



2018 Report of the Joint Media Project



Credits

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Preface

This Report of the Joint Media Project of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) and the International Press Syndicate (INPS) Group is a compilation of independent and in-depth news and analyses by IDN from April 2017 to March 2018.

IDN-InDepthNews, online since 2009, is a flagship agency of the INPS Group and its partner, the Global Cooperation Council established in February 1983.

The articles in this compilation appeared on www.indepthnews.net in the main category Sustainability and on the INPS Group's thematic website 'SDGS for All – www.sdgsforall.net. These can be accessed free of charge 365 days a year.

2017-2018 is the second 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 April 2014-March 2015 and April 2015-March 2016 – 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 third year of the INPS Group's 'SDGs for All' joint media project with the SGI.

This compilation comprises 50 articles analyzing developments related to sustainable development 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 on January 2016. With these new Goals that universally apply to all, countries will mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, over meanwhile in the next thirteen years, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

The SDGs, also known as Global Goals, build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and aim to go further to end all

forms of poverty. The new 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.

While the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the 17 Goals. Countries have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the progress made in implementing the Goals, which will require quality, accessible and timely data collection. Regional follow-up and review will be based on national-level analyses and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level.

I would like to avail of this opportunity to express my gratitude to the network of our correspondents around the world for their insightful contributions, the Project Director, INPS Japan President Katsuhiro Asagiri for his valuable support in implementing the project, and the SGI for the trusted and professional partnership.

Sincere thanks also to Dr. Patrick I. Gomes, Secretary-General of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States for taking the time to write a Foreword and Mr Kazuo Ishiwatari, Executive Director, Peace and Global Issues, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), for sending his message.



Credit: CTBTO

Ramesh Jaura
Director-General of the INPS Group and Editor-in-Chief
of its flagship agency IDN

Foreword

The ACP Group of States, established by the Georgetown Agreement on 6 June 1975, consists of 79 developing countries composed of 48 from Sub-Saharan Africa, 16 from the Caribbean and 15 from the Pacific/Oceania region, accounting for a population of more than one billion persons. Within the ACP are 40 of the 48 of the world's Least Developed Countries (LDCs), 37 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and all 15 Land Locked developing Countries (LLDCs) of Africa.

These numerically significant constituents of the Global South have exercised decisive influence globally, as for instance, in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) defending the Doha Development Agenda with the principle of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT). And moreover, within the G90, the ACP's role as catalyst and advocate was widely applauded when at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Bali, Indonesia in 2013, a Trade Facilitation Agreement was adopted.

More recently, the UNFCCC of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change was forcefully enabled by the so-called "Ambition Coalition" in which the ACP's 79 and principally, the European Union's 28 Member States joined forces to achieve today's most far-reaching treaty-based agreement to save Planet Earth.

These historical global engagements by the ACP provide a substantial foundation rooted in its 43-year old Partnership agreement with the European Union, from 1975 in Lomé and then for the 20-year period from 2000 at Cotonou, Benin, for a continuing struggle in the fight against poverty.

The UN Agenda 2030 and SDGs opens a new era for a repositioned ACP Group to continue and deepen its decisive role in supporting all ACP member states to achieve the 17 SDGs as the basis for the Sustainable Development of their societies and our only home we have for humanity.

ACP's Integrated approach to SDG Implementation

The basis and *raison d'être* of the ACP is development and this implies "ending poverty in all its forms everywhere" (SDG #1). The unity and solidarity on which the ACP is founded provides a unify-




Credit: UN Photo/
Amanda Voisard

ing force in adopting measures to end poverty. While universal in ambition and intention, there are specific demands, interests and stages of development of the 79 member states of the ACP; and their organisation into Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Integration Organisations (RIOs) also warrant attention by development activities and through political dialogue and advocacy from the national to regional, continental and global levels. At each level, actions taken by programmes or projects and policy debates are grounded in the principle that poverty eradication can only be achieved by structural transformation of our economies.

This entails how the productive resources of society are organised (an agriculture sector and food security – SDG 2) with the benefit of investment capital to move up commodity or mineral value chains enabling income and jobs to be created in sectors that historically relied mainly on exports of primary products. In this way, the productive sectors are oriented to generate income for individuals and the State so that social services are improved. As a corollary, healthy lives (SDG3) are necessary for productivity in the economy and this requires inclusive and equitable quality education that

Foreword



promotes life-long learning opportunities (SDG 4). These activities are related to economic growth, full employment and decent jobs (SDG 8) from which better social services can be provided. But in these and related activities a cross-cutting theme has to be “gender equality” (SDG5).

To address specific SDGs it is helpful to align those on the social aspects of sustainable development, as for instance, SDG 2 on ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, with SDG 3 to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. None of this economic transformation can take place without the attention to the heavy investment in affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy (SDG 7) that relies on a resilient infrastructure to promote sustainable industrialisation in the driving force has to be innovation (SDG 9).

In the wider context of the political structure and governance institutions there is concern about inequality among and between countries (SDG 10) as well as reducing the drift from rural areas to the cities with the enormous degradation of cities (SDG 11) and the underlying macro-level need for peaceful and inclusive societies providing “access to justice” (SDG 16).

The above illustrations on the interdependence of social and productive sectors need to be situated in what should not be treated narrowly as “environmental” concerns but rather underpin the overarching framework “to combat climate change and its impacts” (SDG 13). The fulfilment of this is based on the endorsement and on-going implementation of the UNFCCC of the 2015 Paris Agreement by the Conference of Parties (COP 21). To this must be added sustainably use oceans and seas and terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 14 & 15).

Priorities for supportive action by the ACP Group.

The inter-related aspects of the SDGs are the important framework in which the ACP approaches its repositioned

engagement at the global level. In this regard, a limited number of specific SDGs constitute our concentrated efforts, but linkages are made to ensure complementarity and a cumulative impact of our programme interventions.

The thematic areas being addressed include Climate Change, in which a Global Climate Change Alliance II of Euro 70 million is being programmed and implementation will mainly be undertaken through the African Union and RECs/RIOs. A major aspect of this engagement is to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Related to Climate Change will be our continuing work on Oceans & Seas in which a broad spectrum of activities are ongoing on such issues as Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, marine pollution but also advancing fisheries management so that productive resources of coastal communities can be mobilised for jobs and decent work.

Gender equality must receive the full and systematic support it deserves in its own right as SDG 5 but to main streamed across all programmes in which the ACP is involved. Significant will be a new EU-UNU-ACP Spotlight Initiative on gender equality with an initial allocation of Euro 350 million from the 11th EDF.

Agenda 2030 conveys Planet, Peace, Prosperity and Partnership as ambitious goals of the SDGs. This requires a new understanding and strengthening of institutions of the State. Hence the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies serves as the central nucleus from which ACP’s activities enable access to justice, transparency and accountability in all institutions - global, continental, regional and national- through capacity-building in which human resource capacities and appropriate organisational structures enable the structural transformation of societies. This is indispensable for sustainable development to be realised. Herein lies the comparative advantage and value-addition of the ACP Group of States with 43 years of praxis in South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

Dr. Patrick I. Gomes, Secretary-General of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP)

Message



The joint media project SDGs for All with the International Press Syndicate (INPS) has now reached its third year. We would like to convey our heartfelt appreciation to INPS for promoting this project.

Recently, news about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become more frequent in the media and we are pleased that it is permeating

throughout society considerably more than the Millennium Development Goals.

We are aware that there are unpredictable issues such as climate change that remain in order to achieve the SDGs. However, if we look back on humanity's history, we have been able to overcome numerous situations through facing them head-on while uniting our conscience and wisdom. In the same way, with regard to the SDGs, we have conviction that humanity will be able to surmount this wall and open a bright future.

The SGI is taking action toward building a sustainable world based on Buddhist principles. From that standpoint, it is our hope that international society will not view the SDGs merely as a numerical goal but, rather, as the project title "SDGs for All" states, will make efforts to ensure that everyone on Earth can feel happiness.

Related to this, we carried an interesting article in our organ publication the other day by Masaki Inaba, the executive director of the Japan Civil Society Network on SDGs.

Mr. Inaba pointed out that the principle governing people's behavior within a capitalist economy is the desire to "maximize assets" and that such desire has led to the

advancement of extreme developments that have occasionally overlooked the environment or human rights. The current debate over the SDGs makes this desire self-evident, however faith or religion has the role of putting a stop to this increasing desire. In light of continuing developments in the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence, Mr. Inaba spoke about his expectation that the role of faith and religion would be to spread philosophical propositions regarding the human being.

In today's international society, the issue of the division of society and discrimination, which is not addressed directly by the SDGs, is getting worse. In this sense, we feel now is the time to humbly reflect on the way human beings and society are at present and to work toward ensuring the happiness and security of all humanity through joint efforts to achieve the SDGs.

This year marks the 70th anniversary since the announcement of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In commemoration of the 70th anniversary, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda issued a peace proposal in January this year. In it he introduced the following passage on the civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "It goes without saying that Dr. King regarded the adoption of new laws that would pave the way for an equal and just society as a paramount struggle that had to be won . . . And yet Dr. King set his sights even higher—he sought to completely root out prejudice and resentment and aim for what Dr. Harding described as "a new America—an America where blacks and whites, as well as people of all colors, could come together to find common ground for the common good."

One could say that the SDGs are precisely a "common ground." Fortunately, humanity has been able to create this foundation in the SDGs themselves, and it is our great hope that our joint media project together with INPS can strengthen this foundation and contribute to the happiness of all humanity.

Kazuo Ishiwatari, Executive Director,
Peace and Global issues, Soka Gakkai International (SGI)

Table of Contents

Women Farmers in Africa Fight Impact of Climate Change by Ronald Joshua	...9
Why Eye Care is Important – for Bangladesh and Other Countries by Naimul Haq	...11
Switzerland Joins Sustainable Development Solutions Network by Jaya Ramachandran	...13
Experts Stress Acceptance of Headscarf in Abrahamic Faiths by Jaya Ramachandran	...15
Sustainable Livelihoods Behind Street Vending in Thailand by Kalinga Seneviratne	...17
UN Calls for Keeping the Promises to the World’s Poorest by Ramesh Jaura	...19
‘Smart Farms’ Making Thai Agriculture Sufficient and Sustainable by Kalinga Seneviratne	...21
Women and Water Inseparable for Sustainable Development by Krista Price	...23
Bodies as Battlefields – Dangers Women Face During Conflicts by Julia Zimmerman	...25
Thai Doctor Creating Multi-Faceted Approach to Sustainable Development by Kalinga Seneviratne	...27
Tanzania Pushing Gender Empowerment Despite Hurdles by Kizito Makoye	...29
UN Expert Reveals Shocking Facts about Poverty in the U.S. by J C Suresh	...32
The Price of Forest Degradation and Biodiversity Loss for Livelihoods by Fabíola Ortiz	...35
U.S. Politics Increasingly Governed by Policy of Unilateralism by Rodney Reynolds	...37
Global Upturn Offers Prospects For Sustainable Growth by J Nastranis	...40
One Planet Summit Spotlights Funding to Fight Climate Change by A.D. McKenzie	...42
The Global Fund To Fight AIDS Asked to Change Criteria Discriminating Poor Countries by J C Suresh	...45
COP23 Finally Provides a Platform for Indigenous People on Climate Talks by Stella Paul	...47
Further, Faster, Together On Climate - From Bonn To Katowice by Ramesh Jaura	...50
Vatican Conference Underlines Nexus Between Sustainable Development and Nuclear Weapons Ban by Ramesh Jaura	...54
Data, Evidence Take Centre Stage at Adolescent Health Congress by Stella Paul	...58
Traditional Knowledge and Education Major Themes at Arctic Circle Assembly by Lowana Veal	...60
Cuban Youth Mastering the Art of Economic Improvisation by Julia Rainer	...62
UN Chief Opts for Preventive Diplomacy Over Post-Conflict Peacekeeping by Shanta Roy	...65
Giving Visibility – and Land Rights – to the Indigenous by Fabíola Ortiz	...68
Orphans of Conflict in DR Congo Learning a Brazilian Martial Art to Overcome Pain by Fabíola Ortiz	...70

Table of Contents

Myanmar May be Able To Learn From Sri Lanka To Resolve the “Bengali” Problem by Jayasri Priyalal	...72
Making the 3rd Industrial Development Decade for Africa a Reality with Actions on the Ground by J Nastranis	...75
Over 110 Countries Commit to Halt Land Degradation by Jaya Ramachandran	...77
Safe Piped Water Remains a Luxury Across Africa by Jeffrey Moyo	...79
Poverty Swoops on Southern Africa’s Urban Dwellers by Jeffrey Moyo	...81
Environmental Risks Behind Peace Accords in Colombia by Fabíola Ortiz	...83
Women Bear the Brunt of Violence in Papua New Guinea by Neena Bhandari	...85
Clean Energy Coming to Kenya’s Kakuma Refugee Camp by Justus Wanzala	...88
Inter-Religious Coalition Aims For Peace in the Middle East by Joan Erakit	...90
Education Key to Promoting Sustainable Development by Shanta Rao	...93
Nordic States Support Sustainable Development Goals by Lowana Veal	...95
Historic UN Conference Vows to Restore Ocean Health by J Nastranis	...97
Where Forced Child Pregnancy is Not Fiction by Phil Harris	...99
Oceans in Crisis Around Africa by Jeffrey Moyo	...101
Aboriginal Australians Press For Constitutional Recognition by Kalinga Seneviratne	...103
People Must Not Be Ignored in Disaster Risk Reduction Planning by Ek Soria	...105
Funding Needs for UN’s 2030 Development Agenda Skyrocket – to Trillions of Dollars by Shanta Rao	...107
The World’s Poorest and Most Vulnerable Want Climate Action by Ramesh Jaura	...110
Strengthening the UN and its Creative Evolution into the Future Interview with Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Dr. Daisaku Ikeda	...112
UN Peacekeeping Missions Face Threats of Cuts – and Extinction by Shanta Rao	...117
Why Spending 30 Dollars a Year on Each Adolescent Is Essential by J Nastranis	...120
Sport as a Tool for Achieving SDGs by Desmond Brown	...122
Drought Forcing Sri Lanka’s Tea Producers to Seek Greener Pastures by Stella Paul	...124
U.S. Reasoning Behind Cutting Funds to UNFPA Challenged by J Nastranis	...126

Women Farmers in Africa Fight Impact of Climate Change

By Ronald Joshua



NEW YORK | BAMAKO (IDN) – Fatou Dembele is a farmer in landlocked Mali, where half of the population engaged in agriculture are women. Agriculture is a key sector to lift women out of poverty. But the increasing degradation of land and natural resources caused by climate change is making women more vulnerable.

Therefore when Dembele's plants first started dying, she thought the plot of land was ruined, and her livelihood was at risk. "We thought the land was sick. We didn't know that there were live parasites that attacked the roots of the plants and could kill them," says Dembele.

The increased number of parasites, because of rising temperatures and humidity, is just one of the many side effects of climate change Dembele and other women farmers are faced with.

To combat the negative impact of climate change on women's livelihoods, a new UN Women programme known as Agriculture Femmes et Développement Durable (AgriFed), implemented by the local non-governmental organization Groupe d'Animation Action au Sahel (GAAS) Mali, is helping local producers adapt to these new challenges.

The programme works with farmers to modernize their techniques, enables their access to information on latest advances in agriculture and increases the value of their products by improving their conservation methods.

"The effects of climate change are not sparing Mali, and are hitting this country hard, an additional challenge in an extremely fragile security context in the Sahel region," Maxime Houinato, UN Women Country Representative in Mali, said at a side event

co-organized by UN Women on March 14 at the 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62).

“And yet, Mali, although a low contributor to the global emission of greenhouse gases, is no less committed to the race to adapt to the effects of climate change,” she added.

To restore Dembele’s production, the programme taught her how to use locally available biopesticides to eliminate the parasites. “Thank goodness, we learned that there are local plants whose extracts can fight this disease,” says Dembele.

AgriFed started its activities in 2017 in the Segou region, over 200 kilometres northeast of Bamako, the capital of Mali. Training on sustainable agriculture techniques reached 247 women and 66 men. The training helped farmers improve water usage, crop scheduling, pesticide and fertilizer use, and cultivation techniques.

In the towns of Boidié and Sécoro, and Cercle de Tominan, women have improved and increased production of shallots thanks to the training. But during harvest, it became clear that the women needed to learn how to conserve their produce better.

“We grow shallots and onions because of their long shelf-life, but we did not know conservation techniques [before],” explained Hayèrè Keita, a shallot producer and seller in Sécoro. “Following our traditional methods, the rates of loss can be very high.”

UN Women supported further training sessions that showed the farmers how to preserve products like shallots, onions and potatoes. Around 110 women producers have managed to increase their revenues using these modern production and preservation techniques.

“I have been growing vegetables and fruits for 20 years, but I only knew the traditional way of doing it,” says Alphonsine Dembele, another farmer.

“AgriFeD taught us to diversify the products we grow, with the introduction of the potatoes, tomatoes and peppers. They not only bring additional income, but also help improve nutrition at home and reduce malnourishment in our children. says Dembele, the other farmer.

She adds: “It has had a positive influence on social cohesion, because women [from different ethnic communities] now meet and

have dialogues during the training sessions in the fields.”

The programme, funded by the Government of Luxembourg, will run for five years and is expected to be replicated in other areas of the country.

The programme was launched on December 12, 2017 with a view to building the resilience of a million women and youth in the Sahel to climate impacts through smart agriculture at the One Planet Summit. The launch coincided with a gathering of world leaders in the French capital to mark the anniversary of the landmark Paris Climate Change Agreement.

The One Planet Summit, co-hosted by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and the President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, aimed at supporting the formal UN process on climate action as nations look to raise climate ambition in the run up to 2020.

The initiative is a programme of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) and the G5 Secretariat. The G5 Sahel, the institutional framework for development coordination among the five countries in the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – has identified combatting climate change and environmental degradation, along with their effects on rural populations, as a priority.

At the national level, governments are working on adaptation strategies; the new initiative is designed to support those efforts. UN Women presented the programme, which is among some 12 showcased at the Summit, on behalf of the UN system. [IDN-In-DepthNews – 27 March 2018]

Image: Members of the women’s cooperative use climate-resilient organic compost and biopesticides in their farm |

Credit: UN Women

Why Eye Care is Important – for Bangladesh and Other Countries

By Naimul Haq

DHAKA (IDN) – John Bob Ranck, also known as Bob, Chief Executive Officer and President at Orbis International, recently visited Bangladesh on a special mission. He travelled to some of the hospitals where Orbis as a partner has been supporting Bangladesh's efforts in addressing avoidable blindness.

Bob, a retired United States Air Force Brigadier General, came to Bangladesh a few weeks after the memorable visit of the teaching hospital or better known as the Flying Eye Hospital's (FEH) training programme in Bangladesh.

Bob who joined Orbis International on February 29, 2016 spoke to Naimul Haq, IDN-INPS Correspondent in Bangladesh, about the needs of and support for eye health in the South Asian country and shared his experiences of addressing problems of avoidable blindness, especially childhood blindness.

