerged before the pandemic, therefore when COVID hit Thailand, it was a great chance for us to improve and extend our system”.

“Our course is cheap, and students can study from anywhere with happiness; I personally think that in the post-COVID, students do not need to sit in class and listen to the lecturers; they can study online and get a degree,” added Dr Thiraphat.

He argues that their ‘People Academy’ model is competent for the Disabled. “In daily life, they face difficulties in commuting; we have our Call Center and SISA Application, which the Disabled can download easily for IOS and Android, together with the Open Chat to support Disabled students.

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Disabled people are very smart and digitally savvy, quite a number of them are online vendors, and thus we have tailored our Bachelor's degree and certificates to meet their capacity for digital communication," added Dr Thiraphat.

STOU is at pains to point out that students can take a course that aligns with their occupation and passion. "This is a new trend in education whereby students do not need to spend four years studying only," argues Dr Kamolrat. "People Academy is emerging on the basis of happiness and capacity, our education is for life, and students can learn when they are ready."

STOU has taken into account the fact that the Disabled sometimes are not well to study continuously; they can study in this program when they are ready. Education is only at their fingertips; at present, the Open University is discussing with its network partners, such as the Thailand Professional Qualification Institute, the methodology to provide professional certificates to their students.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation has joined forces with a start-up company to introduce the National Credit Bank System (NCBS) in accordance with Thailand 20 year National Strategy. The NSCB will promote Lifelong Learning by supporting skill development for all ages. With the system in place, learners without students' status can turn learning outcomes from various subjects, courses, or work experiences into credits that can then be accumulated at the National Credit Bank.

Using sufficient credits at the NSCB, learners can apply for a degree from Thailand's higher educational institutions. During a recent press conference, Government deputy spokeswoman Ratchada Thanadirek said that within the next two years, around 150 public and private universities would participate in NCBS.

"Our People Academy aligns with Thailand's 20-year National Strategy that focuses on driving education in the midst of the digital age," notes Dr Kamolrat. "Education becomes life-long learning so when you are ready to pursue your study, you can check how many credits you have in your credit bank and pursue your education while you are working." [IDN-InDepthNews – 05 November 2022]



*A Thai sunset. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

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### Thailand: Secularism Hinders Buddhists to Address Mental Health Crisis

By Kalinga Seneviratne

BANGKOK — While the massacre of 37 people that included 26 preschool children in a remote north-eastern township of Thailand on October 7 has shocked the nation and exposed the inadequacy of the public mental health system, it is yet to trigger a debate about whether Buddhism could step in to help solve a major social crisis in the majority Buddhist country.

Good Health and Well-Being are a major Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), but the secular nature of the SDGs may hinder spiritual wisdom contributing to achieving this goal. The current situation in Thailand is a good example. SDG 17 that calls for “partnerships for the goals” may be utilized to incorporate the country’s traditional Buddhist wisdom to address a major mental health crisis in the kingdom.



*A standard morning "merit-making" ritual across Thailand where people give food to monks. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne.*

Buddhism has become popular at an unprecedented global level in recent years due to its message of calming the mind to achieve peaceful living through the practice of meditation and especially mindfulness meditation, which has become a fad in the West.

In a country that has had a tradition of such mindfulness practices for centuries and which has over a hundred specialized mindful (Vipassana) meditation centres across the country today, which attracts thousands of spiritual tourists each year, especially from the West, Thais are afraid to introduce it to the public health system to address a contemporary mental health crisis.

The massacre has focused attention on a serious social crisis in Thailand that includes drug abuse, gun violence, and police corruption. Added to this is another looming mental health crisis, with the country’s rapidly ageing population having to cope with old-age depression.

The perpetrator of the massacre was a 34-year-old former police officer, Panya Kamrap, who was dismissed from the service in June for possessing methamphetamine. Yet, he was a model village boy, who went to university in Bangkok, and joined the police force. He is now being diagnosed as suffering from a mental health problem that could have been addressed a long time ago.

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In the aftermath of the massacre, the Thai media focused on monks conducting merit-making rituals for the dead across the country, even members of the royal family taking part in some ceremonies. Both Buddhist monks and the media have been silent on how Buddhism could be incorporated into the process of treating mental stress and addressing the crisis of gun violence.

“Thai journalists adhere to nonpartisanship concept and by detaching themselves from religious practice (as in this case, a possible solution) in a way they are showing that they are not favouring one religion over other religions,” Pipope Panitchpakdi, former Deputy Director of Thai PBS network and a community media specialist told IDN.

“It is perhaps considered old fashion to provide a religious solution which can be viewed as a kind of cop-out of the solving the problems instead of relying on modern (western) science like psychology to fix the problem,” he added.

Thailand has just 7.29 mental health workers for every 100,000 people, according to WHO statistics. There was no psychiatrist available in Panya's village Nong Bua Lam Phu, and if needed, he would have had to travel more than 100 km to reach one. But, thousands of monks and temples are well equipped to handle mental health issues, and only if the people are guided to recognize it by the media and the medical profession, say some critics.

Thailand has over 200,000 Buddhist monks, and fewer than 1000 psychiatrists point out Dr Mano Laohavanich, a Thai social activist who is campaigning for the reformation of Thai Buddhism. “Thailand is known to have thousands of meditation centres. Sadly, all the centres focus on self-development and spiritual awakening. None of them has community awareness (outreach),” he argues.



*Meditation training for monks at a Thai temple. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

In an interview with IDN, Dr Laohavanich noted that a weakness of Thai Buddhism is that it focuses on themselves (spiritual development) and not on the concerns and problems of society. “In this regard, in Thailand, Buddhism is a part of social problems, not their solution”, he notes.



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"There is a problem in Thailand because fewer of the monks come out of the temple to engage with the community (as healers). Less of that is happening, and that's why we have these (social) problems," admits Phra Maha Pranom Dhammalangkaro, Abbot of Wat Chak Daeng in Bangkok.

"Temples will have to encourage more of the monks to be more active in teaching Buddha dhamma (teachings) to the public. As well as leading meditation for the public, and that will help."

Fra Anil Sakya, a senior monk at the Wat Bovornniwet Vihara and the Rector of the Bangkok-based World Buddhist University, in an interview with IDN, argued that it is wrong to blame Buddhism for a severe social problem in the kingdom. "It has nothing to do with Buddhists or non-Buddhists; it's a normal social problem... when we talk about social problems, it is rooted in economics, politics (and) it has developed (because) the moral ethics of the old value of family has been lost."

"In the upbringing of society at the moment, religion is less involved in bearing up the child ... people try to avoid the word religion" he added. He explained that in Thai culture, there is a term called 'Boworn' that involves the home, the school, the village, and the government. "In traditional Thai society, villages, temples and schools are involved together to hold society in a harmonious way."

Sakya argues that psychological counsellor is a new western word, and Buddhist monks have played this role since the time of the Buddha. He explained that the Buddhist approach to psychological counselling is to have the empathy of the mind with the people, and you need to understand what suffering is to address its causes. "2500 years ago, this was the main task of a Buddhist monk," he notes.

Referring to the modern mental health system, Sakya says, "once you are hospitalized as a mental patient, it is secularized, and they will look after you through modern medicine... that is the problem". He explains that Buddhist psychology is about "cleansing your mind from all the defilements, that is, greed, hatred, and ignorance".

In addition to problems with drug abuse and gun violence, Thailand's rapidly ageing population is facing an acute depression problem among the elderly, which health authorities are yet to come to grips with. According to the Thai mental health department, about 14 per cent of 12 million senior citizens in the country are at risk of suffering from depression, and the problem is expected to worsen.

Sakya believes that this issue could be tackled if the mental health authorities recognize the values of the traditional Buddhist societies in a predominantly Buddhist country.

Neurotologist Dr Nattawan Utoomprurkporn of King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital in Bangkok told IDN that when she worked in London, the hospital there had a mindfulness course using Buddhist beliefs, but at her hospital in

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Bangkok, they are careful that activities to stimulate their (patient's) mind and mental activity are not related to religion. "In Thailand, we want to be very inclusive. Most of the activities we have here are secular ... like rehabilitation, we try to be very inclusive."

Development economist Dr Nitinant Wisawesuan of Thammasat University believes that Buddhist teachings on mind development could be combined with health sciences in community development if Buddhism is not seen merely as a ceremony. "Buddhism can teach self-development that should extend benefits to society ... this should be a key element to achieving SDGs."

She explained to IDN how the Thammasat University Foundation works with cancer patients using Buddhist philosophy and meditation to help them to die "with values without despair, sorrow or pain. Buddhism in the health sector can help to improve their mental energy".

Sakya argues that young people and health professionals do not see Buddhist practices and philosophy as a modern path to healing mental stress because the Thai government a long time ago stopped teaching Buddhist morality and ethics in schools. He says that monks are now trying to reintroduce it into schools with two leading Buddhist universities in Thailand—Mahamakut and MahaChulalongkorn—training monks for the task ahead.

"It is an extra-curriculum activity (in the school system); we can't force it; the school has to decide if they want it. We don't call Buddhism; it's called 'sila dhamma' (morality teachings)," explained Sakya, while also pointing out the fact that many temples in the villages have elderly homes and the elderly spent most of the day in temple activities, which is a form of mental therapy.

"That is how Buddhists have been living (now); you secularize (and you) take all those out of the social setting, and you say it is a problem of religion," points out Sakya, who is an influential monk in Thailand advising many provincial governors in the kingdom. [IDN-InDepthNews – 04 November 2022]

### Developing Nations Risk Missing Development Goals Long Before 2030

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS — The late Everett McKinley Dirksen, an American politician, once famously said: "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money".



Perhaps that remark may be applicable to the funding of the [UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), where developing nations continue their relentless search for billions of dollars—now rising to trillions—to help achieve these targets by the year 2030.

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But this appeal for real money—and not just commitments—has been virtually undermined by a shortage of funds triggered by rising inflation worldwide, sharp cuts in development aid by Western donors, the after-effects of the war in Ukraine and the devastation caused by the pandemic lockdown.

"There are two main reasons why we are not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," said David Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, presenting his [report](#) to the United Nations General Assembly on October 21.

"The first is that States have misunderstood the Goals as political aspirations when in fact they have a rock-solid foundation in international human rights law. Every single Goal and over 93% of the 169 targets are directly connected to an international human rights treaty," he said.

"The second problem is grossly inadequate levels of investment in achieving the goals, with an annual gap of more than \$4 trillion," Boyd pointed out.

His report identifies seven sources of funding that could generate up to \$7 trillion annually towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals.

Anuradha Mittal, Executive Director at [The Oakland Institute](#), a leading policy think tank based in California, told IDN the Rapporteur's recommendations around financing should be urgently applied.

Taxing the wealthiest—who have grown wealthy at the expense of the poor and the environment—and ensuring redistribution of wealth is the only way forward, she pointed out.

"The billionaires can jet into space for the "best day ever," not pay taxes, capture the government and thereby the policies, while billions lack access to safe drinking water and food—basic human dignity".

She said countries need public money so governments can govern and put in place institutions, policies and programs that serve the people.

"Instead, so-called 'development institutions' are working for the billionaires and corporations to ensure a 'business friendly' environment so they can continue to rule the world."

Boyd, the UN Special Rapporteur, warned that with the world approaching the halfway mark towards 2030, current trends show that almost all States will miss nearly all Sustainable Development Goals and targets.

"Failing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals will condemn billions of people to misery and jeopardize the future livability of the planet for everyone," he noted.

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"On the other hand, meeting them would dramatically improve the quality of life for billions of people and protect the extraordinary Earth that is needed to sustain all forms of life," he noted.

Pooja Rangaprasad, Policy Director (Financing for Development) at [Society for International Development](#), told IDN commitments on SDGs will not be met unless UN member states lead on addressing key global economic challenges such as addressing international tax dodging and unsustainable and illegitimate debts.

Hundreds of billions of dollars of public revenue are lost due to the failure to stop large-scale international tax dodging by multinational corporations and wealthy elites.

"We agree that the private sector needs to contribute to the SDGs, and it starts with governments ensuring more effective taxation of private and corporate wealth."

She added: "We are not short of solutions to move on this quickly."

At the UN General Assembly in September, the [Group of 77 and China](#), along with the Africa Group, tabled resolutions calling for negotiations at the UN to address this broken international tax system.

"We need leadership from the richest countries in the world to implement these resolutions and ensure there is fiscal space to implement the SDGs."

Boyd said today's global economy was based on two pillars—the exploitation of people and the exploitation of the planet—that were fundamentally unjust, unsustainable and incompatible with the full enjoyment of human rights.

The SDGs aim to address these problems by transforming the economy, alleviating inequality and protecting the environment.

Examples include new taxes on wealthy individuals and pollution, debt relief for low- and middle-income States, closing tax loopholes, redirecting subsidies from environmentally destructive activities to sustainable actions and fulfilling longstanding commitments to foreign aid and climate finance.

"The recent UN recognition of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment should be a catalyst for accelerated action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," Boyd said.

The Special Rapporteur urged States to take immediate and ambitious rights-based action to improve air quality, ensure everyone has access to safe and sufficient water, transform industrial agriculture to produce healthy and sustainable food, accelerate actions required to address the global climate and energy crises, replace fossil fuels with renewable energy, and conserve, protect and restore biodiversity.

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He also called on States to ensure that a rights-based approach is at the heart of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and detoxify people's bodies and the planet.

"Employing a human rights-based approach to each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is the best way to ensure effective and equitable action, prioritising vulnerable and marginalised populations and making sure that no one is left behind," Boyd said.

The 17 SDGs include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, the elimination of economic and gender inequalities, improved health care, sustainable energy, protection of the environment and global partnership for sustainable development.

Frederic Mousseau, Policy Director at the Oakland Institute, told IDN that it would be chimeric to hope that the world can be on track with the SDGs when governments are forced by creditors and financial markets to focus on a single goal—economic growth.

He said the belief that growth will trigger human development ignores the fact that the trickle-down effect doesn't work. Instead, it perpetuates inequity where the rich get richer, and the poor and the environment get poorer.

"The economic model that is upheld as the engine to drive the SDGs, is driven by vested interests whose priority is self-interest and profits. The Rapporteur makes the right diagnosis and very sensible recommendations," he noted.

Mousseau also said phasing out industrial agriculture is one of the sensible recommendations that exemplifies the problem. Communities are displaced, livelihoods are destroyed, water sources are polluted, and forests are devastated so that plantations for oil palm, agrofuels, and animal feed can be established and goods exported by corporations.

He argued that the "extractive agriculture model is dressed in promises of economic development when the reality is tattered communities, farmers turned into plantation workers, rich biodiversity of the South converted into cash crop basket for the rich, and pillaged and colonized economies of the South". [IDN-InDepthNews — 24 October 2022]

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*A woman crafts a mosaic depicting a peace dove in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. © UN Women/Christopher Herwig*

### Slow Progress for Women Helping Forge Peace

By Caroline Mawanga

NEW YORK — Defending women's rights and promoting greater inclusion is a proven strategy for peace and stability, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed told a recent Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security, which focussed on Secretary-General António Guterres's annual report as envisaged with a landmark [resolution](#) adopted 22 years ago.

Guterres noted in his report that "despite normative agreement since the year 2000 and evidence that gender equality offers a path to sustainable peace and conflict prevention, we are moving in the opposite direction. Today, the world is experiencing a reversal of generational gains in women's rights while violent conflicts, military expenditures".

The UN Chief added: "Recent challenges to democratic and inclusive politics show once again that misogyny and authoritarianism are often mutually reinforcing and antithetical to stable and prosperous societies. In several countries, violent extremist groups and military actors have taken power by force, revoking previous commitments on gender equality and persecuting women for speaking up or simply for going about their daily lives."

Ms Mohammed said the perilous state of peace in our world cannot be separated from the destructive effects of patriarchy and the silencing of women's voices. "The challenges we face—from proliferating conflicts to worsening assaults on human rights—are in many ways connected to the trampling of women's rights and to deeply ingrained misogyny around the world." Therefore, there is a need for also challenging the social, political, and economic structures and norms that sustain it.