Bob said: "For every dollar you put in for sight restoration you get 4 dollars back." Recent studies of retiring people in a particular industry who discontinued working because they were not able to focus on objects properly, showed that when they were equipped with spectacles they were able to continue working for at least another ten to fifteen years.

He added: "How many businesses would love to have their most skilled workers stay on their jobs for another decade? But we

don't think about that because it doesn't make headlines. Extending productivity of adults this way could provide great business opportunities and hence help lift people out of poverty. Besides, adults retained in the workforce are in the government's interest. It is a business case and I don't think we put that business case out in front of the people."

"One of the best things that I can do is to support Orbis Bangladesh in the development of new partners and let them know that Orbis International is behind the efforts and behind what they want to do," said Bob. For a population of 160 million people in Bangladesh there are only 34 pediatric ophthalmologists. In the United States there is one pediatric ophthalmologist for every 400,000 people. "So, it's two and half per million. And that's what our newest efforts are about."

"We are going to try and train more pediatric ophthalmologists and anesthesiologists who can also help in the efforts because there is such an incredible need and children deserve a chance. They won't get a chance unless they have eye care. And frankly, parents of a visually impaired child understand the difficulties of their child when they see him struggling in school to read what is on the blackboard, or who cannot play or who is clumsy. By starting to help the efforts of Orbis Bangladesh we can help in an area where there is a huge

deficit."

"What I can do as the chief of the organization from outside is to look at the Orbis programmes around the world." Currently the organization is implementing 56 programmes in 18 countries, "and perhaps we could take lessons from other countries where similar but very effective programmes are in progress and we could collaborate to shape things differently that are valuable here in Bangladesh."

"I could facilitate collaboration that could lead to enhancing skills of stakeholders here in Bangladesh by learning from other countries," Bob said. For instance, the development of a new application for an eye care hospital in, say for instance, in China and sharing the same in Bangladesh could perhaps greatly help doctors or other staff members. So I can help in this way by learning from global community where Orbis works.

Bob, also a pilot having over 30 years of experience as a strategist and team leader, talked about how to do good and achieving the good things. He said that people feel good to give but what is the result of that giving? "So if you give to an organization that is building a population of eye care professionals so that more and more people get care – in fact, you are changing society, families and communities – it is a lasting change."

He referred to Philanthropy Age which

has a motto of “making every dollar count” and said: “Philanthropy Age community was born with the philosophy of Zakat (followed in Islam religion). The organization believes in not just giving but ensuring effective use of funds. Philanthropy Age has a partnership with Orbis now funding a three-year training programme and we are building a simulation centre so that doctors can get hands on training without having to touch a patient in the basic skills, much like a pilot where there are opportunities for perfection through trial and error without actually harming anyone.”

He added: “We want to help Bangladesh access such technology in which doctors should be able to practice simulation surgeries so that a doctor does not learn lessons practicing on a child’s eye. The first time you operate on a child you want to be perfect. And so they are doing wonderful to see what they are focused on.”

“The FEH is a state of the art – it’s got the latest machines, new hospital airflow technology to prevent infections, latest practice in how you walk through doors that prevents infection and many more latest technologies. We can orient local doctors on what is the next state of the art technology for them,” said Bob.

“Sometimes it’s not helpful to go from what you do now to state of the art technology because the jump is often too big. We can help doctors go from state of the art to the next state that is useful. We can also advise doctors on what new technology they should be looking for. And so helping them in this manner is more valuable than just saying here is the state of the art technology.”

“The reason I am saying this is that sometimes state of the art technology comes with bill for consumables and support that’s not affordable. And so you want to be able to do state of the possible and consumables that are long lasting. What we do is we bring in biomedical technicians and people who are experienced in repairing machines.”

Bob added: “We don’t want to go back to a country where a piece of equipment is broken and nobody is able to repair it. We want to ensure that they can maintain the equipment and keep it running optimally. So I am in favour of a sustainable development – bring capabilities that are long lasting, that would help people in the long run.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 March 2018]



Image: John Bob Ranck, Chief Executive Officer and President at Orbis International | Credit: Naimul Haq/IDN-INPS

Switzerland Joins Sustainable Development Solutions Network

By Jaya Ramachandran

BERN (IDN) – The global Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) has launched its 25th network, SDSN Switzerland, co-hosted by the Centre for Development and Environment at the University of Bern and BIOVISION Foundation, foundation for ecological development, with a view to shaping multi-stakeholder dialogue, fostering sustainable development solutions, and advising decision-makers on the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the Paris Climate Agreement.

SDSN Switzerland was officially launched on February 15 with a conference under the banner ‘Where Society, Science and Politics Create Solutions.’ The network claims to have 19 members from key institutions around Switzerland who are committed to implementing SDGs at the local level.

The global SDSN was launched in 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. It mobilizes global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical solutions favorable to sustainable development. SDSN collaborates with UN agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector and civil society. A Leadership Council of approximately 100 global leaders on sustainable development acts as the board of SDSN.

Spanning six continents, the SDSN Networks Programme currently draws upon the knowledge and educational capacity of

over 700 member institutions, most of them universities, organized around 25 National and Regional Centres. National and Regional SDSNs develop long-term transformation pathways for sustainable development, promote education around the 2030 Agenda, and launch initiatives at the local level.

According to organizers, the SDSN Switzerland Launch Conference brought together around 250 representatives and decision-makers from science and research, think tanks, government, civil society, business and international bodies to discuss how to effectively implement these international sustainability agreements in Switzerland and beyond.

The Conference featured plenary sessions on various topics, including: SDSN as a tool to build bridges and create solutions; making Switzerland sustainable; and Switzerland’s opportunities and responsibilities for a sustainable world. Nine parallel breakout sessions were held in innovative formats, including “collective story harvesting,” to exchange experiences and ideas.

The 2030 Agenda also calls on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), to carry out voluntary, state-led national reviews to provide a platform for partnerships.

Rio+20 called for the HLPF in 2012, in



its outcome document, ‘The Future We Want.’ This universal intergovernmental high-level political forum replaces the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Since 2012, the HLPF has held five annual meetings. The fifth session, in July 2017, addressed the theme of ‘Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world.’ It carried out thematic reviews, reviewed the implementation of several SDGs, and also adopted a Ministerial Declaration.

Katrin Muff of the Business School Lausanne facilitated the Conference. She emphasized that SDSN Switzerland is not just another new initiative, but rather a network that will enable existing initiatives to scale and speed up, and make new connections.

Muff introduced SDSN Switzerland Co-Chairs Océane Dayer, Swiss Youth for Climate, and Urs Wiesmann, University of Bern. Highlighting the role of peace and justice in achieving “a healthy planet,”

Dayer said meaningful sustainability is not a question of fixing issues one by one, but that a sustainable world demands interdisciplinary work and cooperation.

Wiesmann outlined the history of Switzerland's sustainability agenda and commitment to the SDGs. He drew attention to the interrelationships among the SDGs, and identified the challenge of addressing them in concert, taking into account the social dimensions.

He said sustainability cannot be achieved within country boundaries, but needs to be a global effort, and called for a move from sectoral sustainability policy to a broad-based movement for sustainability involving all actors, including government and civil society.

He stressed the important role of promising initiatives that bring together different stakeholders and forms of knowledge.

Dayer said the conference aims to: bring together unlikely allies; foster transformative solutions; and advise makers.

Guido Schmidt-Traub, SDSN Global, introduced SDSN, noting serious sustainability challenges around the world. He highlighted that the network aims to promote sustainable development through knowledge and to propose solutions to nudge policy-makers.

Welcoming SDSN Switzerland to the global network, he encouraged the Swiss network to help the country better take on its international responsibility by improving education and training, and providing pathways for the sustainability transition,

including practical solutions on data.

Bertrand Piccard, explorer and initiator of the Solar Impulse Foundation, which performed the first solar-powered flight around the world, gave a keynote address. Piccard said that upon completion of this flight, he realized that “the rest of the world lives in the past.” He identified a “tremendous gap” between the people fighting for environmental protection and those who focus on economy and profit.

Noting the need to speak the language of industry and politics, Piccard said solutions already exist that can help to halve CO2 emissions from transport, construction and industry, and at the same time create jobs and make profits. He noted that the way forward is to create the biggest market for industry, namely by replacing out-dated and inefficient technologies.

Piccard highlighted the strength of the technology pull, but felt that the current legal framework is “completely out-dated.” He suggested fixing this at the government level, starting with information, including the fact that if all actual costs are included, sustainable electricity is already cheaper than conventional electricity.

Piccard also drew attention to ‘#1000solutions,’ a Solar Impulse initiative that aims to identify 1000 solutions that protect the environment in a profitable way. He said: “Even for climate change deniers and people who have no compassion for the environment, there are only advantages in sustainability.”

Sibyl Anwander from the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment shared her ex-

perience in Haiti 30 years ago, noting that inefficient political systems can lead to bad education and poverty, which in turn cause serious environmental concerns. Citing the example of the “Go for Impact” platform, she highlighted the need to use a holistic approach and promote innovations that address the global challenge.

Nicola Blum from ETH Zürich outlined her research and entrepreneur experiences with regard to promoting sustainable development. She underscored the need for collaboration among different stakeholders in order to bring solutions to society that are conducive to sustainability.

In the ensuing panel discussion, Piccard said it is naïve to think that a group of people with good intentions can change the world, since “these are not the people who run the world.” He noted that the people who run the world are billionaires who own businesses and politicians who want to be re-elected. Blum responded that this underlines the importance of educating future world leaders. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 February 2018]

Image: (Left to Right) Urs Wiesmann, Co-Chair of SDSN Switzerland; Katrin Muff, Conference Facilitator; Bertrand Piccard, Solar Impulse Foundation; Jacques Dubochet, University of Lausanne; Océane Dayer, Co-Chair of SDSN Switzerland; Michael Bergöö, Acting Managing Director of SDSN Switzerland. Credit: Peter Lüthi, Biovision

Experts Stress Acceptance of Headscarf in Abrahamic Faiths

By Jaya Ramachandran

GENEVA (IDN) – The headscarf that sparks heated debates in Europe is a source of commonality between the three main Abrahamic religions Islam, Christianity and Judaism, according to experts who participated in a debate at the United Nations office in Geneva.

The event on February 23 focused on: Veiling/Unveiling: The Headscarf in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue (Geneva Centre) and the Permanent Mission of Algeria to the UN in Geneva organized the discussion in the run-up to the 37th regular session of the UN Human Rights Council scheduled for February 26 to March 23, 2018.

The Geneva Centre's Executive Director Ambassador Idriss Jazairy who moderated the event – accompanied by an exhibition related to the theme – said it was intended to address stereotypical views on the use of the veil and “reveal the headscarf as a connecting thread and “an element of convergence” in Christianity, Islam and Judaism.”

He added: “The headscarf represents commonality, rather than discord; it should connect and build bridges between cultures, rather than divide. It has played an important role in defining identities in all three Abrahamic religions.”

The use of the so-called ‘veil’ must not become the subject of politicization and deny women their personal freedom of choice regarding the use of the headscarf. He said that “denying women their right to wear or not to wear the headscarf” violates Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

“Imposing it on women or prohibiting it by law represent a violation of their basic rights. The only way to defend women's rights and to promote the advancement of their status is to respect their right to choose,” said the Geneva Centre's Executive Director.

The Deputy Permanent Representative of Algeria, Toufik Djouama, said numerous groups that believe in the “clash of civilizations” are cultivating a “degrading image about the Islamic head-

scarf.” The use of the veil, he said, is “a personal choice” taken by Muslim women.

Djouama observed that promoting “dialogue, mutual understanding, respect of human rights and diversity” must remain key priorities for governments, civil society organizations and academia. The freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in public as stipulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights must allow women to decide themselves whether to wear or not to wear the headscarf, he said.

Elisabeth Reichen-Amsler, Director of Church and Society section within the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Neuchâtel Canton (EREN) remarked that the use of the headscarf couldn't be considered as solely belonging to Islam as often stated in public discourse. In fact, its roots can be traced back to ancient cultures in Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and the birth of Christianity. “The obligation for married women to wear the headscarf was already mentioned in an ancient law written in 1120 B.C. by an Assyrian king,” Reichen-Amsler said.

In the letter of Paul of Tarsus to the Corinthians in Genesis 2:21, she added, women were obliged to wear the headscarf. This obligation lasted for approximately 1900 years in Christianity. It was only during the 1960s that women were no longer obliged to wear the headscarf for religious purposes. This explains the different interpretations of Islam, Judaism and Christianity regarding the use of the headscarf.

Dr. Malika Hamidi, author of the book “Muslim feminism – why not?” highlighted that feminist and secular movements in France had objected to the wearing of Islamic headscarves by Muslim women as it allegedly violated the right to their liberty and dignity. However, numerous women in political and secular movements have maintained that there is “no contradiction between the headscarf and freedom” and “between the dignity and respectability of women.”

Feminist movements in French-speaking Europe, she said, re-



main “shaken” by the fact that some Muslim women hold the view that the headscarf has “liberated them in their relationship with men and European societies.” She added: “The fact that women are wearing headscarves, within the limits determined by Islam may allow them to gain more respect but represents a vector of social, political and cultural participation which is strongly questioned in the West.”

Dr. Valérie Rhein, an expert on theology holding a PhD in Judaism at the Institute of Jewish Studies, University of Bern, stated that the use of the headscarf is an ancient tradition of Judaism. It was a custom, she said, “for a Jewish bride to veil her face before the marriage ceremony”. This practice is mentioned in Genesis 24

of the Bible which describes the first encounter between Isaac and Rebekah.

She added that the Talmudic law, rooted in the concept of Zniut/ Modesty, also required women to cover their hair after marriage as it symbolizes belonging to “observant Judaism” and of being married. It was also incumbent on men to wear a headgear (kippah) as it symbolises a “sign of respect” and a “relationship with God.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 23 February 2018]

Image: Panel debate about Veiling/Unveiling at UN Office in Geneva

Sustainable Livelihoods Behind Street Vending in Thailand

By Kalinga Seneviratne



KHAOSAN, Bangkok (IDN) – When people talk about sustainable development there is rarely any mention of the many street vendors who make a living on streets in Thailand, as across the rest of Asia.

Even attempts to stop them doing business – like the unsuccessful year-long attempt by the governor of Bangkok to clean the city's streets of street vendors – passes unnoticed in the media.

“Street vending tends to attract tourists to Bangkok, it is part of Thai lifestyle and tourists want to experience that,” says Pattama Vilailert, a tourism consultant. “Some tourists come to Thailand (especially) to taste reasonable street food.”

Vilailert notes that after visiting Bangkok, many Chinese tourists, for example, post photos of a street food stall on social media that go viral and others will then come to eat, take a photo and post it on the same social media. “It is part of their travel accomplishment,” she argues. Last year, a staggering 10 million Chinese visited Thailand.

In April last year, a month after Bangkok was named as the finest street food destination in the world by CNN, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) announced that it was going to rid

Bangkok's pavements of street vendors in the interest of cleanliness, safety and order.

Wanlop Suwandee, chief adviser to Bangkok's governor, said then that “street vendors have seized the pavement space for too long and we already provide them with space to sell food and other products legally in the market, so there will be no let-up in this operation.”

In June last year, representatives of street vendors from Bangkok's 50 districts submitted a letter to Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha asking that they be allowed to continue trading on the streets because it was their livelihood. It was reported by the Nation news group that the vendors described the measures by the government and the BMA to confine Bangkok's street vendors to designated areas and markets as too harsh.

One of the areas that was exempt from the ban was the backpacker tourist haven of Khaosan, a historic area bordering the Chao Praya river. For decades this area has been a magnet for budget travellers with its cheap hostels and guesthouses ... and street vendors.

Today, not only Westerners but also thousands of Asian travellers are attracted to its street vending culture, creating a carnival-like atmosphere after sunset, with streets lined by the folding tables and chairs of food stalls, virtually closing thoroughfare to traffic. Besides the many neighbourhood hotels and pubs that also set out their own folding tables and chairs on the street, numerous ‘tent’ stalls are put up on the pavements selling objects like clothes, shoes, bags and souvenirs, among others.

Over the years, studies have shown that street vending is a major livelihood for many Thais with a low level of education and it has thus become a major source of income for urban poor families, some of which have migrated from the villages.

Here in Khaosan, vendors are said to pay monthly fees to someone, be it rent to the land or shop owner where they sell their food, bribes to police or fees to informal neighbourhood organisations.

However, Nut, a food vendor in her 40s who has been selling noodles from her mobile cart here for many years, told IDN that mobile stalls do not pay the police. “If I have a stationary shop I have to pay” she told IDN, adding, “I have a family in Bangkok to feed from what I earn from this.” But, a juice seller who gave his name as Tot complained, “I have to pay money every day to do business. No money, police arrest me. They come every day to take money.”

One of the street food vendors, whom one of his Burmese employees told IDN is a Cambodian, said that he runs his stall 24 hours a day. “I supervise at night. My sister comes in the morning,” he explained, refusing to give his name. He was not willing to say if he has to pay the police but he did indicate that he has to pay “someone” to operate here.

He employs about eight young workers – men and women – from Myanmar. He has his kitchen and the tables and chairs for his customers under five tents. All of these are taken out and stored in the back of a pick-up truck on Monday morning and brought back out on Tuesday evening, because street stalls are not allowed to operate on Mondays.

Casually talking to street vendors, IDN noted that most of the vendors who sell non-food items like clothes, shoes and bags are from Myanmar, some of Nepali origin. Most seem to be in their 20s and 30s. They were unwilling to give their names. A Burmese woman in her 30s selling bags said that her “boss” pays her 350 Bhat (about 10 dollars) a day plus a two percent commission on every 1,000 Bhat of sales.

A 28-year-old man who gave his name as Kumar said that he is of Nepali origin but a Myanmar citizen from Mandalay. “We come getting the passport chopped (at the border) and work here. We’re legally here,” he insisted. “No jobs in Mandalay. We cannot starve there. I get about 15,000 Bhat (about 425 dollars) a month from boss. This is not my shop. Boss pay the police for me to have shop here ... not me.”

In January it was reported that the Thai authorities had arrested over 1,600 illegal migrants, mainly from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos who were working as street vendors or in restaurants. Under

a new law, they could be sentenced to five years in prison or fined up to 100,000 Bhat (about 2,800 dollars), and employers of illegal migrants also face hefty fines.

A Thai social worker, who has worked with Myanmar refugees for over two decades, but did not want to be named, told IDN that there are about four million Myanmar people working in Thailand and only about 200,000 have legal status to work here. “They pay agents in border areas to get work permits ... Thai brokers makes thousands of Bhat from each of them,” she explained.

“As long as they can speak Thai they are tolerated and Thais don’t care” she added. “These migrants come from a culture where almost everything is done illegally so they don’t see anything wrong in getting things done by paying someone.”

She did not see a problem for the Thai street vendors (who usually operate food stalls) in terms of sustainable incomes for themselves from street trading.

In fact, she noted, these migrant workers may contribute towards making street vending more profitable and sustainable for the locals because “undocumented migrants can’t go for higher paid jobs ... so they would work for bosses to run their street shops or work as kitchen hands.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 15 February 2018]

*Image: Bangkok’s Khaosan area at night, with street vendors |
Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne/IDN-INPS*

UN Calls for Keeping the Promises to the World's Poorest

By Ramesh Jaura

BERLIN | GENEVA (IDN) – Forty-seven countries, already the world's most disadvantaged, will fall short of achieving sustainable development goals set by the United Nations in its 2030 Agenda unless urgent action is taken, a new study has warned.

Recognised as least developed countries (LDCs) in UN jargon, the 47 are known to be in need of special attention from the international community. They are mostly situated in Africa South of the Sahara. Forty of the LDCs belong, among others, to the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of 79 States.

The study by the Geneva-based UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) highlights that LDC growth averaged 5 percent in 2017 and will reach 5.4 percent in 2018, below the 7 percent growth envisaged by Target One of Sustainable Development Goal 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

In 2017, only five LDCs achieved economic growth of 7 percent or higher. The ACP states Ethiopia and Djibouti recorded 8.5 percent and 7 percent respectively. Nepal achieved 7.5 percent growth, Myanmar 7.2 percent, and Bangladesh at 7.1 percent

With this in view, Paul Akiwumi, Director of UNCTAD's Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes, has called for the international community to "strengthen its support to LDCs in line with the commitment to leave no one behind."

"With the global economic recovery remaining tepid, development partners face constraints in extending support to LDCs to help them meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Inequalities between the LDCs and other developing countries risk widening," he said.

The UNCTAD analysis contends that too many LDCs remain dependent on primary commodity exports.

While international prices for most primary commodity categories have trended upwards since late 2016, this modest recovery barely made a dent to the significant drop experienced since 2011, particularly in the cases of crude petroleum and minerals, ores and

metals, the UNCTAD analysis notes.

In 2017, LDCs as a group were projected to register a current account deficit of \$50 billion, the second-highest deficit posted so far, at least in nominal terms. In contrast, non-LDC developing countries registered current account surpluses, so did developing countries as a whole and developed countries.

Projections for 2018 suggest that the current account deficits of the LDCs would grow further, making worse possible balance-of-payments weaknesses.

Only a handful of LDCs, according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund, recorded current account surpluses in 2017, including two recipients of relatively large amounts of aid – Afghanistan and South Sudan – as well as two ACP countries, Eritrea and Guinea Bissau.

All other LDCs recorded current account deficits of varying sizes, ranging from less than one percentage point of GDP – Bangladesh and Nepal – to more than 25 per cent in Bhutan as ACP's Guinea, Liberia, Mozambique, and Tuvalu.

Special foreign aid commitments for LDCs amounted to \$43.2 billion, representing only an estimated 27 per cent of net aid to all developing countries – a 0.5 percent increase in aid in real terms year-on-year.

This trend supports fears of a levelling-off of aid to LDCs in the wake of the global recession. In 2016, only a handful of donor countries appear to have met the commitments under Target Two of Sustainable Development Goal 17, notes the UNCTAD analysis.

"This analysis signals a clarion call for action," Akiwumi said. "The international community needs to pay increased attention to their commitments toward LDCs."

The analysis was presented to UNCTAD member States at a meeting of its governing body in Geneva, Switzerland, on February 5. Among other trends highlighted in the UNCTAD analysis are:

- LDCs will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals un-

less they speed up wholesale restructuring of their economies.

- The pace of LDCs structural transformation remains sluggish, with many of them falling short of the inclusive and sustainable industrialization envisaged in Target 2 of Sustainable Development Goal 9 on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation.

- Between 2006 and 2016 real manufacturing value added increased in nearly all LDCs although in most countries this was accompanied by a relative decline in the manufacturing share of total value added, pointing to a widespread risk of premature de-industrialization among LDCs.

- In 2016 LDCs accounted for barely 0.92 per cent of global exports; roughly the same level as in 2007.

- LDCs' combined trade deficit has been widening significantly in the wake of the financial crisis, rising from \$45 billion in 2009 to \$98 billion in 2016, pointing to the association between the weak development of domestic productive capacities and structural deficits in the trade balance.

- Aid to LDCs remains far below the target of 0.15–0.20 percent of donor countries gross national income agreed in 1981.

- In 2016, only a handful of donor countries appear to have met the commitments under target 2 of Sustainable Development Goal 17.

- Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom provided more than 0.20 per cent of their own gross national income to LDCs, while the Netherlands met the 0.15 per cent threshold.

- Aid tends to be skewed towards a relatively small pool of LDCs, with the top-ten recipients – which often include countries affected by humanitarian emergencies and conflict – accounting for roughly half of total disbursements to the group.

- Recent data suggests that levels of external indebtedness have been surging across LDCs, both in terms of stocks (relative to gross national income), and – even more so – in terms of burden of debt services.

- Resources sent by individuals to LDCs as a group (remittances) totalled \$36.9 billion in 2017, down by 2.6 per cent compared to



the peak of \$37.9 billion in 2016.

- In absolute terms, the largest recipients of remittances among LDCs included Bangladesh (\$13.6 billion in 2016), Nepal (\$6.6 billion), Yemen (\$3.4 billion), Haiti (\$2.4 billion), Senegal (\$2 billion) and Uganda (\$1 billion).

- In 2016, remittances accounted for as much as 31 per cent of GDP in Nepal, 29 per cent in Haiti, 26 per cent in Liberia, 22 per cent in the Gambia, 21 per cent in the Comoros, 15 per cent in Lesotho, and they exceeded 10 per cent of GDP in Senegal, Yemen, and Tuvalu. [IDN-InDepthNews – 07 February 2018]

Image: Olivia Nankindu, 27, surveys the fruits of her labor in the waning afternoon sunlight on her farm near Kyotera, Uganda | Credit: Stephan Gladieu/World Bank

'Smart Farms' Making Thai Agriculture Sufficient and Sustainable

By Kalinga Seneviratne

CHANTHABURI, Thailand (IDN) – Thai farmers are going back to basics under a “Smart Farms” formula supported by modern information communication technology (ICT) integrated into a Buddhist concept of ‘sufficiency economy’ to make the kingdom’s lifblood – agriculture and its small-scale farmers – sustainable into the foreseeable future.

“Some farmers use chemical fertiliser to get more fruits [from their trees] (but) their trunks die in three to five years. We use organic fertiliser here and our trunks will last for 30 years” said farmer Sittipong Yanaso, speaking to IDN at his lush multi-cropping durian plantation here.

“We get enough dry leaves for our fertiliser,” he added, pointing to the green mountains surrounding his plantation. Showing the banana plants growing in between his durian trees, he explained that the trunks are used after harvesting the fruits, a technique that has been handed down from ancestors.

Sittipong’s durian plantation also has banana, papaya, rabuttan, mangostean, pepper, coconut and longon plants, which serve to give him an income in between his durian harvests. Recently he has planted some coffee and has a small area of rubber trees that adds to his income. He has also planted bamboo as wind-breakers and the tall bamboo tree trunks provide him material as support for banana trees (when fruits bloom) as well as for picking fruits.

“This is a very mindful orchard,” argues Professor Kamolrat Intaratat, Director of the Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM), whose organisation has assisted Sittipong in adopting ICTs to improve his knowledge of organic farming and marketing.

“The philosophy of CCDKM is that we work with conceptual base integration and a partnership model, working with marginal people,” explained Kamolrat, after accompanying IDN on a tour of the farm. “Most important is to create income generating projects... the majority of Thais are small farmers, so we look at how to use ICT to facilitate smart farming in Thailand.”



Kamolrat went on to explain that farmers are trained in ICT literacy and how to access information. “After that we train how to analyse this information (to know) the price of the farm product, and they gain access to many farm pricing [models] ... from the government, private and export markets. Farmers can then decide what is the best price for them to sell the product.”

“We show how ICTs can be used with the organic ecological farming systems ... Smart farming is not only about ICTs, but also mindset and innovative processes in managing their farms.”

At the end of 2015, around 35 percent of the Thai workforce was engaged in agriculture, mainly as small-scale rural farmers. To safeguard Thailand’s rural farmers and make their livelihood sustainable, the Thai government has introduced many programmes in recent years under the philosophy of ‘sufficiency economics’, which was first mooted by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 1998, when the kingdom faced a grave economic crisis.

Drawing on Thailand’s deep Buddhist tradition, this concept em-

phasises the ‘middle way’ – the importance of balance. Both sustainability and sufficiency are at the core of this philosophy, with human development as its principle aim. Sharing (knowledge and resources) rather than competition and exploitation are important aspects of this system.

The Thai government has thus been promoting the formation of area-specific farmers’ cooperatives using notions are similar to the ‘risk management’ and ‘stakeholder’ philosophy in Western economics which came into prominence in the 1990s.

To improve the livelihood sustainability of the rural sector, the Thai government has laid out a number of measures under this philosophy, such as loans through village funds and village development programmes for the improvement of people’s livelihood through Pracharat grassroots projects.

One of the campaigns under the Pracharat (“state of the people”) approach is a scheme developed with Kasetsart University and the Thai Chamber of Commerce to develop the “Thai GAP” standard, which is a system for fruit and vegetable safety according to good agricultural practices (GAP), which takes into consideration the quality of land management, soil, seedlings, water management, fertilising, pest management, consumer safety and environmental protection.

Once certified by Thai GAP, producers will receive their own QR Code so that smartphone users (consumers) can find information about the product. This initiative

is a way of uplifting the farming sector into the digital era where consumers who want healthy products can reach farmers directly.

CCDKM has been working with ‘Smart Farmers’ to gain this GAP certification and Sittipong’s farm is one of those that have achieved this status. “For most of the GAP (certified) farmers, their produce is not enough for the demand because people are now very concerned about their health,” said Kamolrat. However, “durian and banana in this farm have pre-orders ... right now the durian orchard is already booked three months in advance.”

“Our farm is very self-sufficient. Right now the demand is so much we can’t satisfy all,” confirms Sittipong’s wife Narisara. She explained that the farm’s sufficiency is achieved through maximising family labour that includes her daughter and son-in-law.

“We don’t use outside labour. We plan our farm well,” she added, showing her banana plantations where “we get a regular income (in between durian harvests) because we space out planting.”

She also added that the use of ICTs has helped the family to market its produce profitably and obtain a higher price for its fruits, especially supermarkets buying its bananas at a premium price “given that GAP certification indicates it is export quality.”

Sittipong told IDN that he is able to keep his income from the durian harvest “in the bank” because he obtains a substantial income from others crops such as banana, pepper and coconut spread throughout the

year.

Sittipong has now become an e-agriculture evangelist in the region, converting other farmers to the sufficiency and sustainable philosophy of organic farming. He points out that even if you buy fertiliser from outside, organic fertiliser costs one-third of its chemical counterpart, so that when other farmers visit his farm and observe his comfortable lifestyle, it is not difficult to be converted.

“This is a pilot farm to tell others that even if you have a husband and wife team, you can do your own farm,” said Kamolrat. “What is important is to plan your crop all the time.”

Meanwhile, the Thai government has begun to spread its sufficiency economics development philosophy overseas. When Thailand took the chair of the Group of 77 developing countries in January 2016, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai told member states that the ‘sufficiency economics’ model on holistic farm management could be adopted by most of them to achieve all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

He pointed out that this philosophy is at the core of SDG 12 which calls for reasonable consumption and production, and its ability to provide food security aligns well with SDG 1 on eliminating poverty and SDG 2 on eliminating hunger. [IDN-In-DepthNews – 28 January 2018]

Image: Farmer Sittipong Yanaso at his durian farm | Credit: CCDKM

Women and Water Inseparable for Sustainable Development

By Krista Price

VIENNA (IDN) – A comfort often overlooked, the water served at the Vienna UN headquarters is locally sourced from mountains outside of the city. In Austria, water is a point of pride. This developed nation's water sector is committed not only to quality water systems but also to sustainable practices regarding the water and waste industry. For Austrians, and those frequenting the UN's conference rooms in Vienna, exceptional drinking water is a given.

However, this is not the case for a discouragingly large portion of the world's population. Rapid industrialization, coupled with the ever-increasing global population, has created a world in which water is of high demand while the supply is quickly diminishing. Approximately 60% of the world's population goes without safe toilets or waste systems. Furthermore, almost 2.1 billion people use untreated sources of drinking water daily.

Even more disheartening, when water management is underdeveloped within a community, the burden of water sourcing most often falls on the shoulders of women. In many rural communities, women use water in their key roles of food production, management of the home, waste water systems and more.

In a recent panel at the ACUNS Vienna UN Conference, Dr. Peter Weish of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna noted the importance of

gender “for peace and sustainable development,” adding that “women play an essential role in the fight for a livable world, in the fight for drinking water.”

The interconnection between education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5) and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) is clear. However, just as important is better governance of water to improve the welfare of women worldwide, he said. Policies must be gender focused to impact communities in which water is scarce or management of the resource is undeveloped. Policy creation must be tailored to the needs of the women who carry the burden, he added.

According to Mariet Verhoef-Cohen, President of Soroptimist International and Women for Water Partnership, “Water and women are deeply connected... women often lack social and political power and are, therefore, systematically excluded and marginalized from decision-making processes.” Speaking at the ACUNS conference, Verhoef-Cohen noted that since this undermines the effectiveness of water governance policies, gender-biased social and institutional barriers within the water industry must be reworked to ensure development of effective water policies.

As a result, Soroptimist International, a group of 75,000 members in 122 countries, has determined its 2017–2019 biennium focus to be on Women, Water and Leadership. A corresponding pilot project has

provided female farmers in Kenya with vocational training and expertise to produce higher crop yields using less water. The aim is to empower women with knowledge about water, thus improving their harvesting results and increasing their economic independence.

To be impactful for women in rural communities in Africa or Asia and women responsible for fetching water in Romani communities in Hungary and elsewhere, however, policy development regarding water governance must also account for women's needs.

Verhoef-Cohen stressed the imperative to “position women as active leaders and experts, partners and agents of change” in all areas of water: policy, community development, and practice.

While the UN continues striving for SDGs in all areas, she said, it is of critical importance that the policies that make the Alpine water so easily enjoyed at the UN Vienna, be a priority and gender focused for the benefit of women worldwide. [IDN-InDepth-News - 26 January 2018]



Image: A general view of the Vienna UN Conference | Credit: Robert Bosch/AG/APA-Fotoservice/Schedl

Bodies as Battlefields – Dangers Women Face During Conflicts

By Julia Zimmerman



VIENNA (IDN) – When thinking of war and its inherent dangers, the first thought is probably death on the battlefield and the profound loss of human life that accompanies it; however, soldiers are not the only victims of war. Civilians are also greatly affected, and the impact can be especially devastating for women.

At the ACUNS UN Vienna conference, Ismail H. Balla, Chief of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) Vienna Office, said it was incumbent upon the international community to address the systematic violence faced by women before, during and after conflict. He quoted Maj. General Patrick Gammaert, who as Deputy Force Commander of the UN Mission to the Democratic

Republic of Congo in 2008 observed: “It is now more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in modern wars and conflicts.”

In the face of contemporary wartime realities, Balla noted that international organizations, militaries, lawyers, and NGOs are working hard to change the status quo and to integrate women into conflict management, the military, and peace-building.

For example, Brigadier General Dr. Walter Feichtinger, Head of the Institute of Peace Support and Conflict Management at the Austrian National Defense Academy, is a champion of gender equality in the military. Speaking at the ACUNS conference, he emphasized that times have changed: “Women in the military are

the new normal nowadays in the Austrian army.”

In fact, Austria started integrating female soldiers as early as twenty years ago and women now compose roughly 600 of the 15,000 total troops. Brigadier Feichtinger sees the National Defence Academy as a role model to other institutions on how to change mindsets on values such as gender equality. He noted that in working towards the elimination of conflict-related sexual violence and restoring peace, the inclusion of female leaders in both military operations and peace processes is crucial: “Women are an integral part of comprehensive security and also their thinking and perceptions.”

Karuna Parajuli, Nepalese lawyer and a graduate of UNODA’s Women Scholarship for Peace: Global South program, is also adamant about the importance of increasing the role of women in post-conflict peace negotiations. In Nepal, she works with local NGOs to offer free legal representation to women who have been victims of conflict-related violence.

The armed conflict in Nepal (1996-2006) left behind many women victims of violence, particularly sexual violence. In working with these victims, Parajuli is faced by the challenge that women are still very afraid to speak openly about their experiences, even after many years. In Nepal, as in many other countries, sexual violence is heavily stigmatized, causing victims to fear negative societal repercussions for sharing their stories.

Ingeborg Geyer, Zonta International’s UN Representative in Vienna, further highlighted the use of sexual violence, particularly rape, during conflict. Emphasizing that rape is one of the most pervasive and detrimental acts related to war, Geyer noted that its aftermath can have grave consequences for women and societies. In addition, the extent and intensity of rape during conflict can cause severe health conditions such as vaginal fistula.

Human trafficking is another danger faced by women during times of war. Jean-Luc Lemahieu, Director of the Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs at the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), has worked to shed light on the issue of human trafficking through the organization’s Blue Heart Campaign. He indicated that 71% of all trafficked human beings are women,

adding that human trafficking is often used to generate income in impoverished economies during times of conflict.

Moving forward, it is clear that in tackling sexual violence, human trafficking and other gender-related issues connected to conflict and war, the 3P paradigm is crucial: prevention, protection, and prosecution. Increasing women’s role in political leadership is also important. As Parajuli pointed out, Nepal’s Parliament now has 33% women, a great achievement.

As an alumnus of UNODA’s Women Scholarship for Peace: Global South program, Parajuli received in-depth training on key conceptual and practical aspects of disarmament and development-related issues. As noted by UNODA’s Vienna Chief Balla, such training is part of the coherent, coordinated and context-specific response necessary to enable young people such as Parajuli to be important catalysts for change, as they challenge impunity and pursue justice for women in the context of war and conflict. [IDN-InDepthNews - 26 January 2018]

*Image: A general view of the Vienna UN Conference |
Credit: Robert Bosch/AG/APA-Fotoservice/Schedl*

Thai Doctor Creating Multi-Faceted Approach to Sustainable Development

By Kalinga Seneviratne

CHANTABURI, Thailand (IDN) – A passionate, socially conscious doctor in this rural farming community in the north-east of Thailand is working with a school for marginalised children, supported by a foundation set up by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second daughter of late King Bhumibol who died in October 2016.

The school aims at empowering the students to break into the medical field through an unconventional career path that is providing a multi-faceted approach to addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

After a demonstration at the school by his students of a unique Thai massage therapy he has developed to treat what is called 'office syndrome' (problems of the neck and shoulder due to long exposure to working in front of a computer screen), Dr Poonchai Chitanuntavitaya, Chief Medical Officer of Social Health Enterprise told IDN: "I have here six Hmong (hill tribe) students and their families are very happy. If they stay there (in the hills) they will be just workers in the corn field but here they can gain knowledge, gain self-esteem and they could one day become health professionals."

"Once I get training, I get more opportunities to get a job," one of his students 17-year-old Natetaya Janelinda told IDN. "Along the way I can help others who are sick," adding that one day she would like to

become a doctor.