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The women, peace and security agenda is not just an answer to historical wrongs and marginalization but an opportunity to do things differently, she noted. "When we open the door to inclusion and participation, we take a giant step forward in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding," Ms Mohammed said.

She called for full gender parity—including through special quotas to accelerate the inclusion of women—across election monitoring, security sector reform, disarmament, demobilization, and justice systems.

Ms Mohammed said women's participation at all levels has played a pivotal role in changing the way the international community had approached peace and security over the past two decades. However, progress has been "far too slow", she said, as borne out by the statistics.

For example, between 1995 and 2019, the percentage of peace agreements with gender equality provisions rose from 14 to 22 per cent. Four out of five peace accords still ignored gender.

Furthermore, women constituted, on average, just 13 per cent of negotiators, six per cent of mediators and six per cent of signatories to major peace processes during this period.

"Women's participation in peace processes, and influence over decisions that affect their lives, continue to lag very far behind, creating a very real barrier to inclusive, durable, and sustainable peace. We must do better. And we must do it now," she said.

In her [remarks](#), she also referred to the plight of women human rights defenders who risk their lives for their communities and the planet.

Ms Bahous said the UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), recently reported that out of the nearly 350 individual cases of intimidation or reprisals for cooperation with the UN in the past year, 60 per cent concerned women.

UN Women surveys have also revealed that nearly a third of women civil society representatives who have briefed the [Security Council](#) have also faced reprisals.

Ms Bahous called for measures such as providing material and political support to women rights defenders and their organizations, as well as updating legislation for asylum, temporary relocation or temporary protected status for gender-based persecutions.



*UN Women Executive Director  
Sima Bahous. Photo Credit:  
UN Photo/Evan Schneider.*

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"And lest any think that marginalizing women keeps them safe, let us be clear: it achieves the opposite. Denying women space, access, or funding because of safety concerns emboldens perpetrators and, in their eyes, validates their tactics," she said.

She upheld the value of women's participation as critical to inclusive and sustainable peace and baulked at the low rate of representation in peace processes, national parliaments, and other contexts, such as COVID-19 task forces.



*Women's meeting in adivasi village, Umari district, India Photo Credit: CC BY-SA 4.0*

"We know very well what to do," said Ms Bahous. "Quotas and temporary special measures remain our best tool to set right these damaging imbalances and promote equality in decision-making."

Turning to fund, one of the key levers by which words become a reality, she said that investing in women's leadership, women's civil society organizations, and supporting women human rights defenders in conflict contexts is more urgent, more needed and makes more sense than ever.

While it was encouraging that 103 countries had adopted National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security compared to 37 a decade ago, commitments can only fulfil their promise when they are supported and funding commensurate to the challenge.

In 2021, there was a 72 per cent shortfall in funding to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in humanitarian emergencies. The share of bilateral aid to fragile and conflict-affected contexts dedicated to gender equality remains at five per cent.

Funding for women's organizations in conflict-affected countries, where it is needed most, declined from US\$181 million in 2019 to \$150 million in 2020. In Afghanistan in 2022, 77 per cent of women's civil society organizations have not received any funding and are no longer running programmes. In Myanmar, approximately half of women's organizations had to close following the coup.



*Southern Ndebele women in Africa. Photo Credit: CC-By-SA3.0*

Against this backdrop, UN Women's Chief urged the international community to reverse this trend. "All those in a position to do so must significantly step up funding for gender equality in conflict settings. To fail to do this is to fail to live up to our claims of commitment and support." [IDN-InDepthNews – 23 October 2022]



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### Zimbabwe: Growing Lettuce in Empty Plastic Bottles

By Farai Shawn Matiashe



*Zimbabwean farmer Ruth Rugeje runs a hydroponics system that uses recycled plastic bottles at her home in Gweru. Credit: Kudzai Mpangi.*

MUTARE, Zimbabwe — Ruth Rugeje, 38, monitors plants of cabbages, a pale green leafy vegetable, grown in empty two-litre bottles in the backyard of her home in Mutapa, a high-density suburb in the central Zimbabwean city of Gweru.

This innovative farmer picked these plastic bottles from the illegal dumping sites in her neighbourhood and reused them in hydroponics.

There is a greenhouse to help control temperatures in her garden.

Her system of hydroponics uses gravity to pump water and nutrients through pipes to plants in plastic bottles as opposed to the one powered by a solar system or electricity from the national grid.

In a country facing long-hour power load shedding due to old generators at the main power plants in Kariba and Hwange, solar energy has become the alternative for many, particularly farmers with hydroponics stations as the system require electricity for 24 hours.

But the costs to install solar power are beyond the reach of many like Rugeje.

The use of gravity in hydroponics is viable and reduces costs.

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“I was receiving cash-based transfers as a cushioning to Covid-19 shocks. I already had a small garden. I was later supported to venture into hydroponics in October last year,” says Rugeje, a single mother to an 11-year-old daughter.

“I picked up empty bottles from the dumping sites near my home and started growing leafy vegetables, including lettuce, spinach and cabbages.”

She says picking up empty bottles reduces her operating costs.

“I did not buy them. I saved a lot. These bottles are also easy to replace,” Rugejo says.

Illegal dumping sites have become common in Gweru and other parts of the country, with the reckless disposal of plastics causing a major headache.

This is because there is inconsistency in garbage collection by the City of Gweru authorities, particularly in high and medium-density suburbs.

Rubbish dumping in Gweru attracts a fine, forcing some people to dispose of garbage late at night or early in the morning.

Yet plastics are a health hazard to humans, particularly when burnt.

Some of the plastics that take hundreds of years to decompose find their way into rivers and dams in the cities in Zimbabwe.

Research shows that plastics break down into more methane and ethylene, which are greenhouse gasses that worsen climate change.



*Lettuce grown in plastic bottles in Ruth Rugejo's backyard garden in Gweru. Credit: Kudzai Mpangi.*

Rugejo is one of the many households in Gweru that are being supported with livelihoods programmes, including hydroponics, by a German charity, [Welthungerhilfe](#).

When she ventured into hydroponics late last year, she thought the vegetables would be for family consumption.

Little did she know that she would end up selling some to her

neighbours.

“I sold excess after I harvested for the first time early this year,” says Rugejo, an unemployed woman who survives on farming.

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“The money helped me pay school fees for my daughter and other essentials like clothes.”

Takudzwa Muvindi, a productive assets creation engineer with Welthungerhilfe under the Urban Resilience Building Programme, says the hydroponics system that uses recycled plastic bottles is cost-effective.

“Nutrients are added into the water in a 65 litres container. Both are transported to the plants grown in plastic bottled via pipes using gravity,” says Muvindi, who designed this hydroponic system.

“At the end of the process, there is a container that collects water. The farmer pours it back into the main 65 litres tank. She can do this three times a day depending on the weather conditions.”

Hydroponics, a soilless cultivation technique that enables plant growth in arid or peri-urban areas, uses up to 90 per cent less water and 75 per cent less space.

Vegetables that are grown in a hydroponics technique grow at a rate of 100 per cent faster than traditional farming.

Hydroponics is an option for farmers with limited access to land and water and works well in places with poor soils, says Louis Muhigirwa, a deputy Food and Agriculture Organisation representative in Zimbabwe.

“It is a potentially useful tool to overcome some of the challenges of traditional agriculture in the face of freshwater shortages, climate change and soil degradation in areas such as urban, arid climates and low-lying islands,” he says.

Rugejo dreams of owning a farm and practising hydroponics farming on a commercial basis.

“If given a large piece of land, I would be happy to supply vegetables to supermarkets in the city,” she says. [IDN-InDepthNews – 07 October 2022]

### **Women Leadership Forum Discusses the Significance of Gender Equality**

By Aurora Weiss

VIENNA — The gender pay gap, inequality in access to education and the labour market: These issues remain pertinent in the 21st century. Achieving full gender equality, one of the [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), could take close to 300 years if the current rate of progress continues, noted a [report](#) published by [UN Women](#) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs ([UN DESA](#)) in early September.

Against this backdrop, the [European Brand Institute](#), in cooperation with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization ([UNIDO](#)), organized the

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10th "Women Leadership Forum" at the [Vienna International Centre](#) on September 20.



*A glimpse of the Women Leadership Forum. Photo Credit: Katharina Schiff.*

The Forum was initiated in 2013 with the panel discussion 'Equality Creates Values', said its founder, Ms Renate Altenhofer. "Over the past ten years, the Forum has become a stage to make female leaders visible and raw models for the next generation," she added.

And this, particularly in view of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, violent conflict, climate change, and the backlash against women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are further exacerbating gender disparities, avers the report.

The UN expects the pandemic to push an estimated 47 million additional women and girls into extreme poverty and further widen the gender poverty gap. Data from 16 countries show women have done 29 per cent more childcare per week than men during the pandemic. Nearly one in two women reported that they or someone they know have experienced violence since the start of the pandemic, according to survey results from 13 countries.

To change the current situation for the better and achieve progress, equal efforts are needed by both men and women, UNIDO's Director General Gerd Müller said.

"We all have a responsibility. We need a fundamental change in politics, economy, and society. It doesn't require only strong women; we also need committed men. For example, in African countries in positions of power, out of 54 states, only two are led by women."

Equality for girls and women has many dimensions: cultural, social, economic, and legal, said Mr Müller. Equally vital is equality in law, political participation, economic life, equal educational opportunities for all girls and women worldwide, and most importantly, promoting financial inclusion, he added. Currently, one billion women have no access to the financial market, though women are crucial for peace and progress and the future of our planet.

The 2030 Agenda embraces three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. Therefore, it is necessary to put women at the heart of the economy.

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As an example, Ghada Waly (pictured on the left) executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) and director general of the United Nations Office at Vienna, mentioned her home country of Egypt, where women maintain most households. Unemployment is three times higher among women than men. "It is clear that inclusivity and diversity require effort. It is very difficult to achieve them because they touch the core of our society. That is why it requires the commitment of both women and men in leadership positions," she pointed out.

"At UNODC, we believe that more female police officers, prosecutors, lawyers, and judges will contribute to better protection of women from violence and lead to a more peaceful society. Women are underrepresented in this sector, and they are making 1 of 6 police officers on the global scale. We know that women's representation

in law enforcement and law institutions is linked to the core effective victim centre response to crimes. More women in the justice sector are good for justice," Ms Waly stressed.

Gender equality is not only a problem in certain professions but also needs to be addressed geographically. For example, even if women in Kenya are trained to access funding for agriculture, the problem arises that these funds cannot be utilized because women cannot legally own land.

The Arab region has the lowest female labour force participation rate in the world: 26 per cent compared to the global average of 56 per cent. In contrast, the male labour force participation rate is 76 per cent, above the global average of 74 per cent.

Female unemployment in the Arab states is 15.6 per cent, three times higher than the global average. The proportion of women in leadership positions is low in the region, with only 11 per cent of women holding leadership positions, compared to the global average of 27.1 per cent.

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Jordan has the lowest rate of women's economic participation of any country not at war.

According to an International Labour Organization ([ILO](#)) report released this year, the female labour force participation rate is less than 15 per cent, compared to about 60 per cent for men.

For women in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, access to jobs is even more limited, safety issues are greater, support structures are poor, and opportunities are even worse.

The gender imbalance in leadership positions is still significant. Data from the [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#) show that women still hold less than one-third of leadership positions.

Women and girls around the globe continue to face obstacles that limit their possibilities and challenge their futures, U.S. Ambassador to Austria Victoria R. Kennedy stressed at the Women Leadership Forum in Vienna.

The American diplomat, lawyer, activist, widow and second wife of long-time U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy delivered an inspiring speech. She emphasized how important role models are because when women achieve high office or business success, they impact and empower future generations of women and girls to follow in their footsteps.

"Kamala Harris is the first female Vice President of the United States, and she is the first African and Asian American woman to hold such a lofty office. And when women achieve high positions, we help pave the way for future generations of women and girls to follow in our footsteps," said Ambassador Kennedy.

She also remembered how she chose her career path during the 1970s when the women's liberation movement in the United States was in full swing. Even though her father was a lawyer, she did not see herself in that profession because it was exclusively reserved for men. It took a male professor to open her eyes, recalled Ambassador Kennedy.

The professor told her the story of Carla Hills, a female lawyer. She had just been appointed by the president of the United States to be his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. At that time, in the mid-1970s, Carla Hills was only the fourth woman to serve as a cabinet secretary in the entire history of the United States. The male professor challenged her with a simple question that changed her life: "If she can do it, then why can't you?" [IDN-InDepthNews – 03 October 2022]

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*Pope Francis delivering his inaugural keynote speech at the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in the Kazakh capital on September 14. Credit: Katsuhiko Asagiri | INPS-IDN Multimedia Director*

### **Kazakhstan, the Centre of a New Route of Global Relationships?**

By Kalinga Seneviratne

NUR-SULTAN, Kazakhstan — Pope Francis has raised the prospect of Kazakhstan becoming the centre of a new route connecting the East and West, but this time a route that builds on human relations and respect.

Kazakhstan was once the meeting place of traders and travellers travelling from the East to the West, known as the Silk Route. In the 21st century, the Chinese are trying to revive these routes via railways and highways to promote trade across the world known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

While inaugurating the *Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions* in the Kazakh capital on September 14, the Pontiff gave a new definition to such a route to wean humanity away from purely material pursuits.

"We are meeting in a country traversed down the centuries by great caravans. In these lands, not least through the ancient silk route, many histories, ideas, faiths and hopes have intersected," said Pope Francis addressing 1000 delegates—mainly spiritual leaders from 50 countries. "May Kazakhstan be once more a land of encounter between those who come from afar."

He added that such a route should be "centred on human relationships: on respect, sincere dialogue, respect for the inviolable dignity of each human being and mutual cooperation".

President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pointed out that in the 12th to 14th centuries, Nur-Sultan was home to Buddhist temples, Christian churches

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and Muslim mosques. "The Kazakh land has become a bridge between West and East," he noted, adding, "unfortunately, distrust, tension, and conflicts have returned to international relations".

Pointing out that the previous international security system is collapsing, he averred, "the solution to these problems is goodwill, dialogue, and cooperation".

The Pope made a passionate appeal for religious leaders to work towards eradicating "the injustice of global inequalities and imbalances...so forcefully brought out" by Covid-19.

"How many people, even today, lack ready access to vaccines?" he asked. "Let us be on their side, not on the side of those who have more and give less. Let us become prophetic and courageous voices of conscience."

"Poverty is precisely what enables the spread of epidemics and other great evils that flourish," argued the Pontiff. "As long as inequality and injustice continue to proliferate, there will be no end to viruses even worse than Covid—the viruses of hatred, violence and terrorism," he warned.

In the plenary sessions, many of the speakers representing major religions and various regions echoed the same message.

Professor Ahmed El Tayeb, Grand Imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar Islamic university, lamented that as we were about to recover from the pandemic, we have been overwhelmed by other disasters. "We have recently been affected by arrogant policies affecting the global economy, destroying people's lives," he noted. "It is painful (that) religion with its moral teachings is not guiding modern civilization."

Anthony Volokolamsk, chairman of external church relations of Moscow Patriarchy, quoting from a statement from the church's leader, said, "we have seen misrepresentation of facts, we hear words filled with hate against nations and peoples (which) spur people against dialogue and cooperation". He thanked the Forum provided by Congress for creating an opportunity to conduct such a dialogue.

"Civilization cannot be divided into good and bad," argued Li Guangfu, Chairman of the Chinese Taoist Association. "We need to develop mutual respect."

Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh, the official representative of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the King of Saudi Arabia, also argued for building bridges between religions. "It is important that religion is not used to create chaos in society," he said. "We need to promote values of social responsibility." Thus, he added, the role of religious leaders should be to motivate others to practice charity, justice, righteousness and compassion.



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Hirotsugu Terasaki (pictured on the left), Vice President of the Japanese Lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, pointed out that it is now more important than ever before to reach out to those in distress. Referring to teachings in the *Lotus Sutra* he argued that "one should have a sense of relief and joy when a person is helped to overcome what has seemed at one time to be a harrowing and intractable plight".

Expressing a sole voice from Africa, Dr Fidon Mwombeki, general secretary of the All-Africa Council of Churches, argued that there are people in all religions who don't

respect the dignity of others, which creates conflict when others react. When IDN asked him later to explain this point further, he said, "when people don't meet, they have all these stereotypes, but when you meet, you discover that this is not what I thought".

Dr Mwombeki explained that in Africa, so many people think Islam is violent because of what is happening in Somalia, Zaire and northern Nigeria. "When I meet Muslim people here and see how they talk about Islam, its commitment to the human dignity of all, (I see) their attitude to life is different," he noted.

### **The Final Declaration**

The final declaration of the Seventh Congress, presented at the end of the two-day meeting in the presence of Pope Francis, contained 35 points and recommendations. It affirmed that the purposes of the Congress and the Declaration is to guide contemporary and future generations of humankind in promoting a culture of mutual respect and peacefulness by making available a document that could be used in public administration of any country in the world, as well as by international organizations, including UN institutions.

Maulen Ashimbayev, Head of the Secretariat of the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, said after the declaration was read out that the document will be presented to the members of the United Nations at the forthcoming UN General Assembly sessions.

The Declaration also instructed the Secretariat of the Congress to develop a concept paper for the development of the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions as a global interreligious dialogue platform for the decade of 2023-2033.

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In wrapping up the proceedings of the Seventh Congress, Kazakh President Tokayev said that it is vital to put to good use the peace-making potential of religions and unite the efforts of spiritual leaders to pursue long-term stability.

"As we face an increasingly turbulent geopolitical post-pandemic world, it becomes more crucial to develop new approaches to strengthening inter-civilizational dialogue and trust at the global level. I believe that this forum made a significant contribution to this vital ongoing work," Tokayev noted.

He also thanked Pope Francis for visiting the country and attending the Congress, which he thinks would help to give better exposure globally for the ideas and recommendations expressed in the final declaration.

It was agreed at the final session that the Eighth Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions will be held in Nur-Sultan in three years in September 2025. [IDN-InDepthNews – 17 September 2022]

### Religious Leaders Gather to Find Ways to Heal a Wounded World

By Kalinga Seneviratne



*Pope Francis addressing the Inter-religious conference in Kazakh capital Nur-Sultan. Photo Credit: Katsuhiro Asagiri | INPS-IDN Multimedia Director*

NUR-SULTAN, Kazakhstan — "The whole world is experiencing the ongoing impact of the pandemic, conflicts, sanctions, climatic change and other global issues. We all see the increase in geopolitical tensions and conflicts across the globe," said Maulen Ashimbayev, head of the Secretariat of the 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions on September 13. He was addressing a meeting of the Secretariat.

"Distrust between countries, wars, acts of terror, and lack of effective work by international organizations negatively affects the overall global situation. Against this backdrop, our forum can send an important signal to the international

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community as it calls for dialogue, overcoming contradictions, ending conflicts and achieving peace", he added, speaking ahead of a two-day meeting in the Kazakh capital with Pope Francis giving the keynote address.

Kazakhstan, which prides itself on creating a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society living in comparative harmony, initiated the Congress in 2003 in the aftermath of the religious animosity created around the world after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The first event attracted 17 delegations from 23 countries.

The Congress is convened every three years.

The 7th Congress, which began on September 14, attracted more than 100 delegations from 50 countries along with about 150 international and 500 local media.

A highlight of the Congress is the participation of Pope Francis, who arrived on September 13 for a three-day visit to Kazakhstan—the first such visit by a pontiff to the Central Asian country in 30 years. In this predominantly Muslim country—where 70 per cent of the population belongs to the Islamic faith, there are approximately 250,000 Catholics in Kazakhstan out of a population of 15 million.

On the evening of his arrival, the Pope held a joint meeting with representatives of civil society and diplomatic corps at the Kazakhstan Central Concert Hall, which was packed with over 1000 people.



*Pope Francis speaking at the event flanked by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Photo Credit: Katsuhiko Asagiri | INPS-IDN Multimedia Director*

In welcoming Pope Francis, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted that for 30 years after independence from the Soviet Union, his country has put in place its own model of inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord based on the concept of "unity-in-diversity". He pointed out that it is due to this experience that Kazakhstan has convened the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions.

"Since its inception in 2003, the Forum has served as a good example of how people can come together as one, despite their differences. I strongly believe that only dialogue, human fraternity, and respect will make coexistence and tolerance possible", said Tokayev, while expressing appreciation to the pontiff for making the trip. Which he said would add value to the gathering and help to disseminate its message far and wide.

"We face the shortage of food in most undeveloped regions of the world. At the same time, geopolitical confrontation with the world's most fragile powers

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(has)intensified, which leads to tensions increasing in various parts of the world," Tokayev pointed out.

After praising Kazakhstan for creating a "healthy secular" society, the Pope argued that it is essential to step up diplomatic efforts to promote dialogue, which is necessary amid the current geopolitical tensions. "It's time to learn not to aggravate enmity and stop strengthening opposing blocks. We need leaders, who at international level could promote mutual understanding and dialogue between peoples' .... to build a more stable and peaceful world, taking care of new generations," he said.

"This requires understanding, patience and dialogue with everyone. I repeat with everyone," the pontiff stressed.

Pope Francis, who came to the stage in a wheelchair, also spoke about the need to overcome the "bane of corruption" so that people's needs could be addressed rather than paying rhetorical attention to it. Referring to Kazakhstan's mineral wealth, he warned that such wealth could create inequality. "Prosperity of society should not be the property of a few, but it has to be of many," noted Pope Francis.

During a press conference organized by the foreign ministry on September 12, when asked by a journalist how can a Congress like this offer a constructive solution to interstate conflicts, Bulat Sarsenbayev, chairman of the board of the Nazarbayev Center for the Development of Interfaith and Inter-Civilization Dialogue, said that what makes the congress unique is the fact that, unlike other similar events, Kazakhstan attracts the leaders of the world religions, not only representatives.

But he acknowledged that the Congress "cannot solve all the issues" related to conflicts in the world. "We try to create a proper atmosphere, to propose initiatives and offer some steps, but it is a long way."

Kazakh deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko, who chaired the press conference, added that the Congress's final document would be sent to different international organizations and governments and disseminated through the media, especially social media outlets. We present it "as the voice of spiritual leaders, very influential people".

Head of the Congress Secretariat Ashimbayev believes that spiritual leaders and religious figures will be able "to charge the ideological and spiritual vacuum with new meaning" if the Congress can "unite the global community under a common constructive agenda". [IDN-InDepthNews — 14 September 2022]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Culture of Peace: An Answer to Intolerance, Hatred, Conflicts & Terrorism

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS – A High-Level Forum on the Culture of Peace, which took place on September 6, had an explicit message to the world at large.



*Photo Credit: United Nations*

The Forum underlined the importance of peace at a time when Ukraine, a sovereign nation-state, is being annihilated by Russia, one of the world’s major nuclear powers and a permanent member of the Security Council.

At the same time, a rash of military conflicts and never-ending civil wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Ethiopia, Libya and Myanmar are crying out for peaceful resolutions and political stability.

This year’s Forum is taking place at a time “when the world is experiencing persistence and proliferation of violence and conflicts in various parts of the world,” according to a “Concept Note” from the UN.

“These are adding to the existing practices of discrimination, and intolerance, including those based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, access to the property, disability, birth or other status, many of which have exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

It was on 13 September 1999 that the UN General Assembly adopted, by consensus and without reservation, its pioneering resolution 53/243 on the Declaration and Program of Action on a Culture of Peace.

Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury, who is credited for his pioneering initiative at the UN General Assembly for the adoption of the landmark [Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace](#), told IDN that for two decades and half, “my focus has been on advancing the culture of peace which aims at making peace and non-violence a part of our own self, our own personality”.



*Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury. Photo Credit: Soka University, USA*

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This has now become more pertinent amid the ever-increasing militarism, militarization and weaponization that is destroying both our planet and our people, he pointed out.

"Often, I am asked how the UN is doing in the implementation of the Programme of Action on the Culture of Peace".

"I believe that the Organization should own it and internalize its implementation throughout the UN system", said Ambassador Chowdhury, who is also credited for the 1998 proclamation of the ['International Decade for Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World \(2001-2010\)'](#).

He said the UN Secretary-General should prioritize the culture of peace as a part of his leadership agenda. He should make good use of this workable tool that the UN possess in the culture of peace programme to advance the objective of sustainable peace.

"Not using the tool of the culture of peace is like a person who needs a car to go to work and has a car... but with a minimal interest in knowing how to drive it."

"One lesson that I have learned from my advocacy is that to prevent our history of war and conflict from repeating itself; the values of non-violence, tolerance, human rights and democratic participation will have to be germinated in every woman and man - children and adults alike," said Ambassador Chowdhury, who was a former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the UN

In his address to the Forum, Abdulla Shahid, the outgoing President of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly, defined the Culture of Peace as "a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations".

"From this, we understand that a sustainable peace does not endure merely through the absence of violence or conflict. Rather, it requires our communities making continuous efforts to understand one another and to overcome differences through dialogue and respect."

Towards this end, a culture of peace promotes a shift of behaviour within and between different layers of societies, ranging from states and communities to families and individuals, he noted.

"The principles of cohesion and inclusivity underlying it are especially important in today's complex world filled with borderless challenges—such as pandemics, climate change, disinformation and economic uncertainty. Each of these challenges has cross-cutting repercussions affecting the likelihood of conflict," Shahid declared.

Speaking on behalf of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Ambassador Sovann Ke, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of

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Cambodia to the United Nations, said the Forum's theme reflects the enduring value of the culture of peace amidst the global challenges ranging from climate crises to COVID-19, to regional conflicts to food insecurity, among others.

He said the principles of justice, equality and inclusion must be at the core of national and international efforts to sustaining peace and advancing peacebuilding initiatives.

In the context of SDG Goal 16 on "promoting peaceful and inclusive societies," ASEAN believes that there can be no meaningful development without these core principles.

Fifty-five years ago, the Founders of ASEAN envisioned an Organization at the forefront of an evolving, rules-based regional architecture that promotes "regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter."



*UN Peacekeepers from China helping to build a school in Mali. Photo Credit: United Nations Peacekeeping Facebook page*

With over 630 million people, ASEAN embraces a culture of peace as a core value of a politically cohesive, economically integrated, socially responsible, people-oriented and people-centred community.

ASEAN firmly believes that regional organizations and the United Nations have unique and complementary capacities to address key issues for the common good. Strengthening a Culture of Peace is the path to advancing peacebuilding efforts, he declared.

In a statement before the Forum, India said, a Culture of Peace is the foundation for a global order of peace and tolerance. It is the prerequisite to build inclusive and tolerant societies.

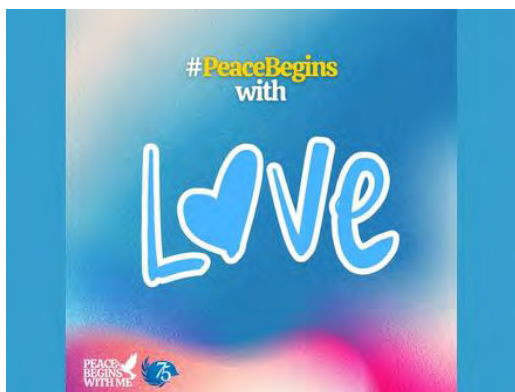
"This is of greater significance in our efforts to advance peacebuilding in post-conflict and conflict-affected situations. The UN Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace has provided an effective blueprint for multilateral action to promote solidarity and understanding."

In today's world, where intolerance, hatred, violence and terrorism have almost become the norm, the need to reaffirm our abiding commitment to promote a culture of peace has become more relevant than ever before, said the statement.

The current pandemic has underscored the interconnectedness and interdependence of humankind like never before. Such testing times call for enhancing mutual support, compassion and cooperation.

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“At a time when we face increasingly widening divisions and fissures between the Member States, we urge for strengthened international efforts to foster a global dialogue on the promotion of a culture of peace, and reaffirming that inter-religious dialogue should be inclusive, broader and encompasses all religions and faiths”.



*Photo Credit: United Nations Peacekeeping Facebook page*

“Peacebuilding efforts, which adhere to the principles of democracy, pluralism, compassion, cultural diversity, dialogue and understanding form the basis of a Culture of Peace.”

India’s fundamental approach to peacebuilding efforts is anchored in respect for national ownership and the developmental priorities of member states.

In today’s world, intolerance, hatred, violence, and terrorism have almost become the norm.

In its “Concept Note”, the UN points out that the consequences of conflicts as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to, inter alia, economic downturn, social instability, rise in inequalities, and increased governance challenges and have been posing serious global as well as national challenges to peace and security. All these, along with pre-existing vulnerabilities, have left poorer segments of society, especially those living in post-conflict and conflict-affected countries, more susceptible to violence and insecurity.

“In order to tackle this, there is no alternative to investing in peacebuilding and sustaining peace, with a view to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account.” Such vision encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict and addressing root causes. At the same time, there is an urgent need to eliminate discrimination and inequalities and promote social cohesion and inclusive development to ensure no one is left behind.

As elaborated in the UNGA resolution on the culture of peace, the empowerment of people to address the challenges in a peaceful and nonviolent way is an essential component.

The values promoted by the concept of the Culture of Peace are defined by its Declaration and Programme of Action through eight specific areas of actions, which include education, sustainable economic and social development, human rights, equality between women and men, democratic participation, understanding, tolerance & solidarity, freedom of information and communications, and advancing peace and security through disarmament and peaceful resolution of conflicts. [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 September 2022]



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Bringing the Benefits and Peace of Space to Humanity

#### *A new UNOOSA head is to be appointed soon*

By Aurora Weiss



A collage of Tim Peake, an astronaut of the International Space Station by the British/European Space Agency (timpeake.com), with a special apple tree grown from seeds taken into space. The tree was planted on the Vienna International Centre (VIC) grounds on 26 September 2021 to inspire future generations of space scientists.

VIENNA — Legend has it that a young Isaac Newton was sitting beneath an apple tree contemplating the mysterious universe. Suddenly — "boink!"—an apple unexpectedly hit him on the head. He experienced his "aha moment!". In a flash of light, he understood that the same force that brought the apple crashing toward the ground also keeps the moon falling toward the Earth and the Earth falling toward the sun: gravity. We are talking about real space Affairs in practice, which debuted in his book *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1869).

Governed by law, "What goes up must come down" a magical example of that theory grows in the yard in front of the Vienna International Centre (VIC). A special apple tree from seeds, which were taken into space, is being planted by the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs ([UNOOSA](#)) to inspire future generations of space scientists.

The "baby apple tree" is a descendant of the 400-year-old tree still growing at Woolsthorpe Manor in the United Kingdom that motivated Isaac Newton's theory of gravity. The sapling was cultivated from one of the 26 seeds taken to the International Space Station by British/European Space Agency astronaut Tim Peake during his 'Principia' mission in 2015. The mission's name refers to Isaac Newton's world-changing three-part text on physics, *Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, describing the principal laws of motion and gravity.

It's a common misconception that there is no gravity in space, and in fact, gravity is everywhere! The great Sir Isaac Newton published his law of universal gravitation in 1687, supposedly after a close encounter with an apple. Newton described gravity as a force, stating that a particle attracts every other particle in the universe with a force that is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

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This means that the force of attraction between two objects reduces (rather rapidly) the farther apart, but it never completely disappears. In this sense, gravity is the force that connects all matter in the universe.

However, in 1916 another genius, Albert Einstein, complicated matters somewhat when he published his theory of general relativity. This had enormous implications for gravity. In essence, we now understand gravity not as a force but as the curvature of space-time. Matter causes space-time to bend, warping the shape of the universe.

Newton's law remains an excellent approximation of the effects of gravity in most cases. Still, when there is a need for extreme precision, or when dealing with powerful gravitational fields, Einstein's relativity is required—Tim Peake concluded that we still don't know what gravity is; we only know how it behaves.