Professor Kamolrat Intaratat, consultant to the Smart Schools programme and Director of the Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCD-KM), who was listening to the interview, said: "I'm surprised she said she wants to be a doctor. Normally marginalised kids don't dare say that. This programme has given her self-confidence."

Merging Thai massage wisdom with modern knowledge

Explaining his unique version of Thai massage, Dr Poonchai says that it is about merging the ancient Thai wisdom of massage with modern medical knowledge, especially that which is related to cardiology, given that he is a trained heart specialist.

"I have treated many heart patients and I know work tension leads them to hypertension, high cholesterol, no exercise and ultimately heart attacks," he argues, but "more and more I realise it's not the right process to treat a patient, the best is prevention."

For this reason, he studied the physiology of the body and found that it is the muscles that makes people stressed and create the adenine rush of the body to fatigue. "All that can be reversed by stretching, and pinpointing (massage) on some pain points in your body, then the brain will be reversed to order," he says.

"It's like, if you are a well trained meditator, you can make the whole body be

relaxed during meditations ... but not many people can do that. So I have devised this therapy to mimic the effect of that, to release your tense muscle to relax. We call it the human maintenance service."

Giving disadvantaged children a new chance

In training his youthful practitioners, he has to convey this medical knowledge gradually to his pupils. But, more importantly he also needs strong, fit youngsters to perform this practice. "I need about a month to build up their core muscles. They do various types of exercises. I wake them at 5 am because they are in boarding school, I can have exercise for 1 hour in the morning and in the evening we start training at 5 and finish at 8," explains Dr Poonchai.

People come to the school on Saturdays and Sundays to act as models for the students to practise the skill they are learning. Sometimes they also go to the local market to provide the service. Recently, at a nine-day Red Cross festival in town, he provided 20 of his students to offer the massage.

Rajaprajanugroh 48, the school where these pupils study, has 548 students and is a 100 percent boarding school because the children – who study from primary 1 to senior high school level – come from disadvantaged backgrounds, many have no parents, some have been drug-addicted or addicted to electronic games, some



even being in child prostitution and 80 percent of them come from homeless families.

Princess Sirindhorn's foundation has created and funds 85 of similar schools across Thailand to educate marginalised children in using modern ICTs in order to create sustainable income generation futures for themselves.

Two-track education

Kamolrat explains that the foundation's policy has opened up the educational system for marginalised children to travel on two tracks. "The first is vocational training because many, once they finish senior high school, don't get the chance to go to university because they go to do a job. The Princess wants them to learn ICT skills for becoming smart entrepreneurs ... the second is for some to proceed on to a university education."

According to Kamolrat, "the first step of ICT training is simple e-commerce, knowing that they can use ICT for taking the product to market ... from packaging to PR to advertising. Do e-marketing themselves. Check stock, update catalogue, as well as do e-banking. How to transfer money using internet".

Dr Poonchai's programme is a new innovation for the idea of the Smart School – a technology-based teaching learning institution to prepare children for the Information Age – notes Kamolrat.

"Thais are good in massage, it comes from our ancestors ... this doctor is trying to integrate medical knowledge into indigenous knowledge, train youth in this kind of massage. It is to be academi-

cally and professionally trained ... when they gain experience from a young age they can become professional massager, and the sustainability of this is in no doubt," she argues.

Adding a new dimension to the Smart School concept

The school's director, Dr Supaporn Papakdee, agrees that this massage training has added a new dimension to the Smart School programme here. "We were lucky to get the services of a medical doctor who saw the potential of our students," she told IDN.

"They get training with medical backup, they can get income immediately for themselves and their family. Hopeless kids have become income earners ... their families are proud."

"I normally did not have self-confidence (but) now by helping others I have," said another 17-year-old trainee Thidarat Singthong. "I would like to be a nurse in the navy," she added.

Dr Poonchai says that what he is introducing to his students is a mobile model of income generation where they can go to the people by, for example, setting up shop at a city rail station or at local airports where the treatment could be given in 10 minutes. In an eight-hour shift they could treat up to 40 people in a day, which would generate a substantial income.

"Office syndrome is a global problem and I hope one day we can provide professional therapists to the UN Development Programme (UNDP)," he said with a determined smile.

Describing himself as a "poor doctor", Dr Poonchai says that he is not doing this to become rich but he would like to use future income generated by his project to fix the ecological disaster facing Thailand, in the very communities these young people come from.

"I will bring a member of a family of corn farmers who burn the land to farm, to work with me (as massage therapist) and when they have the money they will stop burning the forest and the new forest will have higher value and be less toxic," the doctor argues, perhaps introducing a new multi-faceted approach to sustainable development. [IDN-InDepthNews – 19 January 2018]

Image: Dr Poonchai Chitanuntavitaya, Chief Medical Officer of Social Health Enterprise, supervising his trainees while giving massages to visitors to the school for marginalised children

Tanzania Pushing Gender Empowerment Despite Hurdles

By Kizito Makoye

DAR ES SALAAM (IDN) – Despite efforts to promote gender equality, women and girls in Tanzania are still marginalised and largely under-utilised citizens – often suffering from discrimination and violence from their male counterparts due to a biased male-dominated system which often pushes women to the brink of survival.

However, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), various initiatives are being implemented to empower women, although they still face obstacles that prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Among others, the SDGs call for women's empowerment, greater access to education, health care, decent work and fair representation in political and economic decision-making processes, and the following are just some of the initiatives in these directions currently under way in the East African country.

Security and gender desks in public schools

Rita Robert was 16 when she was raped, became pregnant and subsequently kicked out of school, crushing her dreams of becoming a lawyer.

"I was a hard-working student but all my dreams had been shattered," said Rita, now 19.

The former student of Inyonga Secondary School in Katavi region in south-western Tanzania is one of many girls expelled from

school after falling pregnant.

In June 2017, President John Magufuli had faced criticism when he said girls who become mothers would not be allowed back in school.

Katavi region has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the country, with 45 percent of girls aged 15-19 becoming pregnant, according to 2016 data from Tanzania's National Bureau of Statistics.

However, as part of its nationwide campaign to fight gender violence, the Tanzanian government is now setting up "Defence and Security" desks in public schools to protect adolescent girls from pregnancy.

Two or more teachers are being picked in each school to handle sexual abuse cases and report them to the relevant authorities, the government said.

According to Ummu Mwalimu, Minister for Community Development, Gender and Children, the selected teachers will be trained and equipped with knowledge and the skills needed to relay accurate and useful information on various sexual and reproductive health issues and help girls avoid sex predators.

"All schools should have these desks which will be manned by teachers capable of handling gender violence issues," she said.

According to rights campaigners, a culture of silence, outdated cultural practices, lack of reproductive health education and

distance to school, are some of the factors fuelling teen pregnancies in Tanzania.

Female students are often exposed to widespread sexual harassment or, in some schools, male teachers coerce them into sexual relationships. Officials rarely report sexual abuse to police, and many schools lack a confidential reporting mechanism, a 2016 Human Rights Watch report showed.

However, the government hopes that the new initiative will help reduce the number of girls who fall pregnant and drop out of school. The plan is to expose them to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education covering puberty, gender identity, sexual abuse, pregnancy and risky sexual behaviour, according to officials.

While underage sex is criminalised in Tanzania, poor parents often marry off their daughters using a special dispensation granted by the 1971 marriage law, which allows a girl as young as 15 years to marry with parental or court consent.

Referring to the government's initiative, Faiza Jama Mohamed, Africa Director of Equality Now, said: "This is a welcome move ... nevertheless, the government needs to focus on arresting and holding sex predators to account instead of its emphasis on 'protect girls against temptation'."

Women mentored to take corporate leadership positions

In an effort to bridge the gender divide by breaking male dominance in corporate

management, the Association of Tanzania Employers (ATE) is training women executives with a view to propelling them to take senior leadership positions.

Companies with strong female leadership deliver a higher return on equity compared with those without women at the most senior levels, according to a recent MSCI World Index survey. In Tanzania, women hold only 35 percent of all senior leadership positions.

Under the initiative, called Female Future, women in corporate firms are being mentored to acquire leadership skills which will help them climb to key decision-making positions while inspiring and challenging them to work harder and deliver on set organizational goals.

Lilian Machera, coordinator of Female Future Programme, said the programme aims to increase women's capacities in the workplace so that they become more competent leaders capable of making important corporate decisions.

"Our main focus is to enable employers to have an effective business environment and risk management at the helm," she told IDN. "We develop ladies to become more potential leaders capable of overcoming fear and managing fright when negotiating in various issue for their organizations."

According to Machera, by involving employees in this programme, their companies will be able to develop non-gender based leadership at the top to increase effectiveness and risk management through developing and implementing growth strategies.



Under the initiative, which started in 2015 and is jointly implemented with the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (NHO), several women leaders from different corporate organisations are being exposed to business development practices and also introduced to the concept of leadership and board competence.

Juliana Swai, one of the course participants who works as General Manager (Operations) with Akiba Commercial Bank, said that through the initiative she has made a significant shift in her professional life and is now "a better person and a better leader".

"Female Future has created a total mindset shift in me, I look at things from another angle, with curiosity, compassion and objectiveness that was not always present in the past," she said.

Awareness campaign curbs gender discrimination in markets

In the bustling Mchikichini market in Dar es Salaam, female traders have always battled abuse and humiliation from their male counterparts because of their gender.

But ever since Equality for Growth (EfG) – a Tanzania-based non-profit organisation – launched its awareness campaign seeking to empower women in the informal sector to enable them to increase their incomes and reduce household poverty, their confidence has improved remarkably.

Women working in the informal sector in Tanzania often experience violence as they go about their daily business. The informal and unregulated nature of their working environment is worsened by the absence of a mechanism for reporting violence.

A 2009 survey by EfG showed alarming levels of violence experienced by women market traders. According to the survey, 40 percent of women traders in Dar es Salaam markets had been sexually harassed, 32 percent verbally abused and 24 percent had experienced other forms of violence from male traders and customers.

To curb such a situation, EfG is training female market traders to understand how to fight for their rights as well as putting a mechanism in place whereby market traders work without fear of violence and are protected by the law.

Dubbed "Mpe riziki si matusi" – Swahili for "Sustain her with income not abuse", the UN women-funded initiative rolled out in market places across Dar es Salaam has helped reduce gender-based violence, officials said.

According to EfG programme officer Shaaban Rulimbiye, the programme which started in 2015 has transformed the lives of hundreds of female traders in Tanzania's

largest city, making the market safer and enabling them to enjoy their economic rights in a safe environment free from violence.

“We have also trained female vendors to become legal community supporters so that they can raise awareness about violence against women,” he said.

Aisha Shaaban, a female trader at Ilala market in Dar es Salaam, said the training has helped her understand her rights and how to report men who try to violate her rights. “I now know how to report anyone who uses abusive language or attempts to sexually abuse me. No one tries to abuse me these days.”

According to Rulimbiye, EfG has trained several legal community supporters who assist women to report cases of abuse in the markets. The project has also created guidelines which bring together various community stakeholders – including the police, market officials and vendors – to discuss issues of common interest.

“The perpetrators of gender violence are being fined and women work freely without the fear of being sexually harassed,” Rulimbiye said

Jane Magigita, EfG Executive Director, said the organisation hopes to see the informal sector in Tanzania free of all forms of gender-based violence.

“This project not only supports women’s rights to live a life free of violence but also empower them economically. A safer market means more women can do business safely,” she added.

Helping girls stay in school

Faiza Omar lost all hopes when she failed her final exams. However, these were rekindled when she returned to school after she had received advice to re-sit her exam.

With the support of her teachers and parents, she resumed classes with confidence and subsequently passed her exams, thanks to the ‘Room to Read’ education programme for girls – an initiative seeking to support girls to complete secondary school education and also learn relevant life skills.

“I would not have finished my studies had I not received encouragement from the teachers,” said Faiza.

While Tanzania has made significant progress overall in primary school enrolment, few girls, especially in rural areas, complete

their secondary education because of early marriage, teenage pregnancy and poverty, women’s rights groups say.

In Tanzania, 76 percent of girls often drop out of secondary school due to pregnancy and early marriages. Under the initiative, girls are introduced to life skills education, child rights, mentoring and gender response.

The ‘Room to Read’ programme collaborates with local governments, schools, communities and families to ensure that they understand the importance of literacy and how they can play a role in enabling the girl child to reach her full potential.

According to Jamila Mrisho, a social mobiliser and focal teacher at Kiromo Secondary School, said the programme has played a central role in helping girls to remain in school.

“When a girl is at the highest risk of dropping out, we talk to them and advise parents to take necessary actions so that their daughters remain in school,” she said, adding that the programme aims to help girls from poor families to access career and leadership coaching, reproductive health studies and life skills.

In Mlingotini village, where Faiza lives, women find it increasingly difficult to support themselves and their families due to scarcity of water and they generally lack awareness and motivation regarding education, creating an obstacle for girls who want to learn.

Under the ‘Room to Read’ programme, girls interact with teachers or instructors who act as the focal persons for organising various life skills, mentoring and gender response activities.

“My role is to ensure that girls do not drop out from school due to peer influence or some economic reasons. I must work hard to ensure that they finish their education,” said Mrisho. [IDN-InDepth-News – 16 January 2018]

Image: Aisha Shaaban sits in her wooden stall at Mchikichini market in Dar es Salaam waiting for her customers. She’s among women recently trained on women empowerment and how to avoid Gender violence | Credit: Kizito Makoye/IDN-INPS

UN Expert Reveals Shocking Facts about Poverty in the U.S.

By J C Suresh

TORONTO (IDN) – More than one in every eight Americans, numbering 40 million, equal to 12.7 % of the population, are living in poverty, and almost half of those – 18.5 million – in abysmal poverty, according to a new report.

Though the United States is one of the world's richest, most powerful and technologically innovative countries, "neither its wealth nor its power nor its technology is being harnessed to address the situation," stresses Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in his statement on a two-week visit to the USA.

Alston, an international law scholar and human rights practitioner, is John Norton Pomeroy Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, and co-Chair of the law school's Center for Human Rights and Global Justice.

His report published on December 15 by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights finds that the youth poverty rate in the United States is the highest across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with one quarter of youth living in poverty compared to less than 14% across the OECD of which the U.S. is a founding member.

There is considerable debate over the extent of poverty in the U.S., but for the purposes of the report, Alston has relied

mainly upon the official government statistics, drawn up primarily by the U.S. Census Bureau. In order to define and quantify poverty in America, the Census Bureau uses 'poverty thresholds' or Official Poverty Measures (OPM). The figures mentioned in the report are from September 2017.

In the OECD member countries, the U.S. ranks 35th out of 37 in terms of poverty and inequality. The Stanford Center on Inequality and Poverty characterizes the U.S. as "a clear and constant outlier in the child poverty league." U.S. child poverty rates are the highest amongst the six richest countries – Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden and Norway.

The report highlights that a shockingly high number of children in the U.S. live in poverty. In 2016, 18% of children – some 13.3 million – were living in poverty, with children comprising 32.6% of all people in poverty. Child poverty rates are highest in the southern states, with Mississippi, New Mexico at 30% and Louisiana at 29%.

Contrary to the stereotypical assumptions, 31% of poor children are White, 24% are Black, 36% are Hispanic, and 1% are indigenous. When looking at toddlers and infants, 42% of all Black children are poor, 32% of Hispanics, and 37% of Native American infants and toddlers are poor. The figure for Whites is 14%.

Alston draws attention to the fact that poor children are also significantly affected by

America's affordable and adequate housing crisis. Around 21% of persons experiencing homelessness are children. "While most are reportedly experiencing sheltered homelessness, the lack of financial stability, high eviction rates, and high mobility rates negatively impact education, and physical and mental health."

Examining the 'racial' aspect of poverty, the UN expert says: "The poor are overwhelmingly assumed to be people of color, whether African Americans or Hispanic 'immigrants'." But the reality is that there are 8 million more poor Whites than there are Blacks.

Some politicians and political appointees with whom Alston spoke were "completely sold on the narrative of such scammers sitting on comfortable sofas, watching colour TVs, while surfing on their smart phones, all paid for by welfare."

But the poor people he met from among the 40 million living in poverty were "overwhelmingly" either persons who had been born into poverty, or those who had been thrust there by circumstances largely beyond their control such as physical or mental disabilities, divorce, family breakdown, illness, old age, unlivable wages, or discrimination in the job market.

The face of poverty in America is not only Black, or Hispanic, but also White, Asian, and many other colors, notes the UN expert. Nor is it confined to a particular age



group. “Automation and robotization are already throwing many middle-aged workers out of jobs in which they once believed themselves to be secure.”

In the economy of the twenty-first century, only a tiny percentage of the population is immune from the possibility that they could fall into poverty as a result of bad breaks beyond their own control. “The American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion as the US since the US now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries,” declares Alston.

He adds: Many statistics could be cited to demonstrate the extent to which women shoulder a particularly high burden as a result of living in poverty. They are, for example, more exposed to violence, more vulnerable to sexual harassment, discriminated against in the labour market.

Quoting Luke Shaefer from the University of Michigan, School of Social Work, and Kathryn Edin from the Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government, the UN expert says: The number of children in single-mother households living in extreme poverty for

an entire year has ballooned from fewer than 100,000 in 1995 to 895,000 in 2011 and 704,000 in 2012.

“But perhaps the least recognized harm is that austerity policies that shrink the services provided by the state inevitably mean that the resulting burden is imposed instead upon the primary caregivers within families, who are overwhelmingly women. Male-dominated legislatures rarely pay any heed to this consequence of the welfare cutbacks they impose.”

The UN expert points to perturbing practice which affects the poor almost exclusively, that of setting large bail bonds for a defendant who seeks to go free pending trial.

“Some 11 million people are admitted to local jails annually, and on any given day there are more than 730,000 people being held, of whom almost two-thirds are awaiting trial, and thus presumed to be innocent.

“Yet judges have increasingly set large amounts of bail, which mean that wealthy defendants can secure their freedom, while poor defendants are likely to stay in jail, with all of the consequences in terms of loss of their jobs, disruption of their childcare, inability to pay rent, and a dive into deeper destitution,” writes Alston.

But the saving grace is that a major movement to eliminate bail bonds is gathering steam, and needs to be embraced by anyone concerned about the utterly disproportionate impact of the justice system upon the poor.

The UN expert also mentions the widespread practice of suspending drivers’ licenses for a wide range of non-driving related offences, such as a failure to pay fines.

“This is a perfect way to ensure that the poor, living in communities which have steadfastly refused to invest in serious public transport systems, are unable to earn a living which might have helped to pay the outstanding debt,” notes Alston. Two paths are open to them: penury, or driving illegally, thus risking even more serious and counter-productive criminalization.

Demonization of the poor can take many forms, adds the UN expert. “It has been internalized by many poor people who proudly resist applying for benefits to which they are entitled and struggle

valiantly to survive against the odds.”

Racial disparities, already great, are being entrenched and exacerbated in many contexts, he adds. In Alabama, he saw various houses in rural areas that were surrounded by cesspools of sewage that flowed out of broken or non-existent septic systems. The State Health Department had no idea of how many households exist in these conditions, despite the grave health consequences. Nor did they have any plan to find out, or devise a plan to do something about it.

“But since the great majority of White folks live in the cities, which are well served by government built and maintained sewerage systems, and most of the rural folks in areas like Lowndes County, are Black, the problem doesn’t appear on the political or governmental radar screen,” notes the report. [IDN-InDepthNews – 25 December 2017]

Image: Poverty in America Documentary 2017 on YouTube

The Price of Forest Degradation and Biodiversity Loss for Livelihoods

By Fabíola Ortiz

BONN (IDN) – Forest degradation and biodiversity loss carry a very heavy price for climate and people’s livelihoods. Restoring forests matters when it comes to growing resilience to climate variation and securing a healthy environment for future generations. This was the main message delivered by experts and community leaders who met in Bonn (December 19-20, 2017) to discuss a more sustainable path to conservation.

“We should stop seeing indigenous peoples, natural resources and forests as a problem. We could see them as a solution,” said Robert Nasi, director general of the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) which hosted the Global Landscapes Forum, a large science-based platform on sustainable land use.

One month after world leaders held negotiations at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP23), policy makers, experts, private sector representatives, scientists, and civil society returned to Bonn to discuss cutting-edge research and innovative projects across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific in an attempt to see landscapes in a holistic way.

“Landscape management is not optional, it is an urgency,” argued Nasi, highlighting the need to promote transformation through knowledge and change “how we understand landscapes” to better provide science-based evidence to foster achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Erik Solheim, executive director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), suggested that one-third of what global society can do for the climate can be achieved through landscapes policies by protecting biodiversity.

“2017 was the year we saw mother Earth hit back,” he noted. “Hurricane Irma hit with enormous intensity the Caribbean, at the same time we saw floods in India and Bangladesh, landslides in Sierra Leone, droughts in Somalia and a number of negative climate and environmental events.”

“However, we have shown we are also able to change if we really want to,” said Solheim, pointing to the launching of the UK-Cana-

da anti-coal alliance; Chinese president Xi Jinping who had more than ever talked about environment during the Communist Party congress; and India which had increased solar and wind in its energy mix.

“We also need to bring private sector. We have to translate this big momentum to the financial resources”, he urged.

Forest degradation and land use change contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and “the situation is deteriorating rapidly,” warned Karin Kemper, director for the Environment and Natural Resources Global Practice at the World Bank.

Around 24 billion tons of fertile soil erode every year, and 12 million hectares of land are degraded annually. “We can see economic gains from halting forest loss and restoring degraded lands. Sustainable forest products have the potential to create millions of rural jobs and drive green growth,” stressed Kemper.

The global effort of restoring 350 million hectares by 2030 in the Bonn Challenge will sequester an amount of 15 gigatons of CO2 translating into 107 billion dollars in economic gains.

“It is a gloomy picture, but there is some reason for hope,” said Kemper. “There is a new forest economy emerging with a better understanding of the economic value of services from forests such as water supply.”

A continent that has the least contributed to GHG emissions has been one of the most impacted by climate extreme events. “Addressing landscape issues in Africa is not an option, it is existential for our survival, we need a very sustained landscape approach,” said Ameenah Gurib Fakim, President of the Republic of Mauritius.

“The threats to biodiversity are serious in Africa more than anywhere else,” he noted. “African species are disappearing twice the global rate driven by habitat loss and humanity’s footprint. This has been caused by human action, like poaching, deforestation, extraction and harmful processes to slash and burn agriculture deeply threatening Africa’s water ecosystem. The effects are being amplified by climate change.”

Economic modelling of the impact of climate variation in Africa predicts that if the temperature rises 1.5°C by 2040, the financial impact will be 1.7 percent of Africa's GDP. If it rises 4.1°C by the end of the century, the economic cost of climate change will be 10 percent of the continent's GDP.

"The only way to combat forest loss is to empower local communities. We need to advance in the debate of community management of forests," said Brazilian forestry activist Maria Margarida Ribeiro da Silva. She was awarded the 2017 Wangari Maathai Forest Champions Award for her achievements in promoting community forest management.

The award honours the memory of Kenyan Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, who championed forests around the world. It recognises outstanding individuals who have helped preserve, restore and sustainably manage forests and raise awareness of the key role forests play in supporting local communities, rural livelihoods, women and the environment.

"I come from an extractive reserve in the Amazon," explained Ribeiro da Silva. "Our livelihoods have always been based on small hold agriculture and extractivism. We organised ourselves in a collective association to be represented. We requested our land rights and the grant of the title to be managed in a communal way."

Since 1998, she has fought to secure land rights for local communities and protect forests and rivers. "We helped to create a legal framework to allow communities to manage forest resources in protected areas. Our experience has become a model to others. We also supported the forest legal code reform in Brazil." [IDN-In-DepthNews – 22 December 2017]



Image: Global Landscapes Forum | Credit: Pilar Valbuena

U.S. Politics Increasingly Governed by Policy of Unilateralism

By Rodney Reynolds

NEW YORK (IDN) – The politics of the Trump administration are being increasingly governed by the twin policies of unilateralism and isolationism.

After Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016, he withdrew from a historic 2016 climate change agreement signed by 195 countries – and the only signatory to do so.

And this year, he announced plans to dilute the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal signed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), namely the U.S., UK, France, China and Russia, plus Germany and the 28-member European Union (EU) – much against warnings by all the other signatories.

The latest unilateral act came in early December 2017 when Trump announced his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and threaten to eventually move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to the disputed city – the only country, so far, to do so.

And on December 18, the U.S. vetoed a one-page Security Council resolution, crafted by the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and sponsored by Egypt, which reiterated the longstanding view of the UNSC: that no country should establish an embassy in Jerusalem and that its status has to be resolved by the Palestinians and Israelis.

In a statement before she exercised the

U.S. veto, Ambassador Nikki Haley told delegates: “I have been the proud Representative of the United States at the United Nations for nearly a year now. This is the first time I have exercised the American right to veto a resolution in the Security Council.

The exercise of the veto is not something the United States does often. We have not done it in more than six years. We do it with no joy, but we do it with no reluctance.”

“The fact that this veto is being done in defense of American sovereignty and in defense of America’s role in the Middle East peace process is not a source of embarrassment for us; it should be an embarrassment to the remainder of the Security Council, 2 she added.

Of the 15 members of the UNSC, the remaining four permanent members, UK, France, China and Russia, voted for the resolution. So did the 10 non-permanent members proving once again how isolated the United States is in the far reaches of the international community – and particularly at the United Nations, in this case, characterized by a vote of 14:1.

Responding to the U.S. decision, and reacting to Haley’s statement, Nadia Hijab, Executive Director of Al-Shabaka, The Palestinian Policy Network, told IDN: “If the issue were not so serious, Nikki Haley’s comments would be the subject of slapstick comedy.”

“Why does America’s sovereignty need

defending all the way out in the Middle East, and how does Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, in violation of international law, defend that sovereignty?,” she asked pointedly.

In fact, what has happened at the Security Council has stalled the first step in Israel’s campaign to legalize its occupation of Palestinian land, she added.

The other four permanent members and the remaining 10 members who represent all world regions have made it clear that they are not ready to shake a core foundation of the international system – the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war - to serve Israel’s colonial appetite, Hijab said.

Earlier, there were concerns that the statement jointly issued on December 8 by five European countries – including two veto-wielding Security Council members – was somewhat mealy-mouthed, she pointed out.

Although they upheld international law, they “disagreed with” rather than condemned Trump’s recognition and softened even that by noting commitment to a two-state solution, Hijab declared.

The UK, one of the strongest Western allies of the U.S., stood firm.

Ambassador Matthew Rycroft, the UK’s Permanent Representative to the UN, told delegates: “The status of Jerusalem should be determined through a negotiated settle-



ment between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and should ultimately be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian states.”

Quoting previous UNSC resolutions, he said that in line with those same resolutions, “we regard East Jerusalem as part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

“As we have previously said, we disagree

with the US decision unilaterally to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel before a final status agreement and to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. As recent events in the region have shown, these decisions are unhelpful to the prospects for peace in the region, an aim that all of us in this Council remain committed to.”

“The British Embassy to Israel is based in Tel Aviv and we have no plans to move it,” Rycroft declared.

Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, told delegates “it was reprehensible that the United States had chosen to disregard international law and undermine its own role in any future

peace process.”

Affirming that East Jerusalem was the capital of the State of Palestine, as recognized by the majority of States, he urged “all peace-loving nations to stand firm for the rule of law on that issue and to reject Israel’s settlement policies.”

He said Palestinians would never accept occupation as a permanent reality, pointing out “those who want peace do not recognize illegal actions and measures but rather recognize the rights of the Palestinian people as enshrined in international law.”

Asked about the role of the Quartet (comprising the United Nations, U.S., the European Union, and Russia), following the extraordinary OIC summit meeting in Istanbul on December 13 where the Palestinian Authority said it will no longer recognise a U.S. role in the search for peace between the Palestinians and Israelis, UN Deputy Spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters December 13 that the United States remains one of the partners in the Quartet, and the Quartet will remain involved in the search for a solution, a two-state solution, in the Middle East.

“What our concern is we want to make sure that the parties themselves are willing to hold talks with each other. And, in line with that, the United Nations, both in its independent role and through the Quartet, will work to do what it can to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the table for talks,” he added.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres said he had consistently spoken out against any “unilateral measures” that would jeopardize the prospect of peace for Israelis and Palestinians.

Jerusalem is a final status issue that must be resolved through direct negotiations between the two parties on the basis of the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, taking into account the legitimate concerns of both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, he noted.

“I understand the deep attachment that Jerusalem holds in the hearts of so many people. It has been so for centuries and it will always be. In this moment of great anxiety, I want to make it clear: there is no alternative to the two-state solution. There is no Plan B.”

It is only by realizing the vision of two states living side-by-side

in peace, security and mutual recognition, with Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Palestine, and all final status issues resolved permanently through negotiations, that the legitimate aspirations of both peoples will be achieved, he added.

An Asian diplomat told IDN that Trump’s “dangerous and provocative move” regarding Jerusalem can not only trigger violence in the Middle East but also lead to a conflict.

Ironically, this provocation comes at a time when Guterres is aiming at “preventive diplomacy” following the appointment in September 2017 of a High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation to guide him on the road ahead.

The primary mandate of the Board is based on the age-old axiom that prevention (diplomacy) is far better than the cure (post-conflict peacekeeping).

At the same time, the Secretary-General is also determined to help achieve the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. And Goal 16 is aimed at reducing violent conflicts worldwide with better access to peace and justice.

The UN has warned that a few high-intensity armed conflicts have caused, and are causing, large numbers of civilian casualties.

But progress promoting peace and justice, together with effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, remains uneven across and within regions, according to the UN.

The crisis over Jerusalem may well be the next spark for another armed conflict. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 December 2017]

Image credit: www.opnltr.com

Global Upturn Offers Prospects For Sustainable Growth

By J Nastranis

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – Despite an upsurge in world economic growth, which has reached 3 per cent – the highest since 2011 – very few least developed countries (LDCs) are expected to reach the Sustainable Development Goal target for GDP growth of “at least 7 per cent” in the near term (SDG 8.1), says a new United Nations report.

Goal 8 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals – with 169 targets – adopted in September 2015 by the international community envisages promoting “inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all”. Its target 1 stresses the need to “sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries.”

The report, titled World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2018 finds that advances towards sustainable development in LDCs continue to be hindered by institutional deficiencies, inadequate basic infrastructure, high levels of exposure to natural disasters, as well as challenges to security and political instability.

In addition to mobilizing the financial resources to meet the investment needs in the LDCs, policies must also focus on conflict prevention and removing barriers that continue to hinder more rapid progress, declares the report.

However, the upturn in global economy should pave the way to reorient policy towards longer-term issues such as addressing climate change, tackling existing inequalities and removing institutional obstacles to development.

According to the report, as crisis-related fragilities and the adverse effects of other recent shocks subside, improvement in the global economy is widespread, with roughly two-thirds of countries worldwide experiencing stronger growth in 2017 than in the previous year. Global growth is expected to remain steady at 3.0 per cent in 2018 and 2019, says the report.

In view of this, says UN Secretary-General António Guterres in the Foreword, “The World Economic Situation and Prospects 2018 demonstrates that current macro-economic conditions offer policy-makers greater scope to address some of the deep-rooted issues that continue to hamper progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.”

Launching the report on December 11, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Liu Zhenmin noted: “While the upturn in global growth is a welcome sign of a healthier economy, it is important to remember that this may come at an environmental cost. This calls for stronger efforts to delink economic growth and environmental degradation – as also emphasized by the UN Climate Change

Conference [COP23] in Bonn last month [November 6-17].”

The report is a joint product of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the five United Nations regional commissions (Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

The recent pickup in global growth, the report states, stems predominantly from firmer growth in several developed economies, although East and South Asia remain the world’s most dynamic regions. In 2017, East and South Asia accounted for nearly half of global growth, with China alone contributing about one-third, growing at a faster pace of 6.8 per cent, marking its first acceleration in annual growth in six years.

The end of recessions in Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria and the Russian Federation also contributed to the rise in the rate of global growth between 2016 and 2017. The upturn has been supported by a rebound in world trade and an improvement in investment conditions. But, the report warns, the challenge is to channel this into a sustained acceleration in productive investment to



support medium-term prospects.

Despite the improved short-term outlook, the global economy continues to face risks – including changes in trade policy, a sudden deterioration in global financial conditions and rising geopolitical tensions, notes the report.

The world economy also faces longer-term challenges. The report highlights four areas where the improved macroeconomic situation opens the way for policy to address these challenges: increasing economic diversification, reducing inequality, supporting long-term investment and tackling institutional deficiencies.

The report notes that reorienting policy to address these challenges can generate stronger investment and productivity, higher job creation and more sustainable medium-term economic growth.

The recent improvements in economic conditions, however, have been unevenly distributed across countries and regions. Negligible growth in per capita income is expected in several parts of Africa, Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean in 2017–2019.

The impacted regions combined are home to 275 million people living in extreme poverty, underscoring the urgent need to foster an environment that will both accelerate medium-term growth

prospects and tackle poverty through policies that address inequalities in income and opportunity.

Preliminary estimates suggest that the level of global energy-related CO2 emissions increased in 2017 after remaining flat for three consecutive years. The frequency of weather-related shocks continues to increase, also highlighting the urgent need to build resilience against climate change and prioritize environmental protection.

Policies that target international shipping and aviation emissions – which do not fall under the purview of the Paris Agreement – need to be strengthened, as emissions from these sectors continue to grow faster than those from road transport, says the report.

The report warns that many developing economies and economies in transition remain vulnerable to spikes in risk aversion, sudden capital withdrawal and an abrupt tightening of global liquidity conditions, while rising debt poses global financial challenges.

The report suggests that a new financial framework for sustainable finance should be created in alignment with the 2030 Agenda and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda that would shift the focus from short-term profit to long-term value creation. Regulatory policies for the financial system, well coordinated with monetary, fiscal and foreign exchange policies, should support this framework, by promoting a stable global financial environment, adds the report. [IDN-InDepthNews – 14 December 2017]

Image: A worker sorts a green leaf tea before it reaches the main processing floor at the Kitabi Tea Processing Facility in Rwanda | Credit: A'Melody Lee/World Bank

One Planet Summit Spotlights Funding to Fight Climate Change

By A.D. McKenzie

PARIS (IDN) – Financing is key in the fight against climate change, said delegate after delegate at the One Planet Summit in Paris December 12, and this meeting was all about the money: where to invest it and where not.

The World Bank Group announced that it would not be financing upstream oil and gas after 2019, except for certain projects in the “poorest countries”, where there is a clear benefit in terms of energy access for those in need. “The policy will change and change dramatically,” said World Bank president Jim Yong Kim.

The One Planet Summit – with many participants sporting “#make our planet great again” buttons – was held on the second anniversary of the Paris Agreement on climate change, bringing together heads of states and representatives from more than 100 countries, businesses, civil society, youth and the world’s media.

Spearheaded by French President Emmanuel Macron, in partnership with the United Nations and the World Bank, the event saw a range of public and private institutions making commitments on funding, particularly for vulnerable regions.

The summit followed on the heels of the UN climate change talks – COP 23 – in Bonn, where there was a clear sense of urgency, according to Patricia Espinosa, the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

This sense was fuelled by the “extreme weather events that were devastating to so many countries around the world”, Espinosa said at a meeting with journalists in Paris the day before the summit, on the 20th anniversary of the Kyoto Protocol.

“Lots of people are losing everything they have built throughout their lives,” she added, referring to the hurricanes and floods that recently ravaged several Caribbean states and other countries.

“Some heads of state spoke of their desperate need to get support in order to take action and recover, and build more resilient economies – this had a very high impact on everyone,” Espinosa told reporters, also emphasising that “finance is at the very centre” of finding environmental solutions.

Up to COP 23, only 30 percent of what was needed financially to combat climate change had been put on the table, according to the United Nations. The One Planet Summit aimed to change this, with several institutions and governments responding to Macron’s call to make pledges.

Canada and the World Bank Group said they would support small island developing states to expand their renewable energy infrastructure, in order to enable greater access to energy and decrease pollution.

Caribbean leaders, meanwhile, spotlighted the launch of an eight billion dollar investment plan to create the first “climate-smart zone” in the world. The plan

includes public and private entities, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank, businesses and philanthropists.

This “Caribbean Climate-Smart Coalition” aims to find a way “to break through the systemic obstacles that stop finance flowing to climate-smart investments”, stated the Caribbean Development Bank.

“The coalition aims to reinvigorate the islands that have been impacted by recent hurricanes Irma and Maria, and help build more resilient infrastructure and communities across the region as the likelihood of future extreme weather events, increases,” the bank added.

Haiti’s president Jovenel Moïse, a participant at the summit, said the region needed more support overall.

“We talk of ‘one planet’, but we also need to speak of ‘one Caribbean’ because all the Caribbean islands are vulnerable to climate change,” he said, noting that Haiti was in a “grave situation” regarding insurance against disasters.

His St. Lucia counterpart, Prime Minister Allen Michael Chastanet, said: “The hurricane season is coming next year. There is no doubt about it. The world keeps pledging money, but that money has not come.”

Chastanet said that the designation of some islands in the region as “middle income countries” (and therefore not eligible for certain types of financial assistance)



needed to be revised at the international level.

Africa was also in focus at the summit, with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) signing accords with Mauritius, Niger, Tunisia and the Comoros – as the first step in “concretising” France’s Adapt’Action Facility to support countries in their national climate action plans.

The facility, with financing of 30 million euros (approx. 35.5 million U.S. dollars) over four years, seeks to “accompany 15 developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to climate change, in the imple-

mentation of the Paris Agreement regarding adaptation to climate change,” the AFD stated.

“If we believe in the fight against climate change, there are instruments that we need to mobilise,” said AFD CEO, Rémy Rioux.

France has often been criticised for economic and environmental policies in its former colonies, and the announcements came against the backdrop of Macron’s recent bumpy visit to Africa.

Speaking to journalists on “Climate Finance Day” – a day of events organised on the eve of the One Planet Summit – Rioux

said the world needed to do more regarding adaptation and also needed to increase support to Africa.