During his 'Principia' mission in 2015, he took the apple seeds. It spent six months floating in microgravity before returning to Earth in 2016, and an open competition was launched in 2019 by the National Trust and the UK Space Agency to find a home for each of the trees.

Newton space sapling has found a home and is growing on the grounds of the Vienna International Centre, where diplomats meet to negotiate international law for using and exploring space safely and sustainably. It is in front of one of the most abstract offices within the United Nations -The Office for Outer Space Affairs.

Italian astrophysicist Simonetta Di Pippo, who headed UNOOSA from 2014 until the first quarter of 2022, said that she hopes it will inspire new generations of bright minds to ask the right questions and seek answers so many have done in the past. In the words of Sir Isaac Newton himself, "If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants".

Niklas Hedman was designated Acting Director of the UNOOSA on March 23, 2022. According to UNOOSA spokesperson Martin Stasko, Mr Hedman will be replaced by a new director in the next few months. The person is still unknown to the public.

The Office for Outer Space Affairs is responsible for promoting international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space and space science and technology to foster sustainable economic and social development.

It was established on December 13, 1958, as a small expert unit within the UN Secretariat in New York to assist the Committee in its work. In the 1960s, UNOOSA brought about the creation of the United Nations Committee on Outer Space Colonization. In 1993, the Office was relocated to the United Nations Office in Vienna. At that time, the Office also assumed responsibility for substantive secretariat services to the Legal Subcommittee, which had previously been provided by the Office of Legal Affairs in New York.

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Today UNOOSA also serves as the executive secretariat of the International Committee on GNSS (ICG), through which GNSS providers coordinate to advance GNSS technology, compatibility and interoperability, and the use of GNSS to promote sustainable development. Through the Committee, Policy, and Legal Affairs, UNOOSA supports UN member states with drafting and adopting legal instruments and regulatory frameworks to govern their activities relating to the peaceful exploration and use of space in conformity with international space law.

A Space Law for New Space Actors project was initiated in November 2019 to provide bespoke capacity-building support to member states in formulating national space legislation. The Office for Outer Space Affairs implements the United Nations Programme on Space Applications (PSA). It works to improve the use of space science and technology for the economic and social development of all countries, particularly developing countries.

Under the Programme, the Office conducts training courses, workshops, seminars and other activities in subject areas such as remote sensing, communications, satellite meteorology, search and rescue, basic space science and satellite navigation. It works toward this goal through various activities covering all aspects of space, from space law to space applications.

It helps countries build their capacity to develop and make the most out of the space sector through a two-fold approach: on the one hand, it provides resources such as training, workshops, conferences and knowledge-sharing portals; on the other, UNOOSA complements these with concrete opportunities for countries to expand their space capabilities, such as fellowships and competitive programmes, some of which targeting explicitly developing countries, for example under Access to Space 4 All Initiative.

In disaster risk reduction, UN-SPIDER helps countries use space data and technologies, such as satellite imagery to prevent and manage disasters. It also helps governments understand the fundamentals of international space law and increase their capacity to draft or revise national space law and policy in line with international normative frameworks on space. This is particularly important as more and more actors enter the space arena.

That's why there is focused support for transparency in space activities through measures such as the Registry of Objects Launched in Outer Space, which links each object to its responsible country. The Office works with space agencies and space leaders worldwide to devise solutions to challenges that require an international response, such as the threat of a Near-Earth Object impact and the need to accelerate the compatibility of GNSS systems.

Maybe to us who walk on planet Earth, the universe seems small because we have never had the opportunity to look at our planet from other space. However, in the vastness of the universe, the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs is trying to bring the benefits and peace of that space to humanity. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 August 2022]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Why Do Zimbabwean Women Shun Politics?

By Farai Shawn Matiashe



*Female lawmakers make up 34.57% of Zimbabwe's Ninth Parliament. Credit: ZimFact*

MUTARE, Zimbabwe — Cyberbullying and online sexual harassment are some dilemmas that young women trying to rise in Zimbabwe's patriarchal and male-dominated political space face.

What started as a debate on the opposition party, [Citizens Coalition for Change \(CCC\)](#), led by young and charismatic politician Nelson Chamisa not having structures, ended up with CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere fighting cyberbullying from the ruling party, Zanu PF sympathisers in courts.

Former editor of the State-owned newspaper, [Sunday Mail](#), Edmund Kudzayi, threatened to release nude pictures of Mahere and her alleged married men.

Mahere's lawyers later sued Kudzayi for defamation demanding \$100 000 in damages at the High Court in Harare capital.

Her case replicates that of many women in Zimbabwean politics who are often called derogatory names and accused of having sex scandals with married men in an endeavour to silence them.

"Cyberbullying remains one of the reasons why women shun away from politics," says Sitabile Dewa, an executive director at [Women Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence](#), an organisation that advocates for women's rights in politics.

"It has been used as a tool against women. Most women who occupy political leadership positions and those who aspire to take up leadership positions have had their personal information leaked online, their bodies shamed by their male

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counterparts to tarnish their image to citizens as a strategy to make them lose votes or withdraw from politics.”

Dewa says hate speech on social media platforms, including microblogging site Twitter, messaging platforms Facebook and WhatsApp, have also been used to push women away from politics.

Barbara Gwangwara Tanyanyiwa, a caretaker spokesperson for CCC Women Champions, says young women and most married women shun politics because of the ill-treatment of women in the country.

“Surprisingly, most male politicians including those that are our legislators, do not believe in 50/50 gender equality as they think it is giving women positions on a silver platter.”

“On the other hand, people are now taking politics as a career, so men will not let women take up positions they think should be filled by them.”

Linda Masarira, a human rights defender and president of an opposition party [Labour, Economists and African Democrats \(LEAD\)](#), has been called derogatory names on various social media platforms.

“What I have realised is that Zimbabweans are highly patriarchal,” she says.

“The rise of characters like me in the Zimbabwean political economy made a lot of men uncomfortable. I also learnt in my political journey that an opinionated woman is a woman that everyone wants to silence because the men themselves know the power that women possess and the only way to silence a woman’s voice is by speaking ill about their own livelihoods.”

To promote gender equality in Parliament, Zimbabwe’s Constitution adopted in 2013 introduced proportional representation in the Senate, and as of 2020, 48 per cent were women in the total of 80 senators.

After the 2018 general elections, female lawmakers constituted 34.57 per cent of Zimbabwe’s two houses of Parliament, the National Assembly and Senate, which have 350 seats<sup>2</sup>.

### **‘Political climate to become more unfavourable for women in 2023.’**

With just one year left before the country holds its harmonised elections slated for 2023, women in politics fear that the road will be bumpy for many young female politicians.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://zimfact.org/factsheet-women-in-the-ninth-parliament/>

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Women in politics in Zimbabwe also experience sexual harassment offline.

In May 2020, Cecilia Chimbiri, legislator Joanah Mamombe and Netsai Marova, three Zimbabwean activists, were abducted, allegedly sexually abused and tortured for demonstrating against the failure of the government to provide personal protective equipment during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Instead of the State investigating the matter and arresting the perpetrators, the trio were arrested and charged with faking abduction. To date, they are still fighting the charges in court.

“Political violence and sexual harassment have been used against women in politics. A lot of cases of politically motivated violence and sexual harassment have been recorded over the years, and this has and still is a reason why women fear politics,” says Dewa.

Tanyanyiwa says women need a non-violent environment and in 2023 they are not likely going to participate in their huge numbers.

“Heading towards 2023 elections I do not see the environment being favourable for women seeing the violence that is already being perpetrated by Zanu PF,” she says.

Dewa says as the nation heads toward the 2023 elections, the political environment is becoming volatile as political parties campaign across the country.

“Cases of politically motivated violence targeting women leaders including social media attacks targeting their personal lives. Women leaders and female activists face victimisation and harassment that is politically motivated. This results in fewer women being actively involved in politics as they fear for their lives and that of their families,” she says.

### **Is the new Data Protection Act going to protect women in politics?**

Zimbabwe enacted the [Data Protection Act](#), which also has aspects relating to cybersecurity and cybercrimes in December last year.

Some organisations that advocate for women's rights in politics look up to the new Data Protection Act to protect them and to use it to sue those who bully them on social media.

To tackle cyberbullying, Dewa says, there is a need to raise awareness of the ills of cyberbullying.

She says women in politics should undergo cyber security training to strengthen their resilience against cyberbullying and equip them with knowledge on how to handle such incidents.

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Dewa says if the political environment becomes conducive and violence-free, more women will be able to freely and actively participate in politics.

“It is the duty of political parties, civil society, government and other stakeholders to make sure that the political environment and conducive for women to take part in politics,” she says.

Tanyanyiwa says leaders of all political parties in the country should denounce cyberbullying. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 July 2022]

### **Land Lease System Threatens Sustainability of Cane Farming in Fiji**

By Kalinga Seneviratne



*Farmer House – Indo-Fijian cane farmer’s house (on top) and abandoned house and property (in foreground) after the expiry of the land lease. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

SUVA, Fiji — Though sugar cane is thought to be indigenous to the islands of the South Pacific, it was the British who started to grow it as a cash crop in Fiji in the later part of the 19th century. In 37 years, beginning in 1879, they shipped some 60,000 Indians over 7000 miles from home to work as indentured labourers in the newly established plantation for very little or no salary on 5-year contracts.

At the expiry of the contract, they were allowed to return home, but very few took advantage of the offer because they had to pay for the return journey, which they could not afford. Many leased small plots of land to plant sugar cane themselves to survive. The British introduced a native land title system that deprived them of owning the land.

Today, the descendants of these indentured labour—Indo-Fijians or Girmityas—make up 38 per cent of the population but own less than 2 per cent of the land. About 85 per cent of the land belongs to indigenous land-owning units, administered through the government’s Native Land Trust Board, now known as the iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTLTB). The remainder is either freehold or government-owned land.

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CaneFarming family with its indigenous helper (in blue).  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

Indo-Fijians can lease native land through the iTLTB for up to 30 years. But the fact that they cannot own the land on which they farm and have also built their homes makes many Indo-Fijians feel insecure and either leave farming or migrate overseas.

“Europeans set up this system while they took up most of the freehold. In 1940 native land act was introduced. Between 1940 and the 1970s, leases were only ten years, and they were too short (for farming). It became a political issue, and in 1977, the ALTA (Agricultural Landlords and Tenants Act) came, and 30-year leases were given,”

explained Surendra Lal, President of the National Farmers Union, in an interview with IDN.

“Fijians are attached to the land, and after Ratu Mara (Fiji’s first post-independent Prime Minister), it became political that Fijians have a right to it (the land),” he added.

Som Padayachi, an assistant field officer with the Fiji Sugar Corporation, has been a sugar cane farmer since the 1970s. Initially, he was farming while still working for the government. Speaking to IDN from his base in Nadi, he pointed out that in 1970 there were 23,000 cane farmers, and today there are only 11,000 active farmers. “Industry is currently going down, and the government has taken majority holding of the sugar industry,” he says. “All three mills are government-owned; it’s their monopoly.”

Fiji’s biggest sugar mill at Lautoka (about 30 km from Nadi) produced 1.3 million tons a year in 1993; now, all three mills across Fiji have 1.6 million tons.

Thus, Padayachi is worried about the future of Fiji’s sugar industry, which is the country’s second biggest foreign exchange earner. “When farmers have problems, they (government) assist them through the system, like subsidising fertiliser, assistance in drainage, and subsidising herbicide. It is given through Fiji Canegrowers Council,” he explained.

“At the moment, the government is helping a lot. The guaranteed sale price is FJ\$85 a tone. Even if the government cannot get revenue to cover it, they still pay it (when farmers complain),” Padayachi told IDN.



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Lal says that the freehold land is too far away from the sugar mills, and it is not economically viable for people to buy this land and cultivate sugar cane. “Government don’t want to establish mills in freehold areas; it’s a lack of vision in government, and new mills need a lot of infrastructure and investments.” In 1999, when 70 to 80 per cent of leases expired, many landowners asked for FJ\$40,000-60,000 (USD 18,000-27,000) to renew the leases, which most farmers could not afford to pay.

“That’s big money. So, people decide to educate their children and let them find jobs elsewhere. Farmers here say that when my wife and I are gone, this land will be vacant,” points out Lal, adding, “sugar yields are going down, transport and fertiliser prices are going up, and the farmers get fewer returns”. He also notes that annual rents (to landowners) are about FJ\$1000-2000 (USD 451—902), and “banks don’t want to give loans to cane farmers anymore”.

Since the 1987 military coup by Sitiveni Rabuka against a new government that was seen as dominated by Indo-Fijians, it has driven many of them overseas—particularly those with professional qualifications—to countries like Australia, New Zealand and Canada and decreased the Indo-Fijian component of the population from 51 to 38 per cent.

Under the current government led by Frank Bainimarama, race relations have improved, and Indo-Fijians hold many significant portfolios in the Cabinet. In a new constitution adopted in 2013, all Fijians were declared as Fijians irrespective of their migrant backgrounds. The government had declared May 14 as Girit Day, which marks the date in 1879 when the first shipment of Indian indentured labour arrived in the country. The day is now celebrated across the country, with cultural activities attended by government leaders.

Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji’s first and only Indo-Fijian Prime Minister (1999-2000) and a former general secretary of the National Farmers Union, told IDN in an interview that the sugar industry has shrunk in the past three decades by about 60 per cent, fuelled by the rising costs of production and demands by landowners for rising premiums in leasing their land. “Those days, we had the agreement with Europeans, and the prices were guaranteed. The prices were 2 or 3 times better than the world market price. It’s all a different game now,” he says. “About 10,000 people have moved out (from farming) for various reasons.”

Many complain that when they have to leave the property after the expiry of the land lease, they are not compensated for the homes they have built on the property.

During Chaudhry’s short regime, they legislated for such compensation. “When we were in government, we gave the farmer compensation for the relocation cost. We offered either to relocate to land the government has allocated, or you take the cash and decide what you want to do with it ... build a new house or business or whatever. That particular scheme was discontinued after the 2000 coup (that overthrew the Chaudhry regime),” he noted, adding, “the current government has brought it back”.

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Padayachi says that though indigenous Fijians have land, they are not as hard-working as the descendants of the indentured labour. Yet, it is ironic that cane farmers depend on their indigenous workers during harvesting.



*A cane farmer transporting the cane harvest to the mill. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

“Government is trying to get them into cane farming, but they are only interested in traditional farming like cassava, taro. They stay in the village and have a self-help system,” he says.

Addressing a Provincial Council meeting in June this year, Bainimarama assured indigenous leaders that recent changes brought to the land act were designed to make it easier for landowners to own leases and use them as collateral to get loans from banks to develop the land. He said the government is trying to empower landowners to develop their leased land directly through the Seed Fund Grants.

Meanwhile, Lal says, “our (Indo-Fijian) numbers are dwindling, and it is changing the political scenery. Our birth rates are down, and emigration is up”. [IDN-InDepthNews – 23 July 2022]

### **Pacific Leaders Endorse '2050 Strategy of the Blue Pacific'**

#### ***Pledge to Promote "Accountable" Development***

By Sera Tikotikovatu-Sefeti

SUVA, Fiji — The leaders of the Pacific gathering for the first time in three years endorsed the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific at the 51st Pacific Island Forum (PIF) from July 11 to July 14.

"The success of this strategy is down to two things, and that is first, the leaders take accountability, and secondly, the people also be accountable for it, " said Fiji's Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, who chaired the PIF meeting.

The strategy focuses on seven key thematic areas: political leadership and regionalism, people-centred development, peace and security, resources and economic development, climate change and disasters, ocean and environment, and finally, technology and connectivity.

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*The Group of Summit leaders. Photo Credit: Sera Tikotikovatua-Sefeti*

The strategy took almost three years of planning and engagement with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations across the region, taking part in the process. This carefully laid out strategy highlighted some key areas of concern and implementation guidelines to ensure it trickles down to society.

The term "regionalism" was used often during the event addressing the geopolitical presence of foreign countries and other pressing issues requiring a united front across the region from Pacific leaders.