Regarding Asia, officials at the summit said moves by China and other countries in the region were “encouraging”. China announced that all companies would be required to disclose information on their environmental impact, and that domestic green investment was being promoted. The building of coal plants abroad, however, was an issue to which some NGOs drew attention.

China’s participation in the summit was in contrast with the glaring absence of the United States – U.S. President Donald Trump announced earlier this year that the country would withdraw from the Paris Agreement.

But other American voices filled the void, including those of businessman and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, former California governor and actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, actor Sean Paul, Bill Gates and former Secretary of State John Kerry.

“The day after Trump announced the withdrawal, I met with President Macron to say that the American people remain committed to the Paris Agreement,” Bloomberg said during the summit, declaring that Trump “has helped rally people.”

“We owe President Trump a bit of gratitude for helping us meet our goals,” he added.

According to Bloomberg, businesses “are crucial” in the transformation to a low-car-

bon economy. He said that corporations are becoming environmentally friendly because “they have no choice”, as employees, investors and consumers all want change.

Bloomberg and Bank of England Governor Mark Carney announced that there was increasing support for the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), a coalition formed during the climate talks in Paris two years ago.

They told the summit that more than 230 companies with a combined market capitalisation of over 6.3 trillion U.S. dollars have committed to supporting the TCFD, in contrast to just 20 percent of companies currently reporting climate-finance information.

“The more transparent markets are, the more stable and strong the economy will be,” Bloomberg said.

The summit saw a volley of new ideas, names, acronyms and announcements in a programme that veered on the overwhelming. The European Union made climate pronouncements, as did major insurance group AXA which announced green investment of 12 billion euros (approx. 14 billion U.S. dollars) by 2020.

The EU said it would facilitate 9 billion euros (approx. 10.6 billion U.S. dollars) of investment in Africa and the EU neighbourhood region, on sustainable cities, sustainable energy and connectivity, and sustainable agriculture, rural entrepreneurs and agribusiness, as part of the EU External Investment Plan. The investment is expected to be delivered by 2020.

At one event, notable for the presence of women representatives (female speakers were rare at the summit), investors launched an initiative called Climate Action100+.

This new movement currently groups 225 investors who wish to “engage with the world’s largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters to improve governance on climate change, curb emissions and strengthen climate-related financial disclosures”, according to the stated aims.

The investors that have signed on have more 26.3 trillion U.S. dollars in assets under management, said a spokesperson.

The summit’s focus on business and investors drew the criticism of some activists. “President Macron had raised expectations that he would make a concrete announcement of more public finance

to help poor countries deal with climate impacts and scale up climate action,” stated Harjeet Singh of ActionAid International.

“Instead, business took centre stage, while announcements of public finance were disappointingly scarce. Sadly, most of the leaders at the One Planet Summit seem to have forgotten that public financing is necessary for people to protect their safety and food security from climate impacts.”

Alongside the various declarations, the question from a 12-year-old boy was a stand-out moment at the summit.

“Can you tell us what you’ll do to help children like me who will be the victims of climate change?” asked Timothy from Fiji (which chaired COP 23).

One answer came from United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres: countries need to respect commitments and make fossil fuels a thing of the past. [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 December 2017]

Image: In the third row from top, French President Macron (right) and UN Secretary-General Guterres (on his right) listen to a presentation at the One Planet Summit | Credit: A.D. McKenzie

The Global Fund To Fight AIDS Asked to Change Criteria Discriminating Poor Countries

By J C Suresh

TORONTO (IDN) – As this year’s World AIDS Day campaign – My Health, My Right – kicks into high gear, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) has called on The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to end the use of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita as part of the Fund’s grant eligibility criteria, and thus stop discriminating poor countries.

The Los Angeles based AHF is the largest nonprofit HIV organization that provides HIV care to more than 833,000 patients in 39 countries globally, including in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America & the Caribbean and the United States.

The campaign focuses on the right to health and explores the challenges people around the world face in exercising their rights. Initiating the campaign, Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, said: “All people, regardless of their age, gender, where they live or who they love, have the right to health. No matter what their health needs are, everyone requires health solutions that are available and accessible, free from discrimination and of good quality.”

The right to health is enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. This includes the right of everyone to the prevention and treatment of ill health, to make decisions about one’s

own health and to be treated with respect and dignity.

The campaign reminds people that the right to health is much more than access to quality health services and medicines, that it also depends on a range of important assurances including, adequate sanitation and housing, healthy working conditions, a clean environment and access to justice.

If a person’s right to health is compromised, they are often unable to effectively prevent disease and ill health, including HIV, or to gain access to treatment and care. The most marginalized people in society, including sex workers, people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men, people in prisons and migrants, are often the least able to access their right to health; they are also the most vulnerable to HIV.

Most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are linked in some way to health. To achieve the Goals, including ending the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030, will depend heavily on ensuring the right to health for all.

AHF President Michael Weinstein welcomed the appointment of Executive Director of The Global Fund Peter Sands on November 14, and said: “We are disappointed that the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria continues to use per capita income classification thresholds assigned to countries by the World Bank as one of the criteria for awarding grants.”



He added: “It is high time we focused on health rather than just money. It is deplorable that wealthy countries are defining what poverty means for developing countries. By any measure, \$2.76 per day is not a middle income.”

Currently, the Geneva-based Global Fund (GF) HIV grant eligibility is primarily based on a country’s World Bank lending group classification, which is tied to its GNI, and secondly based on the HIV prevalence rate as a proxy for the burden of disease, AHF said.

When a country’s GNI per capita exceeds \$3,955, the World Bank considers it an upper middle-income country (UMIC). According to the current Global Fund policy, if a UMIC does not have an exceedingly high burden of disease, it is no longer eligible for funding – even if its HIV epidemic is beginning to accelerate.

“The Global Fund has a ‘Transition Readiness Assessment’ tool that considers the economic capacity of UMICs to take over and sustain programs which are currently being funded by the GF,” said Dr. Jorge Saavedra, AHF’s Global Public Health Ambassador and former head of the national AIDS program of Mexico. “Regrettably, this process does not account for the growth of new HIV incidence as part of the formula.”

Dr. Saavedra added: “Right now, a developing country can be cut off from support even if the rate of new HIV infections is skyrocketing and its epidemic is not under control.”

He went on to say: “The use of GNI per capita thresholds developed by the World Bank for lending purposes to developing countries should not be used by the Fund, the GF is not a lending agency but a financial mechanism whose aim is to end AIDS, TB and Malaria. It’s detrimental to global public health and there are better, more nuanced ways of making sure lifesaving support gets to where people need it most.”

For the past several years, AHF has been spearheading a broad-based and global advocacy campaign to push for reforms in the way the World Bank classifies ‘middle-income countries’ (MIC). It held its most recent peaceful demonstration in October 2017 outside the World Bank’s headquarters in Washington, DC.

Building upon its ‘Raise The MIC’ global advocacy campaign, which was launched in 2015 with support from over 300

organizations and advocates in 30 countries, demonstrators called on the World Bank to set the lower limit of the MIC category at or above \$3,650 of Gross National Income per capita – equivalent to about \$10 per day – to increase poor nations’ access to foreign aid, including HIV/AIDS drugs and other essential medications.

The World Bank currently designates MICs as those with an income of at least \$2.76/day – barely above the International Poverty Line of \$1.90/day. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 November 2017]

Image credit: The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

COP23 Finally Provides a Platform for Indigenous People on Climate Talks

By Stella Paul

BONN (IDN) – Patricia Gualinga has been coming to the UN climate change conferences for several years. She usually receives 2-3 minutes on a panel of a side event on indigenous issues during which she tells about the struggles of her community – the Kichwas of Ecuador.

The struggles are, typically, of surviving in an environment where water is fast depleting, air is polluted, land is taken away and tribe members are evicted from their homes – all in the name of development. Sarayaku – where Gualinga comes from – is an Amazonian province in which the degradation is often caused by large oil explorers.

“We have protested oil exploration in Sarayaku and have been successful in stopping the oil explorers,” she said on the side lines of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference – officially known as COP23 – which ended in Bonn in the early hours of November 18.

“We did it because the oil explorers were destroying the forest where we have our homes, where we find our food and water. Oil is not development for us, the protection of the forest is. But, we are not people who blindly protest. We have solutions. We have a proposal called ‘Living Forest’ which is a roadmap to achieving sustainable development indigenous land. But we need opportunities to talk about it here (at conferences like the UN Climate conference).

However, as COP 23 concluded, indigenous activists like Gualinga had good reason to smile: for the first time, in a landmark deal, the parties agreed to create a platform for indigenous peoples to actively participate in UN climate talks.

The platform, which was first proposed at COP 21 in Paris, will both strengthen the voice of populations that are often persecuted in their countries and recognise their leading role as the guardians of the forest.

“The overall purpose of the platform will be to strengthen the knowledge, technologies, practices and efforts of local communi-

ties and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate change”, said the agreement, approved by the plenary on November 15 – also celebrated as Africa day at the conference.

Indigenous people’s role in conservation

There are an estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, who care for 22 percent of the earth’s surface, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), including “an estimated 80 percent of the planet’s remaining biodiversity”. They are also custodians of over 20% of tropical forest carbon.

The IPCC has recognised that the world has much to learn with and from local communities and indigenous peoples, the knowledge and practices of which constitute a “major resource for adapting to climate change”. Naturally, indigenous people are often seen as a strong buffer against deforestation, which is a driver of climate change.

According to Edwin Vasquez – general coordinator of Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica (COICA), the umbrella organisation of the indigenous organisations of the Amazon Basin – studies, including a recent one by COICA, have shown the forests managed by indigenous people have less deforestation than those managed by the government and other agencies.

“We have done a case study in the Yaguas National Park [in the Peruvian Amazon]. We found that wherever the forest land is managed by local indigenous communities, deforestation has stopped to over 85 percent. Compared with this, in the forest managed by other agencies that the government chose, there is still large scale deforestation,” Vasquez reported.

However, despite their strong role in conserving, indigenous people are widely discriminated against and their human rights are often violated with physical threats, attacks and numerous litigations filed against them. They also have no direct access to funds as they have not been integral to the climate action dialogues.

As a result, groups like COICA are struggling to look for alternative funding sources to generate the money the indigenous people require to conserve the forests.

“The government asks the indigenous people to manage forests, but does not give them the money they need. So now, we are starting to work on financial sustainability,” said Vasquez.

The new platform

According to a UNFCCC document, the platform came “through decision 1/CP.21 paragraph 135, with a mandate to facilitate the integration of indigenous and local knowledge systems as well as the engagement of Indigenous peoples and local communities related to climate change action, programmes and policies.”

The original proposal, submitted by the Indigenous Caucus – the group working with UNFCCC on indigenous peoples’ issues – was to:

1. Provide a platform for documenting and sharing of experiences and best practices.
2. Build capacities of indigenous peoples and local communities to help enable their engagement in UNFCCC and other relevant processes including the implementation of the Paris Agreement.
3. Integrate diverse knowledge systems and practices and innovations, besides engagement of indigenous peoples in all climate related actions, programmes and policies.

However, at COP23, countries agreed only the UNFCCC traditional knowledge platform for engagement of local commu-

nities and indigenous Peoples. The rights of indigenous peoples have not been fully recognised in the final platform document of COP 23 and so the burden of implementation falls on local communities and indigenous peoples.

While calling the new agreement a sign of progress, experts also say that it may be a long time until total inclusion of indigenous peoples in UNFCCC decisions and actions happens.

“Unfortunately, the parties with the largest indigenous people did not talk as much as they should have,” said Sebastian Duyck, a human rights lawyer at the Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) in Geneva. “The document that they have accepted only ‘recalls’ the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in its preamble. Also, the platform does not necessarily protect forests or rights. So, yes, some progress has been made, but the real operationalising will not start till the next COP in Poland.”

Smaller countries lead the fight

Both Duyck and indigenous activists agree that the definitive progress in indigenous issues was possible because of Fiji – an island nation with a large population of indigenous people. As COP23 in Bonn started, Fiji – which held the presidency this year – passionately worked to make indigenous peoples and their rights central to the negotiations.

“Having Fiji as the president has been very helpful,” said Duyck. “It opened up the doors for many to come and talk about the

issue at the COP. Hopefully, we will see some more progress in Poland.”

He added, however, that for the indigenous issues to be more integral to the climate actions, countries must have more direct references to this in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). “We have analysed the NDCs of several countries and found that only about 5-6 NDCs have direct reference to the indigenous issues and their rights. We need a change in that.”

Summarising the progress, Fernanda Carvalho, Global Climate Policy Lead at WWF International said: “At COP23, countries agreed on the objectives and functions of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform marking an important step towards their full involvement in climate discussions and action. The decision took into account the principles that have been identified as fundamental by indigenous peoples: full and effective participation – equal status and self-selection of indigenous peoples representatives.”

Cavalho agreed that having an indigenous issues champion like Fiji helped: “This was a priority for the Fiji COP Presidency and, as WWF, we welcome this legacy and would like to see it reflected in the NDCs of more countries.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 November 2017]



Image: Leaders from Indigenous communities speak at a press conference in COP 23 | Credit: Stella Paul/IDN-INPS

Further, Faster, Together On Climate - From Bonn To Katowice

By Ramesh Jaura

BONN (IDN) – The two-week long intensive and multilevel talks concluded in Germany's former capital city in the early hours of November 18 tasking the negotiators to focus on 'Where are we, where do we want to go and how do we get there?' before they meet in Poland in December 2018.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat said the Bonn Climate Conference – officially known as COP23, the 23rd session of the Conference of Parties to the Convention – had become “launch-pad for higher ambition”.

UNFCCC Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa, said: “COP23 in Bonn came against a backdrop of severe and unprecedented natural calamities that hit homes, families and economies in Asia, the Caribbean and the Americas – these reminded us of the urgency of our collective task.”

According to observers, with a large number of climate action pledges and initiatives, a strong message from all sides at COP23 was the growing need to coordinate efforts across policy, planning and investment to ensure that every cent invested and every minute of work contributed results in a much greater impact and boosts ambition under the national climate plans.

With 197 Parties, the UNFCCC has near universal membership and is the parent treaty of the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement. Its main aim is to keep a global

average temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius and to drive efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

The UNFCCC is also the parent treaty of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The ultimate objective of all agreements under the UNFCCC is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system, in a time frame, which allows ecosystems to adapt naturally and enables sustainable development.

Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks of Germany, which provided technical support to COP23, said: “In Bonn we made great progress, both with negotiating and implementing. The conference fully satisfied expectations in this regard. And it was an important step on the road to COP in Katowice next year, where we are planning to adopt the rulebook for the Paris Agreement.”

COP23, she said, was also the first Climate Change Conference following the announcement by the Trump administration of U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. “The COP in Bonn sends a powerful signal that the world is united and will not be hindered in its climate action efforts,” she added.

Parallel to the negotiations, the implementation agenda was also advanced in Bonn:

Countries, industry and civil society presented a broad spectrum of climate action solutions in hundreds of events. One example of progress outside of the negotiations is the NDC Partnership, which helps developing countries draw up national climate action strategies. The Partnership was able to considerably expand its work at COP23 in Bonn.

A report launched by the International Renewable Energy Agency during COP23 found that many countries now have higher renewable energy targets than are stated in their national climate action plans or NDCs – indicating that in some countries, at least in respect to green energy, higher ambition is already being locked in.

A special scientific report, produced for the conference by Future Earth and the Earth League, says renewable energy expansion around the globe is doubling around every 5.5 years – consistent with the complete de-carbonization of the energy sector by mid-century.

COP23 President Frank Bainimarama, the Prime Minister of Fiji, said: “I'm very pleased that COP23 has been such a success, especially given the challenge to the multilateral consensus for decisive climate action. We have done the job we were given to do, which is to advance the implementation guidelines of the Paris Agreement and prepare for more ambitious action in the Talanoa Dialogue of 2018.”



The 'Talanoa Dialogue', inspired by the Pacific concept of constructive discussion, debate and story-telling, will set the stage in Poland in December next year for the revising upwards of national climate action plans needed to put the world on track to meet pre-2020 ambition and the long-term goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The Fijian Prime Minister spoke of "a positive momentum all around us". Fiji, he said, was especially gratified how the global community had embraced our concept of a Grand Coalition for greater ambition linking national governments with states and cities, civil society, the private sector and ordinary men and women around the world.

"We leave Bonn having notched up some notable achievements, including our Ocean Pathway, the historic agreement on agriculture and others on a Gender Action Plan

and Indigenous People's Platform. We have also secured more funding for climate adaptation and launched a global partnership to provide millions of climate-vulnerable people the world over with affordable access to insurance," he added.

"Let's all leave rededicating ourselves to more ambitious action on climate change by moving Further, Faster, Together in the year ahead," said Bainimarama.

With the adoption of the Talanoa Dialogue, Espinosa said: "The conference has delivered a launch-pad that can take us to that next stage of higher ambition. It has also advanced the implementation guidelines of the Paris Agreement so that by 2018 it can truly support sustained international cooperation and national efforts to realize a more secure, prosperous and better world for all."

But Bonn 2017 did more than that, added the UNFCCC Executive Secretary. "It underlined that support for the Paris Agreement is strong and that the journey upon which the world has embarked is an unstoppable movement supported by all sectors of society, across all parts of the globe," said Espinosa.

However, ActionAid International expressed disappointment. The organization's lead on climate change, Harjeet Singh, said: "We expected much more leadership from countries who pulled together when the U.S. declared they were leaving the Paris Agreement. With this year's floods, fires and hurricanes fresh in their minds, we had assumed that they would come keen to get the job done.

"But once the talks started, the EU, Canada and Australia slunk back to their comfort

zones, siding with the U.S., instead of driving real change. They continued to put the brakes on climate action and resisted financial measures for countries struggling to cope with climate impacts,” noted Singh.

“Here in Bonn, there were some useful procedural wins in the areas of pre-2020 action, agriculture, Indigenous Peoples and gender. And with the talks presided over by Fiji, a small island state, the challenges faced by climate-impacted countries took centre stage. But even though vulnerable communities were in the spotlight, this still hasn’t translated into the support that they need. It seems that the world is not yet ready to offer hope to people facing the impacts of climate change,” the ActionAid International’s Singh said.

The COP23 President and the UN Climate Change Executive Secretary outlined some highlights from the 2017 UN climate conference as a result of the negotiations; the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action and the myriad of High-Level and other events:

- Long-term Finance – Countries welcomed progress but also urged greater efforts to deliver the agreed USD 100 Billion per year by 2020 for support to developing countries to take climate action.
- Adaptation Fund Exceeds 2017 Target – The target for funding this year was \$80 million, but funding announcements including by Germany and Italy has exceed this by over \$13 million taking the total to \$93.3 million.
- Breakthrough in Agriculture – there was an historic political breakthrough in respect to agriculture that may lead to a faster and more coordinated response by nations to address a sector that is the second biggest emitter after energy.
- The Government of Norway, the multinational company Unilever and other partners announced a \$400 million fund to support more efficient agriculture, smallholder farmers and sustainable forest management.
- Gender Action Plan –The crucial role of women in combating climate change will be formally supported through the plan. This is important given that women tend to be especially vulnerable

to climate change impacts and should not be excluded from decision-making regarding actions and solutions. The Plan aims to make women part of all climate change projects and decisions internationally and nationally.

- Local Communities and Indigenous People’s Platform – A political and practical achievement that aims to support the full and equal role of indigenous people in climate action while recognizing the responsibility of governments to respect the rights of indigenous peoples in these decisions.
- Launch of the Ocean Pathway Partnership – It aims, by 2020, to strengthen action and funding that links climate change action with healthy oceans including through the UN Climate Change process and via more explicit aims and ambitions in national climate action plans.
- Launch of Network of Pacific Island Journalists – Ten award-winning media from Fiji, Samoa; Solomon Islands; Papua New Guinea; Tonga and Vanuatu, attending the conference with funding from the Government of Germany and support from the Deutsche Welle Academy and UN Climate Change, announced the formation of a new association aimed at strengthening climate media reporting across the Pacific.
- InsuResilience Initiative announced a new Global Partnership and an additional \$125 million from the Government of Germany to support its aim of providing affordable cover to 400 more million poor and vulnerable people by 2020.
- Launch of Fiji Clearing House for Risk Transfer – A new online platform using artificial intelligence to help vulnerable countries find affordable insurance and solutions to avoid climate risk.
- The governments of Germany and the United Kingdom along with other partners announced \$153 million to expand programs to fight climate change and deforestation in the Amazon.
- The European Investment Bank formally announced \$75 million for a new \$405 million investment programme by the Water Authority of Fiji to strengthen resilience of water distribution and wastewater treatment for close to 300,000 people living in and around the capital Suva.
- America’s Pledge brings together private and public sector lead-

ers to ensure the U.S. remains a global leader in reducing emissions and delivers the country's climate goals under the Paris Agreement

- The Green Climate Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development announced over \$37 million of GCF grant financing to the \$243 million Saïss Water Conservation Project to assist Morocco with more resilient agriculture.

- Powering Past Coal Alliance brings together 25 countries, states and regions to accelerate the rapid phase-out of coal and support affected workers and communities to make the transition.

- The UN Development Programme, Germany, Spain and EU launched a EUR 42 million NDC Support Programme to assist countries deliver on the Paris Agreement.

- The existing NDC Partnership announced the establishment of a new regional hub to support implementation of national climate action plans or NDCs in the Pacific.

- 13 countries and the International Energy Agency announced EUR 30 million to the 'IEA Clean Energy Transitions Programme' to support clean energy transitions around the world.

- Launch of New Small Island Developing State (SIDS) Health initiative – The World Health Organization, in collaboration with the UN Climate Change secretariat and Fijian COP23 Presidency, announced a special initiative to protect people living in SIDS from the health impacts of climate change. Its goal is, by 2030, to triple the levels of international financial support to climate and health in those countries

- The Bonn-Fiji Commitment was made – a commitment to action adopted by over 300 local and regional leaders to deliver the Paris Agreement at all levels, supported with 20 initiatives including those focusing on Africa, islands, post-industrial cities and climate reporting standards.

During COP23, it was announced that Syria had ratified the Paris Agreement, raising the number of ratifications to 170. Six countries have ratified the Doha Amendment (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden) taking total ratifications to 90 countries. Eight countries have ratified the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol (Comoros, Finland, Germany, Lao Peo-

ple's Democratic Republic, Luxembourg, Maldives, Slovakia and the UK), raising the number of ratifications to 19 countries in total. [IDN-InDepthNews – 19 November 2017]

Image: COP23 Venue | Credit: German Environment Ministry

Vatican Conference Underlines Nexus Between Sustainable Development and Nuclear Weapons Ban

By Ramesh Jaura



VATICAN CITY (IDN) – When world leaders approved ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, as an outcome document of the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development two years ago, they designated it as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” that “also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom”.

The document, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, is based on a consensus emerging from protracted discussions within the Open Working Group. It

meticulously avoids words such as “a world free of nuclear weapons”.

However, the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly includes a Declaration, which explains “the interlinkages and integrated nature” of SDGs: “Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development.” The Peace, Security and Development Nexus was stressed by a meeting organised by the UN jointly with the African Union on September 28-29, 2017.

That nexus was boldly highlighted by the International Symposium organized by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development on November 10-11 on Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament.

In a Vatican communique, Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the dicastery, said the event “responds to the priorities of Pope Francis to take action for world peace and to use the resources of creation for a sustainable development and to improve the quality of life for all, individuals and countries, without discrimination.”

The Dicastery brought together religious leaders and representatives of civil society, officials of States and international organizations, eminent academics and Nobel Laureates and students, to highlight the linkages between integral disarmament and integral development, and to explore the links among development, disarmament and peace. In doing so, it was acting on the maxim of Pope Francis: “Everything is connected.”

At a time when North Korea and the United States continue to flex their nuclear muscles, Pope Francis told participants on November 10 that “in the light of the complex political challenges of the current international scene, marked as it is by a climate of instability and conflict,” the prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons might “appear increasingly remote.”

“Indeed the escalation of the arms race continues unabated, and the price of mod-

ernizing and developing weaponry, not only nuclear weapons, represents a considerable expense for nations.

“As a result, the real priorities facing our human family, such as the fight against poverty, the promotion of peace, the undertaking of educational, ecological and health care projects, and the development of human rights, are relegated to second place,” said the pontiff stressing the Peace, Security and Development Nexus.

Nuclear weapons reflect a “mentality of fear,” he added, while insisting that an effective and inclusive effort nevertheless can lead to the dismantling of arsenals. “International relations cannot be held captive to military force, mutual intimidation, and the parading of stockpiles of arms,” the Pope continued. “Weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, create nothing but a false sense of security. They cannot constitute the basis for peaceful co-existence between members of the human family, which must rather be inspired by an ethics of solidarity.”

In this context, he referred to the Hibakusha, the survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with other victims of nuclear testing such as those on the Marshall Islands.

The Pope regretted that nuclear technologies are spreading, also through digital communications, and the instruments of international law have not prevented new states from joining those already in possession of nuclear weapons. “The resulting scenarios are deeply disturbing if we

consider the challenges of contemporary geopolitics, like terrorism or asymmetric warfare,” he added.

“At the same time, a healthy realism continues to shine a light of hope on our unruly world.” In this context, he referred to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which was “mainly the result of a ‘humanitarian initiative’ sponsored by a significant alliance between civil society, states, international organizations, churches, academics and groups of experts.”

The Vatican conference was the first major global gathering on disarmament since 122 countries signed a new UN treaty on July 7 that calls for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The Vatican is one of three signatories that have already ratified the agreement. None of the nuclear powers and no NATO members have signed on to the Treaty.

Cardinal Turkson in his opening remarks said, while the desire for peace, security and stability is one of the deepest longings of the human heart, “and it is understandable that people, moved by fear, desperately demand more safety and security,” the way to respond to such a demand is not through the proliferation of arms of mass destruction in general, nor through nuclear weapons in particular. “This not only increases the problem of security, but also reduces nations’ financial capabilities to invest in matters that are conducive to long-term peace, such as health, the creation of jobs, or the caring for the environment.”

He recalled that the nations of the world, emerging from World War II, resolved in the Charter of the United Nations, “to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources” (Article 26).

Cardinal Turkson also drew attention to an alarming analysis of military spending former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, a five-star general of World War II, provided in his “Chance for Peace” speech in 1953, delivered shortly after the death of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

“The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities or two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population or two fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron. [...] Is there no other way the world may live?”

Pointing to modern day contradictions, 2006 Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus said: “We are fortunate enough to have been born in an age of great possibilities – an age of amazing technologies, of great wealth, and of limitless human potential. Now the solutions to many of our world’s pressing problems – including problems like hunger, poverty, and disease that have plagued humankind since before the dawn of history – are within reach.

“But the same technologies that can transform human civilization for the better, can also eliminate us all. This brings us to the subject of this conference at which we have assembled. The nuclear arms build up and race can lead us to a human disaster of proportions that we cannot imagine. It is time we work collectively stop this race. Just as we want to create a world without poverty we would also want to create a world without nuclear weapons, where the only place where they could be found is in a museum.”

Calling a spade a spade, Alexei Arbatov, formerly a member of the State Duma and deputy chairman of the Duma Defense Committee, and now a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences said: “Whether nuclear deterrence in the past had saved the world or not – it will not provide such assurance in the future. Human civilization, which is sustaining its security with the ability to exterminate itself during several hours of nuclear warfare, does not deserve the title of ‘civilization’. It is high time to find an alternative insurance.”

Izumi Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs United Nations (UN-ODA), focussed her remarks on November 10 “on the role of the disarmament and non-proliferation regime as a diplomatic pillar that reinforces international peace and security.”

Disarmament was a founding principle of the United Nations, Nakamitsu said. It is reflected in both the Charter, which calls for “the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources” and for a system to regulate armaments, and the very first General Assembly resolution, which sought to eliminate “atomic weapons and all other weapons adaptable to mass destruction”.

Hikomasa Ikeda, Vice President of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a lay Buddhist organization based in Tokyo, stressed in his remarks on November 11 the need to “help people awaken from the mad nightmare” of nuclear deterrence, by which the world’s citizens are held hostage and “peace” is maintained by a balance of terror.

“We need to awaken people from the present nightmare with the bright lights of a new vision. Concepts such as integral disarmament, human security and human development all indicate the orientation for such a vision,” Ikeda said.

“Within the disarmament field, humanitarian concerns have provided such orientation. They have helped introduce a human perspective to the security discourse. The

humanitarian discourse has led to an explicit recognition within the international community of the impermissible nature of nuclear weapons, contributing importantly to the realization of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW),” he continued.

“Underlying the humanitarian discourse has been the assertion that the nuclear weapons issue is not just a question of international law, but has a distinctly ethical and moral dimension,” Ikeda asserted.

“Here the role played by the world’s religious traditions has been noteworthy,” said Ikeda, adding that Pope Francis issued a statement to both the 2014 Vienna Conference and the TPNW negotiating conference held in New York this year, positively impacting the debate. “For its part, the SGI actively participated in the initiative by Faith Communities Concerned about Nuclear Weapons, which issued a total of eight joint statements to the UN General Assembly, the NPT Review Conference and TPNW negotiating conference, urging the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.”

“The Preamble of the TPNW recognizes the efforts made by religious leaders,” Ikeda pointed out. “This is a clear acknowledgement that the voices raising ethical or moral concerns have been an indispensable element in the international discourse over the years.”

Ikeda said: “Within the SGI, we have given sustained consideration to the kind of approach that would most effectively engage a broad-based public constituency in the debate on nuclear weapons abolition. The concept we developed is expressed in the phrase, ‘Everything You Treasure’.”

The Vatican said in a 12-point preliminary document summarising the highlights of the conference: “Everything is connected; and everyone is connected. Together we can rid the world of nuclear weapons, invest in integral human development, and build peace.” It added: “These preliminary conclusions do not represent the end of the conversation, but rather the beginning of future dialogue and action.”

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Encyclical Letter written by Pope Paul VI on the topic of “the development of peoples”.

Pope Francis told the Vatican conference participants that the letter released in March 1967 had set forth the notion of integral human development and proposed it as “the new name of peace”.

Pope Paul VI stated succinctly: “Development cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be integral; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 November 2017]

Image: A view of the Vatican Conference on November 10-11, 2017 | Credit: Katsuhiko Asagiri/IDN-INPS

Data, Evidence Take Centre Stage at Adolescent Health Congress

By Stella Paul



NEW DELHI (IDN) – For three years, 13-year-old migrant Manasa spent nine hours a day picking chilli on a neighbour’s farm in southern India’s Guntur district.

But when a team of local health activists conducting a door-to-door survey in her village in the summer of 2015 found that students had stopped attending school, the finding was shared with a senior official in the provincial government who ordered the village heads to crack down on those employing children on their farms.

Along with 20 others, Manasa was rescued and sent back to school where she is now in her fifth year and dreams of becoming a teacher some day.

Across India and the world, credible data and evidence gathered by the governments and NGOs have been helping improve the lives and health of thousands of adolescents like Manasa.

This was emphasised by numerous experts at the 11th World Congress on Adolescent Health held here from October 27-29, who agreed that more data, better maps and evidence are crucial for better addressing the crimes and health challenges faced by adolescents across the world.

Speaking to IDN on the sidelines of the event, Dr. Sunil Mehra, Executive Director of the MAMTA Health Institute for Mother and

Child (MAMTA-HIMC) – one of the organisers of the congress – said that the world has been slow in taking adolescent health seriously. But, barely 10 years after the first Congress was held, much progress had been made thanks to an “evidence-based approach”.

Evidence-based approach

Across the world there are 1.2 billion adolescents, and India alone is home to 21 percent or 253 million of them. With every fifth adolescent in the world an Indian, the country had a population too big to ignore and so in 2014, India became the world’s first country to launch a specific programme – Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) – for improving adolescent health and nutrition, and protect them from violence.

So far, 7,000 health clinics have been opened under the programme to serve adolescents and about 30,000 adolescents have been trained to counsel and educate others in their communities.

According to Mehra, data has been crucial in implementation of RKSK, which runs across 230 (of 707) districts. “We now have more evidence to say that if our adolescents do not get married before 18, it will bring significant effects on the economic output of the country, on addressing poverty, addressing under nutrition, anaemia and repeated pregnancies. This is possible because we have collected enough evidence, including from lower and middle income countries,” Mehra says.

But producing data and evidence needs money. Mehra shares an example: it took him about 25-30 rupees (about 5 dollars) to produce data for a study he recently conducted on the status and progress of Indian adolescents. “Multiply this 253 million times and that is the number we are looking at,” he said before pointing out that few in the non-profit sectors could afford to spend, so there has to be a greater government, NGO and private sector partnership on data.

Cross-sectoral collaboration

At the same time, because the issues of adolescents are multiple

– including education, economic, health and security, to name a few – a cross- sector approach is needed in conducting research and gathering data.

The best way to go, suggested Mehra, is with holistic ‘adolescent budgeting’, so that every department within the government has enough money allocated for data and evidence on adolescents. The skills of the workforce employed in the job also need to be strictly monitored and improved, he added.

Citing figures from a study he presented at the congress, Mehra said that the road accidents kill 22,000 adolescents each year. To prevent this, there needs to be a seamless collaboration among different agencies regulating traffic laws, policies and safety and risk mitigation programmes.

However, health ministry officials say that the current budget for adolescents – 3,500 million Indian rupees – is quite adequate. “The money that we spend now is enough to implement RKSK and achieve the [Sustainable Development Goals] (SDGs) as well, said Sushma Dureja, Deputy Commissioner at the ministry. She also asserts that the current workforce is both adequately skilled and sensitised on adolescent issues.

India is currently running Digital India – an ambitious campaign that aims to connect the country’s entire population to Internet. According to Dureja, programmes like RKSK will benefit from such campaigns by using more digital tools to contact more adolescents, delivering relevant information and educating them in relevant issues.

Currently, the programme is using a mobile application called ‘Sathiya’, social media and a digital database. “The digital India campaign will give our work a boost as we can get data from newer places,” she noted.

However, Dureja admitted that the size of the adolescent population in India is a huge challenge. The size adds complexities to the problems, she pointed out, and that is one reason why action is slower than expected,

“Take the cases of school drop-outs. Adolescent girls drop out, and by the time it’s noticed, they are already married away. So we have cases like this in millions, spread across urban and rural

areas, in mainstream and marginalised communities ... all of this makes it complicated, she said.

Action now

Mehra has a solution: do not wait for all the data to be on the table, but start taking action even as the data starts to trickle in. “That’s the approach we took in the MDG era and we lost a few initial years to take action. This time, we need to have data and action run parallel,” he told IDN.

Mehra’s suggestion received a huge cheer from Gogontlejang Phaladi (Gigi) – an adolescent participant activist from Botswana. “We need four things right now: action, action, action and action”, said the young activist to huge roars of applause from the audience.

“We need political will and intent, policies, we need data, innovations but above all, we need urgent action on adolescents.”

[IDN-InDepthNews – 30 October 2017]

Image (top): A panel of experts discussing mental health challenges faced by adolescents at the 11th World Congress on Adolescent Health in New Delhi

Image (bottom): Manasa, an adolescent rescued from child labor in India’s Guntur. Her rescue was made possible by a survey conducted by the district administration on school dropouts | Credit: Stella Paul/IDN-INPS



Traditional Knowledge and Education Major Themes at Arctic Circle Assembly

By Lowana Veal

REYKJAVIK (IDN) – “Islanders have nothing to do with climate change though they may suffer the most,” Nainoa Thompson from the Polynesian Voyaging Society told an Arctic Circle seminar focusing on global perspectives on traditional knowledge, science and climate change. Thompson comes from Hawaii, but his co-speakers came from Thailand, Chad, Fiji, Kenya and Norwegian Lapland.

The plight of South Pacific islanders was one of the main themes of this year’s Arctic Circle Assembly, organised in Reykjavik for the fifth consecutive year. This year’s event (held from October 13 to 15) was particularly broad in scope, with a choice of 105 breakout sessions (seminars) as well as speeches and panel discussions.

In recent years, marine pollution and the impact of microplastics on oceans have become very topical. In an attempt to tackle this problem, Dutch physical oceanographer Erik van Sebille has devised an interactive map to track the fate of plastics.

Reporting that more than 70 percent of all floating plastic emanating from northwest Europe ends up in the Arctic, he and his colleagues organised an expedition to Svalbard and Jan Mayen earlier this year where they found a piece of damaged fishing net that had originally entered the sea off Nova Scotia in the year 2000, along with a small plastic ship that was traced to a 1958 cereal packet in the United Kingdom.

Tom Barry from the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna programme introduced the State of Arctic Marine Biodiversity report for monitoring, which came out in May 2017 and includes key findings and advice for monitoring. “The key tool is the framework the marine plan has put in place to facilitate repeatable reporting and communicating on the status and trends of Arctic marine biodiversity,” he said.

Barry noted that disappearing sea ice has an effect on plant and animal life because when sea ice disappears it poses a challenge for various communities.

Like last year, Inuit communities were a major focus at the three-

day gathering, but this time the emphasis was more on traditional knowledge (TK) than renewable energy.

Memorial University in Canada has developed a programme called Smart Ice, which coordinates science with local traditional issues. The initiative involves listening to and working with communities, bringing people together, identifying priorities, and integrating TK with university knowledge. Canadian northern communities, which consist largely of Inuit peoples, rely to a great extent on sea ice for hunting, wood collection and other necessities.

In Norway, reported Anders Oskal from Norway’s International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry, the Arctic Council’s Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme works with reindeer herders and how they deal with climate change.

“The Arctic Council has been pioneering in including TK,” he said, but “the research side is more accepting of TK than is the management side, who say ‘we need objective knowledge to manage’... There is a need for more indigenous institutions, transboundary institutions, that blend the two types of knowledge, as some reindeer herders have PhDs.”