"The retreat is the perfect opportunity for us leaders to discuss, debate, and find a solution to pressing issues that otherwise cannot be discussed publicly," said Samoan Prime Minister Fiaame Naomi Mataáfa reflecting on the importance of face-to-face dialogue.

### **Engagement of Civil Society**

According to the Pacific Islands Association of Non-governmental Organizations ([PIANGO](#)) Deputy Executive Director, Josaia Osbourne, the civil society organisations' community members were engaged during the planning phase of the strategy. "We have been included in the discussion for the past three years, and we have high hope that the strategy can work if we all work together," he told IDN.

Osbourne sees it as a positive sign when people involved with the community are given room on the decision table to voice their concerns and suggestions to ensure any plans trickle down to the community members.

At the launch of the [2050 Strategy of the Blue Pacific Continent](#), Bainimarama said, "It is a matter of precedent, and it is certainly about our future." It is how we work together as communities, as countries, or as one Blue Pacific continent. "The 2050 strategy is about what we share in common, our challenges and our opportunities," he added.

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*French Polynesia Vice President - Jean Christophe Bouissou (left), Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna (centre) and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden(right) enjoy a light moment after the presentation of the final communique of the PIF summit. Photo Credit: Sera Tikotikovatua-Sefeti.*

The strategic people-driven approach has a comprehensive plan to ensure that the proposed (now endorsed) strategy can be relatable to work already in place on the ground. It looks at the present situation around the thematic areas to see what initiatives, plans, issues, and solutions are currently in place.

This is followed by the six strategic pathways: partnership and cooperation; resilience and wellbeing; education; research and technology; inclusions; and equity and governance. Finally, it will look at the level of ambition expected from each thematic area.

The regionalism advisor for the Pacific Islands Forum, Joel Nilon, emphasised that at the heart of these thematic areas is

the ocean and that we live surrounded by the blue Pacific Ocean.

"The 2050 strategy for the Blue Pacific continent was born out of the need for us to take a more strategic and long-term response to challenges in the environment around us," Nilon told IDN.

"It is in response to the leaders' call in 2019 for the strategy to be developed in response to climate change and existing challenges, as well as the intensification of geopolitical rivalry in our region," he added.

According to Nilon, non-state actors such as regional international civil society, the private sector, and members of CROP (Council of Regional Organisation of the Pacific) agencies have helped guide the strategy's development.

This new people-centred approach could be the answer to ensuring that each member involved in the drafting of the strategy will take ownership and ensure that its implementation is enforced and monitored. Thus, according to the General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, the Rev. James Bhagwan, "it's incredibly important for us that this strategy works. It's the first time we've been involved in this, and we know that it can only be a success if everyone works together and plays their part".

Nilon echoed this message. "It is important that we come together and work more closely together," he argues. "We have our numerous strengths; our people, our youth, our cultures offer us natural resilience and social protection, and we have significant natural resources."

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The 2050 Strategy of the Blue Pacific continent was endorsed and fully supported by the regional leaders, and various non-state actors are already planning the implementation to ensure its success.

"And within this context, we need a long-term strategic approach to guide how we work together, how we cooperate as countries, and, of course, how we interact with the outside world," Nilon says. [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 July 2022]



### A Tide of Pledges at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon

By Ramesh Jaura

BERLIN | LISBON — The United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) has pledged to enable 100 coastal countries including all Small Island Developing States to realize the maximum potential of their blue economies through sustainable, low-emission and climate-resilient ocean action by 2030.

This commitment made at the five-day [UN Ocean Conference](#), which concluded in the Portuguese capital on July 1, is particularly important because Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the ocean economy over the last ten years has averaged only US \$1.3 billion per year. But the scale of public and private investment for ocean restoration and protection remains woefully inadequate.

UNDP's Ocean Promise on June 28 underscores that every penny invested in achieving the [Paris Agreement](#) is a penny invested in ocean health—the foundation of the sustainable blue economy. The Promise outlines actions in key sectors to accelerate economic growth, create jobs and livelihoods, improve food security, reduce poverty and inequity, and promote gender equality.

"The Ocean Promise is our blue economy vision that emphasizes the restoration of the nearly \$1 trillion in annual socioeconomic losses due to ocean mismanagement. The promise is also about helping countries to tap into new and emerging ocean sectors for increased ocean-related socio-economic

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opportunities," stated Usha Rao-Monari, Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator at UNDP.

"We will continue to work across issues and scales, from local to global, in close partnership with governments, UN agency partners, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, communities and the private sector, towards accelerating progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. The ocean is a vital buffer against the impacts of climate change—saving our ocean means protecting our future."

As the UNDP points out, [SDG 14](#) remains the most underfunded goal yet holds immense potential to be a game changer in addressing the triple planetary crisis. In a business-as-usual fossil fuel use scenario, many ocean species and ecosystems, and the food security and livelihoods of billions of people face existential threats. With only 8 years to go until 2030, the time to act is now: UNDP's Ocean Promise aims to catalyse significant progress on SDG 14 implementation.

More than 6,000 participants, including 24 Heads of State and Government from more than 150 countries, and over 2,000 representatives of civil society attended the UN Conference (June 27-July 1), advocating for urgent and concrete actions to tackle the ocean crisis. They decided to scale up science-based and innovative actions to address the ocean emergency.



*UN Environment Meeting in March 2022. Photo Credit: UNEP*

This agreement, together with bold commitments from all sectors of society—youth, civil society, businesses and the scientific community—clearly demonstrates the centrality of a safe, healthy and productive ocean to food security, livelihoods and a safe planet, UN sources said.

Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel Miguel de Serpa Soares said in his closing remarks: "The Conference has been an enormous success. It has given us the opportunity to highlight critical issues and generate new ideas and commitments. But it has also shed light on the work that remains, and the need to scale this up and raise ambition for the recovery of our ocean."

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From rising sea levels and marine pollution to ocean acidification and habitat loss, the planet's largest biodiversity reservoir is in jeopardy, threatening to derail progress on SDG14, the key roadmap for global action on life below water. Moreover, there is threat of cumulative human impacts on the ocean—the lungs of our planet. If not curtailed, it will exacerbate the climate emergency, and hinder the aspirations of [the Paris Agreement](#).

Ocean-based economies have also been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and there were many setbacks in ocean management, monitoring and science. The multidimensional food, energy and finance crisis is further aggravating the fallout and weakening people's ability to cope.

But restoring the health of our ocean can be part of the solution. Resilient and healthy oceans are the foundations of climate regulation and sustainable development, with the potential to produce food and energy for billions.

The Conference also heard many success stories with many initiatives showcased demonstrating how stakeholders can come together to transition towards a sustainable ocean economy and, as a result, improve biodiversity, community livelihoods and climate resilience.

In addition, the Conference succeeded in translating ideas into action with a host of new commitments made by many countries and stakeholders. Close to 700 commitments were registered, adding to the substantial commitments made at the 2017 UN Ocean Conference. These commitments showcase the critical need for innovation and science to revitalize the ocean.

### **2022 – Super Year for the Ocean**

2022 has also become a super year for the ocean with a number of key breakthroughs with the Ocean Conference introducing a new chapter on ocean action. [The UN Environment Assembly in March](#) consensually agreed to begin negotiations for a binding global treaty to end plastic pollution.

UN sources note that last month, the World Trade Organization succeeded in reaching general consensus on banning harmful fisheries subsidies. This year's [Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction](#) could also lead to strengthening governance of the high seas. Besides, later this year, [the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity \(COP 15\)](#) is an opportunity to achieve a new target to protect 30 per cent of the planet's lands and seas by 2030. [UNFCCC COP 27](#), to take place in November, will see a focus on climate adaptation measures and financing required to build ocean resilience.

### **Political Declaration**

The Conference also saw the unanimous adoption of [the Lisbon Declaration](#), a suite of science-based and innovative actions, taking into account the capacity challenges facing developing countries, in particular, Small Island Developing

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States and Least Developing Countries, at the frontline of the devastating impacts of the ocean emergency.

Countries agreed on actions ranging from strengthening data collection, recognizing the role of indigenous people in sharing innovation and practices to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from international maritime transportation, especially shipping. They also agreed to promote innovative financing solutions to achieve sustainable ocean-based economies and encourage women and girls' meaningful participation in the ocean-based economy.

"Going forward, it will be important that we renew our focus on ocean action. We need to do this by focusing on improving the scientific basis for our decisions, by improving the science-policy interface, and by engaging in scientific partnerships that build capacity through mutual learning," said UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary-General of the Conference, Liu Zhenmin.

### Voluntary Commitments Snapshot

#### Investments

- The Protecting Our Planet Challenge will invest at least USD 1 billion to support the creation, expansion and management of marine protected area and Indigenous and locally governed marine and coastal areas by 2030.
- The European Investment Bank will extend an additional EUR 150 million across the Caribbean Region as part of the Clean Oceans Initiative to improve climate resilience, water management and solid waste management.
- The Global Environment Facility approved a \$25 million grant towards Colombia's marine protected areas.
- The Development Bank of Latin America announced a voluntary commitment of USD 1.2 billion to support projects to benefit the ocean in the region.
- Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance announced a multimillion-dollar global search for the next generation of projects to build resilience of coastal communities and finance through finance and insurance products.

#### Marine Protected Areas and Pollution

- Portugal committed to ensure that 100% of the marine area under Portuguese sovereignty or jurisdiction is assessed as being in Good Environmental State and classify 30% of the national marine areas by 2030.
- Kenya is currently developing a national blue economy strategic plan, inclusive and multistakeholder-oriented. Kenya also committed to developing a national action plan on sea-based marine plastic litter.



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- India committed to a Coastal Clean Seas Campaign and will work toward a ban on single use plastics, beginning with plastic bags.

### Science and Innovation

- Sweden will support enhanced scientific cooperation, including by providing USD 400,000 in 2022 to IOC UNESCO for the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development in support of work on SDG 14 target 3.
- The Alliance of Small Island Developing States launched the Declaration for the Enhancement of Marine Scientific Knowledge, Research Capacity and Transfer of Marine Technology to Small Island Developing States.

### Climate Action

- USA and Norway announced a Green Shipping Challenge for COP 27.
- Singapore is also championing green shipping, encouraging carbon accounting by shipping companies, and research on low-carbon maritime fuels.
- Chile is working with specialized centres to develop a network of green corridors for maritime transport in order to achieve zero-carbon shipping. [IDN-InDepthNews – 02 July 2022]

### Fiji Govt's Indifference Threatens Levuka's World Heritage Status

By Kalinga Seneviratne



*Levuka's historic street. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

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LEVUKA, Fiji — This rugged island of Ovalau covered with greenery is only 13 km long and 10 km wide and is situated off the eastern coast of the main Fijian island of Viti Levu. Its only town, the port settlement of Levuka with about 1500 population is Fiji's only UNESCO Heritage Listed site and a local community leader says that it could well be de-listed if the Fijian government does not pay enough attention to its heritage value.

Retired local schoolteacher and former CEO of Levuka Town Council Suliana Sandys is critical of the Fijian government for not giving enough priority to developing heritage and cultural tourism in Levuka.

“Heritage doesn't have prominence in the government of the day. They have told that to our face and shown in the way they conduct affairs of the local government here,” she told IDN, pointing out a new market that is being built here that does not incorporate any of the elements of the local architecture. “Government says if there are open spaces and business person has money, why not develop it?”

A few years ago, when a businessman from Suva wanted to raze an old building and build a flashy nightclub, his plans were fiercely opposed by the local Heritage Society and quashed by the Town Council. But Suliana says that they are not opposed to tourism “we don't want tourism that will bring vice here”

Levuka's natural harbour and anchorage attracted European sailors who first arrived here in the early 1830s. This was Fiji's first capital after the island was



*Levuka's exceptional architecture.  
Photo Credit: Kalinaa Seneviratne*

ceded to the British by the local chiefs in 1874. Along the beachfront adjoining the harbour developed Fiji's first city where shops, houses, salons, bars, and churches were built.

Today the bars and salons are gone as it is no more a centre of maritime trade in the region after the 19th-century whaling operations, the cotton boom of the 1860s fell, and the copra trade stopped in the 1950s.

Today, a Japanese-built fish processing plant, now owned by the Fiji government provides most of the employment for the locals, especially young women.

The city could not expand outwards from the beachfront because of the mountainous cliff terrain of the island. Thus, the capital of Fiji was moved to Suva on Viti Levu Island in 1881. The original shop-front buildings, churches and wooden houses on stilts with their wooden windows opening upwards still stands. The locals have proudly preserved their city, protecting the town's historic value.

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The Levuka Historical Port Town was recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2013 and it is protected under the Fiji World Heritage Decree 2013. Listing was the culmination of at least 36 years of effort by various domestic and international stakeholders. It remains Fiji's only World Heritage site, which UNESCO describes as "a rare example of a late 19th-century colonial port town that was influenced in its development by the indigenous community".

Increased prospects for tourism have been seen as a key justification for listing, alongside the inherent heritage protection values. *The Fiji Times*, a newspaper still published, was started here in 1869. The town was also the site of Fiji's first bank, post office, school, and town hall.

Suliana explained that with the help of a Japanese foundation they had organized workshops with local communities before the pandemic to develop a plan for heritage and cultural tourism to the island.

"We got people from every village to come for the workshops. Tell us their stories, tell us what they have that tourists would like to see. We did a leaflet done with locals from villages to promote tourism, telling their history and all that. We had tour guides trained to take people to their own respective villages. We planned trails to climb up the mountains, and hear the stories of the locals. The Department of Heritage just pushed it aside. They didn't want to promote it."

IDN contacted the [Department of Heritage and Arts](#) to find out why they do not support heritage tourism to Levuka, but we did not get a response, even though they promised to do so. But, the Fiji government's global tourism marketing arm, Tourism Fiji's CEO Brent Hill told IDN that they are keen to promote Levuka as a cultural tourism site and they would bring it to the attention of the Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Tourism.

"Currently we promote travel to Levuka as part of Captain Cook cruises as they do a trip to the island," he said, adding that it is easier for them to promote a site that already has infrastructure and tours up and running. "Sending tourists to this historic, quaint town would mean it needs to have the right supporting infrastructure—like accommodation."



*Levuka's historic coast with local villages.  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

There are only three small hotels here, and the Royal Hotel, reportedly the oldest continually operating hotel in the Pacific, is wonderfully intact with its 19th-century interior. "Levuka has always been a special destination for overseas visitors because of its people and history," Nicolette Yoshita, co-manager of Royal Hotel told IDN. "When Levuka lost the copra trade this is what kept Levuka

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going. Visitor arrivals came in groups, then budget travellers and in the 80s, 90s mainly backpackers”.

Yoshita explained that all-inclusive packages could be offered with local entertainment in the evenings. “This is what we did before Levuka was closed down (for Covid). We had groups come in (through a travel agency) with guests accommodated at the Hotel, Ovalau Club & Private homes. Income from these groups helped keep Levuka alive,” she said. “The key is to have it run professionally and it’s where the Dept of Heritage and Arts could come in as they have the staff and an office in Levuka”.

Because of its UNESCO status, Levuka attracts many Fijian tourists as it is only about an hour’s ferry ride from the mainland. However, a local shopkeeper told IDN that the old shopfronts need urgent repairs to keep the buildings intact. “Very difficult to maintain our buildings what the British built is expensive to repair and no funds from heritage people.”

“This place has a lot of water, and we have five rivers flowing from the hills. There’s a lot of food we can grow here—cassava, yam, vegetables, chillies, pumpkins, breadfruit, coconut, mangoes—we can live on local produce,” local taxi driver Raj told IDN while driving me around the islands in bumpy roads.

The tour took about four hours including a visit to Lovoni—the only village in the interior that is on a valley created by an old volcano—and a dip in the crystal clear waters of a narrow river flowing down from the mountains. “For tourism to develop, local roads need repair ...they were badly damaged by hurricane Winston five years ago,” he added.

Raj is a descendant of Indian indentured labour brought to the island by the British. The many villages around the island have interesting histories of European colonial conquests that paid scant respect to land rights. There are also many interesting stories of the communities’ survival, their cultural habits, and traditions that adventurous travellers may find attractive to experience, along with treks into the mountains and rainforests and dips in pristine rivers flowing across the islands.

Suliana believes that sustainable heritage tourism could be developed here if the government sends proper officials to work with the community to develop it. “It is local (Fijian) tourism that is boosting up this town,” she says. “I’m hoping we will not lose the heritage listing people have fought so hard to maintain. I hope they employ people in the heritage department who have some heritage background. Not just seasonal government workers who come and go without any passion for heritage.” Hill says that Tourism Fiji will be happy to help Levuka to develop foreign tourist traffic to the island. “I think a bigger conversation needs to take place with several stakeholders and government ... if Suliana is willing to have a Talanoa (participatory dialogue) session with our Tourism Fiji team, I’m sure we can work out a way to better support or promote Levuka,” he told IDN. [IDN-InDepthNews — 12 June 2022]

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### A \$100 Billion Pledge to Battle Climate Change Fails to Materialize

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS — At the [Stockholm+50](#) international conference in Sweden in early June, UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed deep disappointment over the failure of rich nations to provide financing to mitigate the devastating consequences of climate change, including droughts, floods, heat waves, pollution and biodiversity loss worldwide.

The shortfall in funding has also derailed the implementation of the UN's 17 [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), including poverty and hunger eradication, by 2030.



*Group photo at the conclusion of the international conference. Photo Credit: Stockholm+50*

“What I've been saying very clearly is that developed countries should have implemented that commitment to support the developing world with \$100 billion per year since 2020.”

“And, unfortunately, that did not happen in 2020, that did not happen in 2021. Until now, it's not yet clarified, it will happen in 2022,” he lamented.

But the proposed funding has also been undermined by the disastrous economic consequences worldwide of the three-year-old COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine last February.

The Stockholm+50 meeting, on June 2-3, took place 50 years after the [1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment](#), which was held in the Swedish capital—

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and described as the world's first international conference on the environment which subsequently resulted in the historic [1992 Earth Summit](#) in Rio de Janeiro.

The meeting reiterated that all 17 SDGs rely on a healthy planet. "We must all take responsibility to avert the catastrophe being wrought by the triple crises of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

"Earth's natural system cannot keep up with our demands. This not only hurts the Earth but us too. A healthy environment is essential for all people and for all 17 SDGs. It provides food, clean water, medicines, climate regulation and protection from extreme weather events."

Hosted by Sweden, the meeting was supported by Kenya, home to the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) which originated in Stockholm in 1972.

Keriako Tobiko, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, told delegates: "The variety of voices and bold messages that have emerged from these two days demonstrate a genuine wish to live up to the potential of this meeting and build a future for our children and grandchildren on this, our only planet."

"We didn't just come here to commemorate, but to build forward and better, based on the steps taken since 1972," he declared.

Inger Andersen, Secretary-General of Stockholm+50 and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said: "We came to Stockholm 50 years after the UN Conference on the Human Environment knowing that something must change. Knowing that if we do not change, the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste will only accelerate."

"Now we must take forward this energy, this commitment to action to shape our world," she added.

Of the 17 SDGs, Goal 13 calls for Climate Action.

According to the UNDP, there is no country that is not experiencing the drastic effects of climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions are more than 50 per cent higher than in 1990. Global warming is causing long-lasting changes to our climate system, which threatens irreversible consequences if we do not act.



The annual average economic losses from climate-related disasters are in the hundreds of billions of dollars. This is not to mention the human impact of

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geophysical disasters, which are 91 per cent climate-related, and which between 1998 and 2017 killed 1.3 million people, and left 4.4 billion injured, said UNDP.

The goal aims to mobilize US\$100 billion annually to address the needs of developing countries to both adapt to climate change and invest in low-carbon development.

Recounting the past Guterres said: “As the late great Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme said at the time—and I quote: “In the field of human-environment there is no individual future—neither for human beings nor for nations. Our future is common. We must share it together. We must shape it together.”

“I believe his insight has even greater relevance today across the spectrum of our many global challenges—from the climate emergency to the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine,” Guterres declared.

The Secretary-General also appealed to leaders in all sectors to lead the world “out of this mess and called on G20 governments to dismantle coal infrastructure, with a full phase-out by 2030 in [OECD](#) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and 2040 for all others. He called on all financial actors to abandon fossil fuel finance and invest in renewable energy”.

The conference featured four plenary sessions in which some of the world’s political leaders called for bold environmental action to accelerate the implementation of the [2030 Agenda](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

Three [leadership dialogues](#), hundreds of [side events](#)—including several [youth-led sessions](#)—and [webinars](#), as well as a series of regional multi-stakeholder [consultations](#) in the run-up to the meeting, enabled thousands of people around the world to engage in discussions and put forward their views.

According to preliminary estimates, six thousand people registered to attend in person, including 10 heads of state or government and 110 ministers from 146 participating Member States.

The warning on the consequences of climate change also came from the President of the UN General Assembly Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives, an island nation threatened with extinction from sea level rise.

“Today, we confront many interlinked global crises—from geopolitical, to environmental—which have once again illustrated the deep correlation between human progress and prosperity, with a healthy environment,” he said.

“Our ability to resolve these crises, and to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is directly linked to our ability to address the planetary challenges we face.”

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*Bananas coming into Male harbour in Maldives.  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

As an example, he pointed out, “the pandemic’s disruptions to the global economy and to supply chains affected our livelihoods, our food security, and our well-being. Yet, as the climate crisis continues, and grows exponentially in scale and severity, our ability to effectively address those consequences further diminishes.”

“Our food systems worldwide are struggling under the strain of climate-induced consequences and the destruction of ecosystems. Drought, soil erosion, desertification, the loss of biodiversity, including marine life, and

the depletion of crucial natural resources, are only some of the issues we confront. We owe it to our own children and grandchildren, to do much better,” he declared.

Meanwhile, a new Oxfam study, released June 7, says the amount of money needed for UN humanitarian appeals involving extreme weather events like floods or drought is now eight times higher than 20 years ago—and donors are failing to keep up.

For every \$2 needed for UN weather-related appeals, donor countries are only providing \$1.

Average annual extreme weather-related humanitarian funding appeals for 2000-2002 were at least \$1.6 billion and rose to an average \$15.5 billion in 2019-2021, an 819 per cent increase.

Rich countries responsible for most of today’s climate change impacts have met only an estimated 54 per cent of these appeals since 2017, leaving a shortfall of up to \$33 billion.

The countries with the most recurring appeals against extreme weather crises include Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Kenya, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.

The report, "[Footing the Bill](#)", says that the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events due to climate change is putting more pressure on an already over-stretched and underfunded humanitarian system.

The costs of the destruction from these storms, droughts and floods are also increasing inequality; people in poorer communities and low-income countries are the worst hit yet they lack the systems and funding that wealthier countries have to cope with the effects.



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The richest one per cent of people on Earth are emitting twice as much carbon pollution as the poorest half of humanity

The UN appeals focus on the most urgent humanitarian needs, but that barely scratches the surface of the real costs in loss and damage that climate change is now wreaking on countries' economies, Oxfam said.

The economic cost of extreme weather events in 2021 alone was estimated to be \$329 billion globally, the third-highest year on record. This is nearly double the total aid given by rich nations to the developing world that year.

The costs of loss and damage to low- and middle-income countries—for instance, the money needed to rebuild homes and hospitals or provide shelter, food and emergency cash transfers after a cyclone—could reach between \$290 billion and \$580 billion a year by 2030. This does not account for non-economic losses such as the loss of life, cultures and ways of living, and biodiversity.

UN appeals represent just a small part of the costs of climate disasters for people who are especially vulnerable, and they only reach a fraction of the people who are suffering.

Oxfam's research shows that UN appeals cover only about 474 million of the estimated 3.9 billion people in low- and middle-income countries affected by extreme weather-related disasters since 2000, equivalent to one in eight people.

Oxfam Executive Director Gabriela Bucher said “human activity has created a world 1.1 degree C warmer than pre-industrial levels and we are now suffering the consequences. More alarming still, we will overshoot the 1.5 degrees C safety threshold on current projections”.

“The cost of climate destruction will keep rising and our failure now to cut emissions will have catastrophic consequences for humanity. We can't ignore the huge economic and non-economic losses and damages that underlie this picture — the loss of life, homes, schools, jobs, culture, land, Indigenous and local knowledge, and biodiversity,” she declared.

“This is the climate chaos we have long been warning about. Many countries that are being hardest hit by climate change are already facing crises including conflict, food inflation, and the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This warned Bucher. [IDN-InDepthNews — 07 June 2022]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Southern Africa Feels the Pinch of Russia-Ukraine War

By Jeffrey Moyo



*Africa braces for food price inflation as the Russia-Ukraine war continues. Photo Credit: Anatolii STEPANOV / FAO/AFP*

HARARE, Zimbabwe — Life is no longer the same for Zimbabwe's shop owner, 34-year-old Richwell Mhasi in the capital Harare who has had to park his car at home, switching to his bicycle, cycling to and from work amid the rising prices of fuel since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war this year.

In South Africa's Musina town closer to the border with Zimbabwe, widowed 43-year-old Laziwe Muleya

living in a shack with her three children has now turned to wood fire as she can no longer afford the price of gas for cooking.

South African parliamentarian, William Madisha has gone on record saying, "this conflict will lead to more unemployment and lower our 2021/2022 gross domestic product (GDP) than previously projected."

Already, R77 billion (about \$4.8 billion) worth of South African businesses domiciled in Russia has been affected by the latter's war on Ukraine.

Zimbabwe's Mhasi and South Africa's Muleya, could just be the tip of an iceberg.

Petrol in Zimbabwe which used to sell at around \$1.32 per litre before the Russia-Ukraine war, shot to 1.64 while diesel which previously sold at \$1.29 has become even more expensive, selling at \$1.71 per litre.

In fact, John Mangudya Zimbabwe's central bank chief had forewarned that the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine would have a knock-on effect on the prices of goods and services here.

Dingizulu Zwane, a South African independent economic expert said many Africans should brace for more hard times.

"Our countries in the Southern African region have depended so much on imports from Russia and Ukraine, with the production of the imports obviously going down owing to the war and prices are shooting up," Zwane told IDN.

To this, in Zimbabwe, Claris Madhuku who heads a civil society organization called the [Platform for Youth and Community Development \(PYCD\)](#), quipped: "The elephants are fighting and the grass is suffering."

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With Russia and Ukraine exporting about a quarter of the world's wheat, wheat prices have been shooting up globally since the start of the war, in Zimbabwe climbing up by nearly 15 per cent in early March from US\$595 to about US\$682 per metric ton. Zimbabwe gets at least half of its wheat from Russia.

It is even worse for Mozambique, a country pounded by Cyclone Gombe earlier in March—almost at the same time the Russia-Ukraine war started. This means Mozambicans have had to struggle with the twin hurdles at one go.

“Cooking oil is now very expensive in shops here because we are told some of the raw materials used to produce it were being imported from Ukraine and the war has disturbed the movement of those imports,” Mozambique's 32-year-old vendor in the country's Tete Province, Ms. Elna Sinoa, told IDN.

Now, as Mozambique is still nursing wounds from Cyclone Gombe, Christine Beasley, the CARE boss there has bemoaned shortages that have crept into the poor African nation, thanks to the Russia-Ukraine war.

She (Beasley) went on record saying: “Commonly used relief supplies, including tarps and tents, are now difficult to find.” These, she said, “are being channelled to Ukraine and Poland to meet the massive needs of refugees”.

CARE is a major international humanitarian agency delivering emergency relief and long-term international development projects.

With motorists like Mhasi opting to park their cars now, in Zambia and Zimbabwe, where prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, the economies were already fragile, fuel prices have now increased by 7 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.

Zimbabwe's independent economist, Denis Munjanja said “our country depends on lots of imports from Russia and Ukraine and automatically it has to suffer as the two elephants fight.”

As it focuses on its war in Ukraine, Russia's humanitarian activities in Zimbabwe have also stalled. Just after the war began in Ukraine, Russia in March had made a donation of US\$1.5 million to the WFP to help more than 100,000 people in Zimbabwe's hunger-stricken areas such as Hwange, Nkayi and Zvishavane districts which are among the worst affected by severe drought and food insecurity.

Malawi has also not been spared from bread price hikes, with Amos Zaindi, who is CARE Malawi Country Director going on record in the media saying, “slightly over 20 per cent of the country's wheat dependency is on imports from Russia”.

Zaindi said, “these hikes and potential job losses are of particular concern to CARE as it risks more people sliding into poverty”.

Namibia also faces a more precarious situation amid galloping bread and fuel prices. Namibia's central bank chief Ebson Uanguta has said: “Certainly, some of

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these key products, like oil and wheat in our case, have a direct bearing on the livelihoods of our people.”

Just north of Zimbabwe, heavily dependent on fuel imports much as it does for its own fertilizer, machinery and other inputs for production, Zambia has not been spared either by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Petrol in Zambia now sells at \$1.55 up from \$1.29 while diesel now trades at \$1.53 up from \$1.12.

As Russia and Ukraine fight, other Southern African nations like Angola have also had to catch a cold. In fact, Angola relies entirely on imported wheat, according to a Global Agricultural Information Network report from the Foreign Agricultural Service of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

As such, last year alone, Russia and Ukraine accounted for about 30 per cent of Angola’s wheat imports, which is not anymore. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 May 2022]

### **Economic Gender Equality Falls Short—Despite Investments in Girls’ Education**

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS — A new study concludes that investments in girls’ education have failed to deliver economic equality for women.



*Image credit: togetherforgirls.org*

The researchers found that while such investments have delivered many other benefits—including better health outcomes for women and their families—the economic returns are often disappointing.

The study, released May 12 and authored by researchers at the Washington- and London-based think tank, the [Center for Global Development](#), found that the huge increases to the number of girls who are going to school in the world’s poorest countries are not translating into equal employment or economic gender equity.



“Investing in girls’ education makes sense, there’s no doubt about that. But just getting girls into school is not enough to give them equal opportunities later in life,” said Shelby Carvalho, Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Global

*Girls at school in Central Africa during pandemic. Photo Credit: UNICEF*

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Development, and one of the report's lead authors.

An analysis of 126 countries revealed that when it comes to women working, little has changed over the past 30 years, despite a dramatic increase in the level of education girls are accessing. In fact, women remain twice as likely as men not to be in employment or education.

The study, titled "Girls' Education and Women's Equality: How to Get More out of the World's Most Promising Investment", also revealed:

- On average, higher rates of girls' participation in school have not consistently resulted in more women working, and where they do work, there are huge pay and seniority gaps.
- Globally, the majority of unemployed youth (aged between 15–24) are women.
- In India, the number of women working has not increased since the 1980s, despite massive increases in the number of girls who go to school.
- Evidence from Ethiopia, Malawi, Pakistan, and Uganda shows that improvements to girls' education had no impact at all on labour market equity.
- In Latin America, the number of women joining the workforce is slowing down, even though girls are achieving more in school.

Asked whether the new findings will undermine the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly relating to gender empowerment and women's education, Carvalho told IDN: "These restrictions affect at least three of the SDGs".



*Image source: adb.org*

SDG 5, she pointed out, calls for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls. Education for girls is a key instrument for achieving gender equality, and countries should absolutely invest in a quality education for all girls."

But without a level playing field in the world of work, she argued, women can't reap many of the benefits of that education.

"SDG 10 calls for reduced inequality within and between countries. Gender inequality is a major source of within-country inequality, and a lack of women's representation – from political leadership to teachers in science classrooms – slows progress," she noted.

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SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

“When only 5 per cent of girls are finishing high school—as is the case in Benin and Guinea Bissau—and less than 1 in 5 girls are completing high school in Papua New Guinea and Haiti, we are far from achieving the fourth goal,” she added.

Excerpts from an interview follow:

*What's the status of girls' education and gender empowerment in countries such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia following sharia law?*

*Carvalho:* We find that more restrictive laws or norms which may limit girls' education, their aspirations, or the kinds of opportunities available to women in the labour market do have the potential to limit the role that education can play in fostering empowerment and can act as persistent barriers to equalizing economic opportunities later in life—even when education outcomes are equal.

While places like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, as well as many others, have made strides in some areas related to girls' education and women's rights, there are still other areas of both formal law and social norms which likely continue to limit the potential of girls' education to be the great equalizer we believe it can be.

*Is religion—or the misinterpretation of religion—playing a role in gender discrimination?*

*Carvalho:* Social norms play a major role in gender discrimination, and those can be informed by any number of social phenomena, including religion. Societies that limit women's ability to work or limit their ability to work in certain industries make it so some women can't reap the full benefits of education.

Right now, more than a third of countries restrict women from working in the same industries as men. Often, industries dominated by men are also better paying. There are many other examples: restrictions to access to credit, restrictions to hours, etc. The only way for girls' education to pay off is if women have equal opportunities in the job market.

Carvalho also said, “for women and girls around the world, just because you have the same level of education as your male peer, doesn't guarantee that you won't be paid a fraction of what he is earning, or be unable to work because you spend so much of your time doing unpaid household labour or childcare”.

“It doesn't guarantee you won't be more likely to experience violence by men. It doesn't guarantee you'll have the same chance at prosperity, or that the society your children grow up in will be more equal,” said Carvalho.

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Meanwhile, the researchers also recommend that education systems do more to support gender equality by making sure schools are safe for girls, rooting out discrimination, and supporting girls in the school-to-work transition.

“We know a lot about how to get girls into school and how to help them learn,” said David Evans, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development and the report’s other lead author. “But we still have a lot to learn about how to ensure schools are safe places for every girl.”

Through this lens, the authors examine the investments being made in global education by top donors such as the World Bank and the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Gender equity and girls’ education are commonly cited as a focus by these agencies—in 2020 92 per cent of the FCDO’s education financing and 77 per cent of World Bank financing went to projects that included girls’ education as a stated priority.

“But this has only translated to projects which specifically target girls or the unique challenges they face less than half of the time. A tiny 5 per cent of projects are focused on reducing gender bias in classrooms, and less than 20 per cent are focused on girls’ empowerment, access, health and safety, or advocacy”, the study noted.

Few World Bank education project documents over the past 20 years addressed barriers specific to girls, such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, or inadequate menstrual hygiene management.

“Institutional gender bias in education systems and lack of focus on proven interventions—many of them straightforward interventions like eliminating school fees for girls—is hitting the world’s poorest and most marginalised girls the hardest, with the pandemic pushing them even further behind”.

Poor girls who live outside of cities are most likely to be missing out on school. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of those not enrolled in school live below the poverty line in rural settings, the study said.

“And falls in household income—common because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding economic slowdowns as well as pre-pandemic issues like a parent losing a job or falling ill—are more likely to cause girls to drop out of school than boys”.

“If gender equality and all the economic benefits from education are to become more than a pipedream, we have to do more, and we need to perhaps think differently than how we have in the past,” said Carvalho. [IDN-InDepthNews – 15 May 2022]

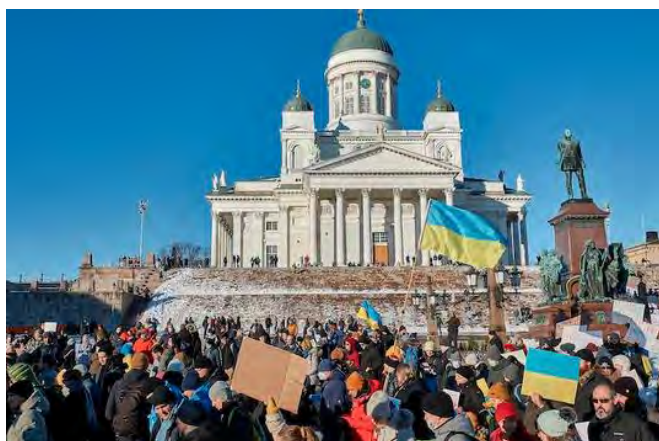
# STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

## Endless Wars

Viewpoint by Sergio Duarte

*The writer is an Ambassador, former United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and President of Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs.*

NEW YORK — The Charter of the United Nations consolidated important norms of international law. Its Preamble affirms the decision to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind”. At the time of its adoption, the world was deeply shocked by two successive wars that directly involved Europe and other regions. In spite of the lofty purposes expressed in the Charter, several armed conflicts in many parts of the globe have marked the seventy-seven years of the United Nations’ existence.



*Protestors at a February 2022 rally against Russia's invasion of Ukraine march past the statue of Tsar Alexander II in Senate Square in Helsinki. CC BY 2.0*

Since 1945 and until last February there had been no wars on European territory, except for the conflicts among former Yugoslav republics in the Balkans and military operations conducted by NATO in that region in the 1990's. Korea, Viet Nam, the Middle East, several countries and regions of Africa and even Latin America, to mention just a few cases, were not immune to the suffering

brought by wars, often caused by political or economic interests of the central powers.

The list of armed conflicts worldwide in these last seventy-seven years, some of which are still going on, is extensive and tragic. A lucrative armaments industry fuels dissension and fosters combats.

Even without wider conflagrations, Europe experienced an era of tense apprehension during the decades following World War II. Two heavily armed camps politically and ideologically opposed to each other occupied geographic spaces divided by a line that extended from north to south from eastern Scandinavia to the Balkans and also encompassed Turkey and parts of the Mediterranean: to the west NATO, established in 1949 under the leadership of the United States and on the other side the Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviet Union.

In spite of some crises, the two military alliances never faced each other in open warfare and kept a delicate balance of forces. This period became known as the



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“Cold War” and lasted until the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. Its ideological components were gradually replaced by a search for power and influence in the international order. The Cold War did not disappear—it just changed.

After the collapse of the USSR, the Warsaw Pact was terminated in 1991. In the course of three decades the majority of its former parties gravitated toward NATO, adopted forms of political and economic organization based on the principles dear to their Western neighbors and joined the European Union, which now comprises 27 members.

East and West are relative concepts: they depend on the location of the observer. Politically, economically and militarily the European West—whose symbolic boundary in postwar times was the Berlin wall—shifted to almost reaching the border with the Russian Federation, the successor of the Soviet Union.

In more recent times, each of the two sides—NATO and Russia—came to identify the other as its chief adversary. Both are engaged in a new arms race in search of illusory supremacy. Mutual mistrust increased, even after both presidents issued in 2021 an encouraging joint statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”.

Russia believes that NATO’s eastward progress is a serious threat to its security and is alarmed by the possibility that Ukraine, an immediate neighbor, might seek membership in the Atlantic alliance. While there may be grounds for its concerns, Russia chose the path of armed aggression to fend off that eventuality.

Whatever its reasons, this attitude flatly contradicts the Charter of the United Nations. By signing the Charter, all members of the international organization committed to settle their international disputes by peaceful means and to abstain from the use or threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of other states.

NATO’s founding treaty establishes that an armed attack against one or more of its members shall be considered an attack against them all and would justify a military response. Since Ukraine is not a member of NATO, the alliance is not bound to intervene directly in the hostilities, although several members are providing growing amounts of arms to the Kiev government. At the same time, they adopted individual and collective severe sanctions against Russia, vowing to weaken it economically and militarily and hoping to provoke internal uprisings against Moscow authorities.

A negotiated solution to the conflict seems distant. The humanitarian cost of the war is very high and the situation in the battlefield remains uncertain. Over 5.5 million people have fled Ukraine and several thousand on both sides have already perished.

Russia’s apparent immediate objective is to secure a land link to the Crimean Peninsula, which it annexed in 2014, and to establish control over the Ukrainian

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shores of the Black Sea. Ukrainian forces successfully expelled invaders in the north along the border with Belarus and keep control of the central and western parts of the country, including the capital Kiev.

Ukraine's president relies on NATO's support but has already made clear that he will not seek membership in the western alliance and does not seem inclined to renounce sovereignty over parts of the country's territory. Up to now, diplomatic contacts between the two contenders has been limited to humanitarian agreements, clearly short of what would be necessary to prevent or alleviate the plight of civilian populations.

Anxiety and tension once again grip Europe while worldwide concern with the course of the conflict and its economic and human consequences increases. The main fear is the risk of a military escalation that leads to the use of nuclear weapons. Russia and NATO arsenals boast so-called "tactical" atomic weapons, that is, arms with relatively low nuclear explosive power that have been developed for use in battlefield operations.

Even so, such weapons are many times more powerful than the ones that were used to raze Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their use may provoke a response in kind from the enemy and trigger an escalation of unpredictable results.

A treaty concluded in 1987 eliminated nuclear intermediate-range missiles based in Europe. This decision caused relief among the population and brought détente to the relations between the two major powers. Nevertheless, the forces currently stationed in Russian territory as well as the atomic war power that can be used by NATO from aeroplanes or submarines are more than enough to ensure catastrophic damage in the case of a direct confrontation.

Moreover, Washington and Moscow possess supersonic nuclear intercontinental missiles that can elude existing defense systems and whose use may result in complete mutual destruction with irreversible consequences for the remainder of the planet. An accident or sheer carelessness may cause the extinction of the human race. The current russo-Ukrainian chapter of the ongoing confrontation between Russia and the West has depended exclusively on conventional weapons, although veiled threats of nuclear retaliation in case of more direct involvement of NATO still persist.

Durable peace in the world can only be reached through good faith understandings that take into consideration the legitimate security concerns of all parties. The negotiating instruments that remain at the disposal of the international community were created precisely to prevent the scourge of war.

The risk of recurrence of the untold human and material losses caused by past and present bloody conflicts is a warning sign that mankind may not yet have fully learned the lessons from its history. The competition for ever more destructive weapons does not lead to undisputable supremacy; rather, as it is plain to see, it is the most direct path to the perpetuation of the rivalries and mistrust that contribute to create and fuel endless wars.

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There is no logical or moral justification for History to continue as a constant series of conflicts with ever more lethal and indiscriminate weapons. Humanity must understand once and for all that security for some cannot be attained at the expense of the insecurity of others. Wisdom and restraint, taking into account the lessons of the past, offer the best chance of building a future of peace and averting the threat of unprecedented devastation. [IDN-InDepthNews — 10 May 2022]

### **A New Integrated Financing Facility to Help Achieve UN's Development Goals by 2030**

By Thalif Deen



*President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana gives opening remarks at the ECOSOC Financing for Development Forum, 25 April 2022. Photo Credit: UNDESA/Predrag Vasic*

UNITED NATIONS — The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which primarily include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger by 2030, are in deep financial trouble.

The goals have been severely undermined by the cumulative effects of several factors, including the economic fallout from the war in Ukraine and, most importantly, the widespread COVID-19 pandemic which has had a devastating impact on both the world's rich and poor nations.

The UN says the COVID-19 pandemic, now in its third year, "presents one of the greatest global challenges in the history of the United Nations".

Over 6 million people have lost their lives, and still the pandemic continues to violently derail the progress made in achieving the 2030 Agenda, while over 100 million additional people were pushed into extreme poverty in 2020, dramatically reversing a two-decade-long decreasing trend.

The World Bank predicts that a quarter of a billion people could be pushed into extreme poverty this year while nearly 323 million people could face acute food insecurity—threatening the very first SDG from extinction.

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Ambassador Collen V. Kelapile of Botswana, [President of ECOSOC](#) said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated trends that are contributing to cataclysmic effects on development progress, and the poorest and most vulnerable are experiencing the impacts most severely."

Economic shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine, have exacerbated the situation, with the poorest countries spending billions on debt servicing, diverting resources from the pandemic response and investments towards supporting a sustainable recovery.

Addressing a three-day high-level forum on SDG Financing sponsored by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on April 26-28, UN's Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed warned: "The SDGs are in need of urgent rescue. Financing for development is an essential part of the solution. But so far, the global response has fallen far short."

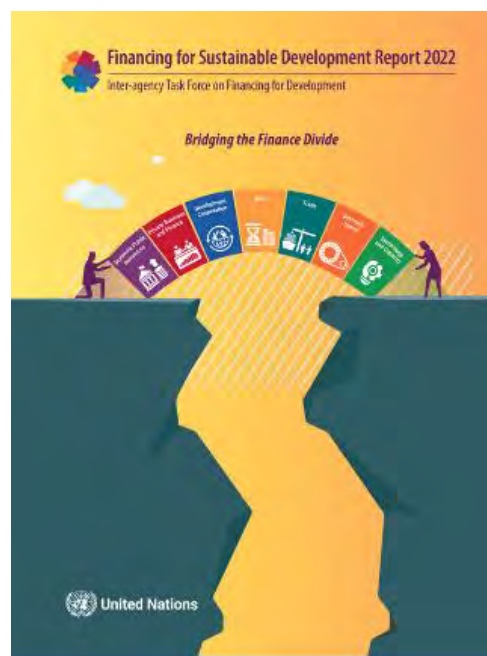
A recent UN report, [2022 Financing for Sustainable Development Report: Bridging the Finance Divide \(FSDR 2022\)](#), warns that 60 per cent of the world's poorest countries are in or at high risk of debt distress, double 2015 levels. The high cost of servicing debt in developing countries—with interest rates up to 8 times higher than their rich counterparts—is straining already fragile public finances.

The SDGs also include quality education, gender empowerment, reduced inequalities, affordable and clean energy, and sustainable cities.

One of the most positive outcomes of the Forum, which was addressed by several heads of government, vice presidents, foreign ministers, ministers of development cooperation and ambassadors, was the creation of an Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) Facility.

The INFF is a new joint flagship initiative of the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and the Governments of Italy and Sweden.

The Facility is expected "to bring together international partners to align and magnify support to more than 80 governments to channel critical investment towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".



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The concept of INFFs was first introduced by the UN Member States in the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda as a country-led approach to strengthening public and private financing for sustainable development.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) said: "It's clear that the INFFs have an important role to play both in the immediate response to the current crisis and in rebuilding better."

"The launch of the Facility comes at the right time. Now, more than ever, our focus must be on strengthening partnerships to bridge the finance divide and channel finance to where it's needed most," he declared

Global challenges require a global response, but ultimately financing flows have to fund health, education, infrastructure and other national SDG investments at the country level, he added.

UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner was equally positive. "Although there is enough money in the world to finance the 2030 Agenda, it is not allocated in the right places—just 20% of global capital is held in developing countries, which are home to 84% of the world's population."

"To bridge this gap, this new INFF Facility will provide countries with the technology, expertise, and tools they need to implement ambitious financing strategies that will unlock game-changing levels of finance—allowing countries to take decisive climate action and make future-orientated investments in key areas like nature, literacy, healthcare and sanitation," he pointed out.

An Outcome Document<sup>3</sup>, adopted at the Forum by Heads of State and Government, Ministers and high-level representatives, warns: "We express our grave concern that the mobilization of sufficient financing remains a major challenge in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and that progress has not been shared evenly within and among countries, leading to further deepening of existing inequalities."

"The success of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement will depend on our ability to mobilize resources, and the institutions that we build for the different agendas to reinforce each other."

"We reaffirm our resolve to continue to scale up our efforts towards the full and timely implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, as well as the 2030 Agenda. We further reaffirm our commitment to strengthen multilateral

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<sup>3</sup>The link to the Outcome Document -

[https://www.un.org/development/desa/financing/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.financing/files/2022-04/2022%20ECOSOC%20FfD%20Forum%20outcome%20document\\_1.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/financing/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.financing/files/2022-04/2022%20ECOSOC%20FfD%20Forum%20outcome%20document_1.pdf)

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cooperation and solidarity to combat the consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, including its socioeconomic impact."

Meanwhile, in an attempt to battle the spreading financial crisis, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has established the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance. Described as a high-level political Group, the goal is to "get ahead of the perfect storm of food security, energy, and financing challenges".



*The Debt Burden. Image Credit: Creative Commons*

According to the Deputy Secretary-General, the Global Crisis Response Group's first report, together with the 2022 *Financing for Sustainable Development Report*, sets out the following recommendations for immediate action.

First, on mobilizing finance quickly and flexibly, from all sources:

- (1) The international community must fulfil its official development assistance commitments and support rapid access to long-term sustainable finance.
- (2) International Financial Institutions must prioritize flexibility and speed. Emergency financing mechanisms that can disburse funds rapidly and without unnecessary conditions must be put into service immediately.
- (3) Access limits to the IMF's Rapid Credit Facility and Rapid Financing Instruments must also be increased, and the cumulative limit extended.
- (4) Countries with strong external positions should channel their unused Special Drawing Rights to others in need, including through the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust and the newly established Resilience and Sustainability Trust.
- (5) New rounds of capital injections are needed for Multilateral Development Banks, including at the regional level.
- (6) The multilateral banks should also take urgent measures to address the high sovereign borrowing costs faced by developing countries in the international markets and the role of Credit Rating Agencies.

Second, she said, "we need to address rising debt risks". The G20 should reactivate the Debt Service Suspension Initiative for two years and reschedule maturity for two to five years.

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The Common Framework for Debt Treatments is in dire need of reform, to include transparency of timelines and clarity on what debt should be covered. It should include a debt service payment standstill; enforcement of comparability of treatment; and inclusion of private and non-Paris Club creditors.

Third, we need to invest in equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, as many countries are still mired in an unpredictable pandemic.

We need full funding for the COVID-19 Tools ACT Accelerator and its COVAX Facility. Countries must step up and share technical expertise and intellectual property to end this pandemic and strengthen resilience for the future.

All countries must continue to provide and expand social protection and invest in a job-rich recovery.

Finally, we must urgently step-up climate finance, half of which must go to adaptation.

This also requires aligning national budgets and tax systems with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement; addressing greenwashing, and rethinking incentives in the international financial system.

We need global solidarity, supported by strong political will, ambition and leadership. Developed countries should urgently fulfil their commitment to mobilize 100 billion dollars annually for climate action in developing countries," she added [IDN-InDepthNews – 30 April 2022]

### **Street Vending: Covid Seems to Have Killed a Bangkok Icon**

By Pattama Vilailert

BANGKOK — Street vendors have been an iconic attraction for millions of tourists that visited Bangkok each year before the COVID-19 pandemic. In perfect tune with the Thais' approach to enjoying life to its fullest, including eating and shopping, street vendors have set their carts in the heart of Thai people and Bangkok for a century, serving both Thais and foreigners.

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns that have devastated the tourist industry in Thailand have also seriously impacted the livelihood of street vendors. When the pandemic broke out, about 40 million tourists flocked to Thailand every year. Street vending was seen as a sustainable livelihood option for millions of Thais. Tourists have started to trickle into Thailand since the lifting of travel restrictions in November 2021. Still, there are serious question marks whether the traditional street vending could be revived to its past glory?

IDN travelled down the Khao San Road, a backpacker's haven, and Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok's nightlife paradise, to witness the life of street vendors after the country reopened to tourists five months ago.

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*Handful of tourists in a deserted Khaosan which was before the pandemic filled with street stalls and tourists. Photo Credit: Pattama Vilailert.*

The Khaosan Road Business Operators Association president, Sanga Ruangwattanakul revealed in a recent media interview that at the end of 2019, 80% of business revenues here were from international tourists. The effects of COVID -19 are severe: Khaosan Road used to be busy 24 hours. "Before the outbreak, a stall here was sold at 1 million baht (29,670 USD). A few small stalls have survived; owners have gone back to their hometowns," he said, predicting that newcomers might come instead if tourists start to flow.

Ruangwattanakul's opinion matches Yordchai's, a street seller of games and gadgets. "I have been a vendor here for over 30 years. I decided to invest in 15,000 Baht monthly rent for a two metered space to set up my stall since I did not have a million to buy a stall," Yordchai told IDN. His investment was worthy until COVID-19 hit the business. He earned around 3,000 Baht (90 USD) a day, but since the first lockdown in 2020, he could hardly make both ends meet. However, Yordchai participated in the government's co-payment stimulus scheme, first launched in October 2020.



*Yordchai looks forward to tourists returning to support his business. Photo Credit: Pattama Vilailert*

According to Thailand's Finance Ministry statement, the co-payment stimulus



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scheme "Khon La Khrueng" is aimed to stimulate domestic consumption and economic growth. The government subsidises 50% of food, drink and general goods purchase. The total subsidy is limited to 150 baht (4.45 USD) per person a day from the first to third phases. For the fourth phase, which started in February 2022, the total subsidy decreased to 120 baht (3.56 USD) per person per day.

However, Yordchai said, "Even though I joined the co-payment package, I still had to use my savings to pay rent for a room and daily expenses. So I pin my hope on the return of tourists to Khaosan Road as I am 62 years old; I don't know what else to do". From December 2021, he saw international tourists wandering on Khaosan Road while he began to pick up his sales to 500 Baht (15.80 USD) a day.

In addition to street vendors, the co-payment stimulus package covers state welfare cardholders and those in need of special assistance. The participant needs to download Pao Tang application onto a smartphone to register for the program. According to DATAREPORTAL, there were 54.5 million smartphone users in Thailand in January 2022, accounting for 77.8% of the total population.

IDN met Nuy, a food street vendor living in the Khaosan area since she was born. "Before the pandemic, various nationalities of tourists came here, and I made over 4,000 Baht (119 USD) each day," she told IDN. "But since the first lockdown in March 2020, I could not sell food; I just stayed home and came out to my stall when I knew that some generous people would come to give food to the needy".

When she came to her stall during the pandemic, she met other vendors and some tourists that could not fly back home, reaching for free food. Nuy could not participate in any government stimulus packages. She has no access to a smartphone, so she lives on her saving and free food. She reopened her street stall in November 2021, "I am 60 years old and just live by, and I don't think I can do much to change my future", she told IDN.

In the nightlife paradise area of Sukhumvit, 40-year-old Noknoy shared her incredible story with IDN. "I was a waitress in the bar in Alley 11, a famous area for tourists, for 20 years and to my surprise, the bar was shut down permanently last month (March 2022). I contemplated how to move on with my life, then I decided to put up a cart near the Sky train station to sell drinks to passers by", she said, pointing out that she is a brand new street vendor and has a lot to learn, like what day street



Noknoy's new business venture. Photo Credit: Pattama Vilailert

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vendors are prohibited on the road. Unlike her co-workers, during the COVID-19 outbreak, she did not return to her home in Surin, a province in the Northeast Thailand. She worked in the bar until it closed for good.

Noknoy participated in We Win (Roa Chana) stimulus package. As stated on Thailand's Ministry of Finance website, criteria for participation include people's level of income and savings, as shown in the government record. People from all walks of life are eligible for the subsidy, including freelancers, vendors and farmers. With the new life path that COVID-19 brought her, she earns around 600-700 Baht (20 USD) a day from foreign tourists and local Thais.

Along Sukhumvit Road, not far from Noknoy stall, IDN found a classic cloth stall vendor, Suay. Before the pandemic, thousands of tourists flocked to the night markets on the pavements 365 days to bargain and buy colourful Thai dresses, clothes, shoes and bags. Noknoy had a stall on Sukhumvit Road for over 30 years.

"I made over 5,000 Baht (150 USD) a day before the outbreak, but during a series of lockdown, I just used up my saving and waited for the time to reopen my stall," she said with a sad smile. "I came back to my stall right after the government reopened Thailand to foreign tourists in November 2021". She is confident that tourists will come back to Sukhumvit. "When nightfall, you won't be able to walk here, and it is my time to make money," she says, though the jam-packed pavements are still to come.

The life of street vendors in touristic areas of Bangkok largely depends on international tourists. Numbers of them have gone back to their hometowns during COVID-19. They might return if they have some capital to prolong the traditional street business. Some street stalls are being replaced with newcomers. Whether they are old or new, the tourists would recognise the colour, vibrancy, and great aroma of Thai cuisine served on the streets at bargain prices. One hopes that these sights will slowly come alive to give Bangkok that flavour that is a magnet to millions of people worldwide. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 April 2022]

### **Safeguarding The Blue Pacific from Any Further Nuclear Contamination**

By Neena Bhandari

SYDNEY — The [Pacific Islands Forum \(PIF\)](#), the region's leading political and economic policy organisation, has appointed a panel of [global experts](#) on nuclear issues to provide independent scientific and technical advice to Pacific nations in their discussions with Japan over its intentions to discharge treated nuclear wastewater from the [Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant](#) in Fukushima into the Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific Island countries, in the past, have been unwilling victims of nuclear weapons testing by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. This has made them staunch opponents of any nuclear-related activities in the region. Fishing and coastal communities are worried about the impact the release of

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*The Blue Pacific Ocean in Fiji. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

wastewater perceived as “contaminated” will have on the ocean, which is the main source of their livelihood and subsistence.

The PIF Secretary General Henry Puna said in a media release, “Our ultimate goal is to safeguard the Blue Pacific—our ocean, our environment, and our peoples—from any further nuclear contamination. This is the legacy we must leave for our children”.

The PIF leaders, at the [Ninth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting](#), in July last year had highlighted the priority of “ensuring international consultation, international law, and independent and verifiable scientific assessments with regards to Japan’s announcement”.

Claiming that it is safe to do so, Japan had announced in April 2021 its intentions to commence discharge of 1.28 million tonnes of the so-called Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS) treated nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean from 2023 until the mid-2050s.

Japan’s claims, that radioactive elements in the water will be treated and diluted to safe levels before releasing, have been supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency ([IAEA](#)) and the United States.

Controlled water discharges into the sea are routinely used by operating nuclear power plants in the world and in the region under specific regulatory authorisations based on safety and environmental impact assessments, [IAEA Director General](#) Rafael Mariano Grossi has said.

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*The catch from the Blue Pacific, Apia fish market in Samoa. How long would this be fit to consume?  
Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

On March 28, 2022, Japan provided the IAEA with a copy of a [report](#) on the discharge record and the seawater monitoring results at the Plant during February. A [third aspect](#) of the IAEA Task Force’s review, in addition to the technical and regulatory aspects, is the independent sampling and analysis of the treated water to corroborate TEPCO data, both for the treated water stored in the tanks and for the marine environment, according to an IAEA media release.

Since the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck the Plant site, sending three nuclear reactors into meltdown and triggering the worst nuclear disaster since the [1986 Chernobyl accident](#), radioactive water has accumulated at the Plant, including liquid used for cooling, and rain and groundwater that has seeped in.

The contaminated water has been treated with ALPS, an extensive pumping and filtration system, to remove most of the radioactive isotopes. The Plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings (TEPCO) has [stored](#) some 1.25 million tonnes of treated water in more than 1000 tanks at the Plant site.

The Japanese government has said that it needs to release the water because the onsite tanks will reach full capacity by later this year and the long-term management of the treated water is necessary to pave the way for further decommissioning of the Plant.

But the proposal has been met with strong opposition. The Pacific Islander communities, who have been affected by the radioactive fallout from some 300 nuclear tests conducted in [the Pacific](#) by the US, the UK and France from 1946 to 1996, continue to experience long-term health disorders and congenital abnormalities.

“The legacy of nuclear testing throughout the Pacific, in particular with respect to the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia, Kiribati and elsewhere, has never been

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effectively remedied or addressed. Pacific peoples have suffered greatly from the destructive programs of militarized colonial powers during the 20th century, continuing into the 21st,” said [Maureen Penjueli](#), coordinator for the Fiji-based Pacific Network on Globalisation ([PANG](#)), a regional non-governmental organisation that focuses on promoting the rights of Pacific Island peoples to be self-determined.

“The consequences of detonating hundreds of nuclear bombs of a much greater destructive power than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs are still being felt today by Indigenous islanders—manifesting in, among other impacts, debilitating health and intergenerational maladies. This legacy continues to threaten not just Pacific islanders and the Pacific Ocean, but the health and wellbeing of all the planet’s oceans and the people who depend upon them,” Penjueli told IDN.

She elaborated that for instance, radioactive materials currently contained in [Runit Dome](#) on Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands are leaking into the surrounding ocean and groundwater.

“The Runit Dome was a haphazard attempt by the U.S. military to contain 111,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste in an unlined crater. It was never replaced by a safe, permanent structure and instead it is currently cracking and polluting the local surroundings,” she added. “Such manifestly inadequate measures in place of effective environmental clean-up, damage payouts, and aid transfers continue to imperil efforts to address the legacy of nuclear testing and achieve sustainable ocean goals.”

The [Medical Association for Prevention of War \(Australia\)](#) is amongst many civil society organisations in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond calling on the Japanese Government to cease plans to discharge radioactive wastewater into the ocean.

“We fully support the Pacific Island nations’ efforts to prevent further radioactive contamination of their waters and lands,” says Dr Sue Wareham, National President of MAPW (Australia). “The hundreds of nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific during the Cold War has left both a radioactive legacy of health problems and a well-placed mistrust of safety assurances. As the old saying goes: If it is safe, dump it in Tokyo, but keep our Pacific nuclear-free.”

The Japanese Government plans to release 22 trillion becquerels of tritium per year into the ocean. Before the nuclear accident, the amount of tritium released into the ocean from the Plant was 1.5-2 trillion becquerels per year. That means releasing about 10 times that amount of tritium into the ocean for several 10 years, according to a Friends of the Earth (FoE) Japan [statement](#) issued in April 2021.

Amongst the many reasons cited to oppose releasing contaminated water into the ocean, Executive Director of [FoE Japan](#) and Deputy Chairperson of Citizen’s Commission on Nuclear Energy ([CCNE](#)), Kanna Mitsuta, said, “The main reason is

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that we should not diffuse radioactive materials into the environment. Treated contaminated water is said to contain 860 trillion becquerels of tritium. In addition, radioactive materials such as cesium, strontium and iodine remain in the water”.

“Although the Japanese government and TEPCO had said that they would not take any action without the understanding of the people concerned, they decided to release the treated contaminated water into the ocean despite many objections. This is a breach of promise,” Mitsuta told IDN.

“CCNE has proposed alternatives, such as storage in large, sturdy tanks and solidification of mortar, but these have not been fully examined,” Mitsuta added.

In a report published in 2020, Greenpeace had argued that “[the only acceptable solution](#)” was for Japan to continue the long term storage and processing of the contaminated water.

The Australian Conservation Foundation ([ACF](#)) is also calling for terrestrial storage and management of all Fukushima waste pending further independent and international review of the full suite of management options.

“Given that it was [Australian uranium](#) that was in the Fukushima plant at the time of the tsunami and meltdown, we have been urging our members and supporters [to write](#) to Australia’s Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, about this matter”, said ACF’s nuclear and uranium campaigner, Dave Sweeney.

“Our oceans are not industrial disposal sites. They are vital life systems we all rely on. We are concerned that releasing radioactive wastewater into the Pacific could result in the bio-accumulation of radio-nuclides in the marine environment and aquatic food chain; and it would also have a significant cultural impact,” Sweeney told IDN.

The Pacific Collective on Nuclear Issues, a group of Pacific civil society organisations, made a thorough [submission](#) to the Japanese Government in December 2021. It strongly opposed the discharge of radioactive water into the ocean and emphasised that the Pacific is not and must not become the dumping ground for nuclear wastes.

It urged the Japanese Government and TEPCO to explore “alternative options for safe containment, storage as well as identification of technologies that can safely treat radioactive material including the radioactive wastewater...”.

The Collective is calling upon the Japanese Government and TEPCO to do a comprehensive reassessment of their entire decommissioning plan. It recommended an ocean-wide independent Environmental Impact Assessment and Radiological Impact Assessment before such large volumes of radioactive wastewater is permitted to be discharged in the ocean.

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Japan's nearest [geographical neighbours](#), especially the Republic of Korea, have also opposed the discharge of the contaminated water.

The proposal also contravenes nuclear-free Pacific international laws and Treaties, such as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty 1985 ([Treaty of Rarotonga](#)), which prohibits the testing and use of nuclear explosive devices and the dumping of radioactive wastes in the sea by member states, including Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island nations. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 April 2022]



*Children in Fiji says they want their oceans to remain clean on World Ocean Day in Suva. Photo Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne*

**DECADE  
OF >>>>  
ACTION**



**SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

**17 GOALS TO TRANSFORM OUR WORLD**