TK is included in the Paris Agreement on climate change and a traditional peoples’ platform has been set up to exchange knowledge, the Assembly heard. “A traditional peoples’ and communities’ pavilion will be set up in Bonn at COP 23 (the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference) which will involve seven regions,” said Hindou Ibrahim, co-chair of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change.

Action by individuals played an important role this year. Marco Braun from Canadian consultancy Ouranos pointed out in a plenary on climate change and energy that there is a time-lag of about 30 years after “switching off” – meaning that we need to act now if we are to curb climate change.

Developed at a few weeks’ notice at the 2016 UN Climate Change Conference (COP 22) in Marrakech last year at the instigation of former Icelandic president Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, who

also spearheaded the notion of an Arctic Circle assembly, The Roadmap mission was introduced in a plenary session at the assembly.

This consists of 20 constructive statements with a focus on 'Doers', as exemplified by the first statement of the Roadmap: "We believe the time is now. The time to take action. The time to do what has to be done to bring about the changes outlined in the Paris accords. The time to stop talking about 'What' and start figuring out 'How'."

The Assembly was also the venue for the first discussion about sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the Arctic. These will take place once a month and will eventually report back to the Arctic Council meeting in September 2018. Various issues were brought up, from the need for hunting communities in Greenland to have an input to the need to "get beyond the rhetoric" in relation to issues such as sustainable mining.

Maria Mjoll Jonsdottir, United Nations Director at Iceland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, told the audience. "Everything goes back to the main challenge, which is climate change. Iceland is looking at greener land; fish are moving to warmer waters. There is an integrated nature to these issues." However, "Goal (SDG) 5, gender equality and the empowerment of women, is a key driver for reaching the other goals," she concluded.

Education is another key issue, according to Heather Nicol from Trent University in Canada, who said that SDG goals should be made more applicable to small northern

communities. "How do you support educational opportunities in small communities in the north that do not have much access to education," she asked. "And in relation to SDGs 16 and 17, she continued, "how does technology affect education and social infrastructure?"

The education issue also cropped up in other seminars. In a session on Arctic youth and sustainable futures, Diane Hirshberg from the University of Alaska Anchorage pointed out that access to education can be limited in small Alaskan communities. "If you decide to move from your home community, you may end up having more students in your class than in your entire home community," she said. "Sometimes," she continued, "you may have to learn a second language" if the new school does not teach in the person's native language. This produces stress and upheaval. Similar concerns also occur in Greenland.

The University of the Arctic (UArctic) is made up of a group of universities, research institutes and various organisations dealing with education and research in northern climes. Its Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security has been holding seminars every year at the Arctic Circle Assembly. One seminar this year looked at the environmental damage caused by the military in peacetime and another looked at climate change as the new security threat.

Lassi Heinonen from the University of Lapland was one of the organisers of the sessions. He explained that at least 141 million tonnes of CO2 equivalents were re-

leased during the Iraq war between March 2003 and 2007. "The military is some sort of protected polluter," he says. "Think of all the resources used during the military exercise with Russia and Belarus a few weeks ago," he pointed out, referring to the ZAPAD 2017 exercise.

During the Cold War, parts of Russia became a dumping ground for old ammunition, petroleum products and other military debris. Anatoly Shevchuk, professor at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, described Russia's clean-up of the dumping ground of Franz Josef archipelago which has been ongoing since 2012, and says they are about to start work on cleaning up Kola Bay.

A second seminar looked at climate change as the new threat. In this, Wilfrid Greaves from Canada's University of Victoria looked at climate change versus urbanisation, pointing out that cities with large infrastructures are more vulnerable to climate change while the impact of climate change on cities is underestimated. "Warming in urban areas is 10 times that of non-urban areas," he noted. [IDN-InDepthNews – 25 October 2017]

Cuban Youth Mastering the Art of Economic Improvisation

By Julia Rainer

TRINIDAD, Cuba (IDN) – Trinidad, one of the most popular cities in Cuba, is a place where time seems to stand still. At least that is what the thousands of tourists who come here every year from all over the world are made to believe.

Colonial cathedrals and majestic houses have been guarding the city for hundreds of years and are beautifully restored as if time had never passed. Indeed, the picturesque city – together with the marvellous surrounding sugarcane plantations – were declared UNESCO world cultural heritage in 1988.

It is part of Trinidad's unique charm that nothing is supposed to change – a concept that can be transferred to Cuba's tourism strategy as a whole.

In recent years there has been an enormous trend to travel to the island nation in the middle of the Caribbean, precisely because the decades of isolation and the socialist economic system led by Fidel Castro have left the country in an almost "time capsule" state.

Low crime rates and the stable – or enshrined – political conditions compared with other Central American countries have added to the appeal of Cuba as the tourist destination to visit.

Following loosening of U.S. restrictions on Cuba and with U.S. tourists increasingly starting to frequent the island, the former "outsider" Cuba has risen to new heights,

gaining much of its national income through tourism.

2016 was the first year in which more than four million tourists travelled to the island. This year there have been 45 percent more visitors from North America, 33 percent more from Europe and 16 percent more from Latin America.

However, Cuba finds itself with a dilemma – tourists are flooding the nation to see that nothing has changed for hundreds of years, but in order to deal with these developments the government needs to allow innovation, change and progress to be part of the process.

Furthermore it is not possible to fully preserve a socialist economic system while allowing millions of people from capitalist countries to enter the state.

Cuba is waking up from its isolation like Sleeping Beauty, caught in a mixed system with socialist and capitalist influences.

Confronted with tourists constantly displaying their iPhones and waving other brand new technical gadgets in their faces, Cubans are beginning to call for change, and it is island's young people who are at the forefront of the arousal.

Just a few decades ago, many Cubans saw little to no possibility of being successful within the country. Now many of the young generation are impatient to see where newly-arrived progress can lead their country.

Lyhán Arango Alfonso, Carlos Alberto Alonso Duffay (known as Carlitos), Laura Vaillant and Yilién Moje are four young entrepreneurs living in Trinidad, who have taken the bull by the horns.

They recently opened a coffee shop/bar in the city centre that is the exact opposite of what many tourists are expecting to see in a traditional Cuban setting. It is not the sound of salsa and reggaeton, but European and American electro-music, which is attracting the locals and tourists who frequent the bar.

The location, a real eye-catcher, looks like you could have stumbled in there off one of Berlin's trendy streets or one of New York's boho-chic neighbourhoods. Chairs hang from the ceiling and the unique artwork, made by co-owner Laura, is nowhere to be found in the cliché tourist shops of the city.

The only hint of its Cuban origin is a book with the diaries of revolutionary Che Guevara, controversially placed on a bridal magazine on one of the tables.

A few years ago, opening an establishment like this would have been impossible due to strict government regulations on economic activity. The experience of owning a business is therefore relatively new for many Cubans.

In a country where education and access to university is free and well established, but where – after years of studying – a lawyer earns 20 to 25 dollars a month, many



are now trying to explore this new-found economic freedom.

Like the group of friends from Trinidad who transformed the living room of Carlito's family home into one of the most striking bars of the hundred-year old city in just 15 days.

Lyhán and Carlitos, who knew each other from university, were the founders of the project. "One day I went to Carlito's house and said: Hey, you have such a good place

to make a bar, right?" "OK, let's do it," he replied.

"And we just started. We didn't have anything to make a bar. We didn't have money, no music records, we just started making it with the stuff we could find", Lyhán recalls with pride. Carlito's mother immediately supported their idea, offering a huge part of her house to the two young men in their early twenties.

What may not seem like a big deal in

capitalist countries means a great deal in a place where one of the only possibilities for income and engaging freely in the economic system is the tourism sector.

This is why there are thousands of Cubans sharing their homes with tourists in so called "casa particulares", more or less the airbnb of Cuba.

With Carlito taking care of the location and his grandmother offering tables and some of the decor, local art school student Lau-

ra pitched in with her decorating work and start-up money came from Lyhán who worked at night as a musician in the city's many restaurants. Yilién, a local girl speaking French – which is a real asset in the highly touristic city – was the last to join the group, and the “fantastic four”, as they call themselves, were complete.

There was no business plan, no real seed capital, no security, just a dream to build a place that was completely different to anything else that could be found in Trinidad. One day they even hope to transform the bar into a local cultural centre, where the aspiring artists and musicians of the city will be able to perform.

In order to get their project under way, they could have taken money from the state, which was supporting new business owners, but because they did not know if their plan could be successful, they did not dare taking the risk and decided to rely only on themselves.

And so far it has worked. They celebrated their first day in business on November 25, 2016, a memorable day in every sense, as Lyhán recalls. “We were just starting the inauguration party, when there was suddenly a lot of commotion. By chance we had opened our bar on the same day that Fidel Castro died!”

The four young entrepreneurs still face constant challenges, like the country's bureaucracy which is difficult to deal with. For example, the government currently does not issue permits for bars, so the group had to resort to a restaurant permit which results in having to pay much higher taxes.

Sometimes an undercover government official visits the bar to check how many customers are being served and adjust the tax to be paid, which can then be relatively high, although the bar might only have had one very lucrative day.

Despite all obstacles the business is going well. Maybe the secret to success is that the friends have resorted to a strategy that most Cubans have been following successfully for decades – improvising and making the best of any situation.

Indeed, even improvisation was needed when it came to the sign for the group's bar, which is known as ‘El Mago’ – The Magician.

Due to the fact that the city is a world cultural heritage, it is not allowed by law to put up new signs on colonial walls.

So, as always, a creative way was found to deal with this challenge. Every day, on his way to open the bar, Carlito carries a suitcase with the name of the establishment painted on it, which he then carefully hangs up over the door.

It seems ironic that it is a suitcase – a symbol for the many people who have left the country over the decades in order to find their future somewhere else – which might now be determining the future of four young entrepreneurs.

[IDN-InDepthNews – 15 October 2017]

Image credit: Julia Rainer/IDN-INPS

UN Chief Opts for Preventive Diplomacy Over Post-Conflict Peacekeeping

By Shanta Roy

NEW YORK (IDN) – Faced with an increasing number of unresolved political and military crises – including in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Kashmir, Palestine, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – UN Secretary-General António Guterres has appointed a High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation to guide him on the road ahead.

The primary mandate of the Board will be preventive diplomacy – based on the age-old axiom that prevention (diplomacy) is far better than the cure (post-conflict peacekeeping).

The creation of the new Board has been prompted mostly by the paralysis of the 15-member Security Council – the UN’s most influential body with power to declare war and peace – which remains deadlocked even as the five veto-wielding permanent members, namely the U.S., UK, France, Russia and China, are more pre-occupied protecting their own political, economic and military interests than saving the world at large.

George A. Lopez, the Hesburgh Professor of Peace Studies, Emeritus, at the Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame, who closely monitors also political developments in the world body, told IDN that with the creation of the Advisory Board, Guterres “clearly aims for the UN to be more proactive in violence prevention during crisis escalation and more effective in forging ceasefires during hostilities”.

Describing the Board as a serious group of heavy hitters, he said the 9 men-9 women group includes two Nobel Peace Laureates, five former Presidents and Prime Ministers, and an all-star cast of former diplomats.

“Guterres has assembled a team with global political clout that will leverage its prestige and experience to move warring parties to the mediation table more quickly and effectively than Special Envoys or the Security Council has been able to achieve of late,” said Lopez, a former Vice-President at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington DC and a former member of the UN Panel Of Experts on North Korea.

A longtime UN observer told IDN the Security Council is obviously good only at condemnation, imposing sanctions, and/or naming Special Envoys.

“It is not sufficiently versatile to push parties to mediation. For most warring parties it will be ‘bad for the legitimacy of their case’ if they were to turn away a team of 7 or 9 of these prestigious folks. So this Board becomes a wedge in the door.”

He pointed out that the UN has had for a decade a fairly effective technical group of mediation experts called the Mediation Support Unit. These are first-rate practitioners, but certainly don’t carry the recognition/clout of the Board.

But whether the new Board will be politically effective or just another group of ineffective advisors remains to be seen, he added.

Asked why Guterres had not mentioned the words “preventive diplomacy” when he announced the new Board, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said: “You know, he may not have mentioned those two words. (But) I think he did highlight the putting together of extremely high-profile men and women from around the world who he will call on, as needed, in mediation efforts, which is definitely, I think, as anybody would describe it, part of a preventive diplomatic effort when needed. So, I think it remains very high on his agenda.”

Asked if there would be an office to coordinate and service the Board, Dujarric told reporters October 5, it will be coordinated by the UN Secretariat staff in New York.

Clarifying further he said: “This is not a job. This is voluntary participation. They will be called upon at different times by the Secretary-General to work on preventive diplomacy, to work on mediation. And they have said they would be available as needed.”

He also said the Secretary-General intends to call a meeting and bring them to New York, “I think, in the near future”.

The 18 members are expected to serve at the Secretary-General’s discretion.

“When he feels there are conflicts or tensions in various places in



the world, where he needs to...(and) there is room for UN mediation, he may call upon one of the members of the board who he feels may be best suited to work ...on that crisis,” Dujarric added.

When the UN announced the Board on September 13, it described the 18 members as current and former global leaders, senior officials and renowned experts who bring together an unparalleled range of experience, skills, knowledge and contacts.

Guterres said the establishment of the Board is part of the “surge in diplomacy for peace” that he has consistently advocated, and gives due priority to the prevention and

mediation work of the United Nations.

The Board is expected to allow the United Nations to work more effectively with regional organizations, non-governmental groups and others involved in mediation around the world.

The 18 members include: President Michelle Bachelet (Chile), who is serving a second, non-consecutive, term as President of Chile and is the former – and first – Executive Director of UN Women; Radhika Coomaraswamy (Sri Lanka), an internationally recognized lawyer and human rights advocate who was UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women,

and between 2006-2012 Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict; Leymah Gbowee (Liberia), and a 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate and founder of the Liberia Reconciliation Initiative and co-founder and former Executive Director of Women in Peacebuilding Network/West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WIPNET/WANEP).

Another distinguished member is: Jean-Marie Guéhenno (France), a former French diplomat who served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations between 2000 and 2008 and President of the International Crisis Group, an independent organization working to prevent wars and shape policies to build a more peaceful world, since 2014.

Also on the Board is Tarja Halonen, President of Finland from 2000-2012, the first woman to hold the post. She is currently a member of the Council of Women World Leaders, a network of current and former women prime ministers and presidents whose primary goal is to draw on the experience of its members to support women’s full participation and representation in the political process at the highest levels.

Also members are: David Harland (New Zealand), Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a private diplomacy organization with its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, that works globally to help prevent, mitigate or resolve armed conflicts through dialogue and mediation; Noeleen Heyzer (Singapore), a Member of the Board of Trustees of the National

University of Singapore (2013-present) as well as Distinguished Fellow at the Singapore Management University and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore (2016-present). She also served, from 2007-2014, as Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and, from 1994-2007, as Executive Director of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) now a part of the UN Women.

Other members are: Nasser Judeh (Jordan), a member of the Jordanian Senate and the Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Jordan, a position he held between 2009 and 2017; Ramtane Lamamra (Algeria), was Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Algeria between 2013 and 2017 and in that capacity played a prominent role in regional mediation efforts, including leading them in Mali; Graça Machel (Mozambique), a former freedom fighter, the first Minister of Education of Mozambique (1975-1989), and an international advocate for women's and children's rights.

Additionally, the Board includes Asha-Rose Migiro (Tanzania), High Commissioner of Tanzania to the United Kingdom and who previously served, between 2007-2012, as the third Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations in which capacity she championed the UN's fight against poverty through effort to meet the Millennium Development Goals; Raden Mohammad Marty Muliana Natalegawa (Indonesia), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia (2009-2014), Permanent Representative to the UN and Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland; Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria), President of the Republic of Nigeria from 1999 to 2007, and before that Head of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces from 1976 to 1979; Roza Otunbayeva (Kyrgyzstan), former President of Kyrgyzstan who also served as both Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the newly independent country; Michèle Pierre-Louis (Haiti), Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and Public Security of Haiti from September 2008 to November 2009.

Also on the Board are José Manuel Ramos-Horta (Timor-Leste), Nobel laureate, journalist and promoter of independence for

Timor-Leste for thirty years, and who served as Foreign Minister, Prime Minister and Head of State of the newly independent Timor-Leste; Gert Rosenthal (Guatemala), Minister of Planning and Foreign Minister between 1969-1974 and 2006-2008, respectively – and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from 1989-1997; and the Right Reverend Justin Welby (United Kingdom), Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Anglican Communion since 2013. [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 October 2017]

Image: Secretary-General António Guterres addresses Security Council meeting on Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Preventive Diplomacy and Transboundary waters. To his right is President Evo Morales Ayma of Bolivia |

Credit: Kim Haughton/UN Photo

Giving Visibility – and Land Rights – to the Indigenous

By Fabíola Ortiz

STOCKHOLM (IDN) – Indigenous peoples are all but invisible on the development agenda but a hoped for change is on the cards with the launch of the world's first and only funding institution to support the efforts of local and native communities to secure rights over their lands and resources.

“Include us, so that we can protect our lands for our children and protect the planet's biodiversity for all the world's children,” said by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during the launch. Recognising the land rights of native and traditional peoples is a low-cost solution toward achieving the world's development, environment and climate agendas.

Known as the International Land and Forest Tenure Facility, the new institution dedicated to scaling up the recognition of collective land and forest rights was officially presented on October 3 during a conference in Stockholm organised by the Swedish government, the Ford Foundation and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).

For most indigenous people, “land is everything,” continued Tauli-Corpuz. Having secure rights over their lands ensures that “they can feed their families and practise their culture and traditional knowledge.”

Almost 2.5 billion people, one-third of the world's population, depend on community-held lands for their livelihoods. They manage more than half the planet's land area in traditional systems, yet indigenous peoples and local communities have formal legal ownership of only 10% of the world's lands, according to a 2015 RRI report.

The Tenure Facility will invest 10 million dollars a year for the next decade in titling projects. This funding could increase titled, protected tropical forestland by 40 million hectares, preventing the emission of more than 0.5 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide.

It will work with indigenous and community leaders to take advantage of laws that are already on the books to strengthen their

rights, said RRI coordinator Andy White, stressing that the Tenure Facility is aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

“Indigenous peoples have cared for the forests for centuries, despite increasing pressure from governments and private interests that want access to the land and its soil, the timber in the trees and the minerals in the ground below,” said White.

The Tenure Facility has kicked off with six pilot projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America covering two million hectares of forest in six countries – Cameroon, Indonesia, Liberia, Mali, Panama and Peru.

The tropical rainforest in Peru, which is part of the Amazon basin, is an interesting case in which more than half of the country's territory is forest, and much of that land is occupied by indigenous people.

After Bolivia, Peru is the South American country with the second highest proportion of indigenous population. Approximately 20 million hectares are pending titling in favour of indigenous people – corresponding to 15 percent of Peruvian territory.

“We cannot design public policies and conservation strategies without including the indigenous,” Silvana Baldovino, programme director of the Peruvian Society for Environmental Law, told IDN. “We cannot create rules inside a cabinet without speaking to the native peoples. It would be illogical to draw conservation policies without engaging who are actually on the ground.”

Baldovino was in Stockholm to talk about the successful Peruvian case of titling and managing forests. “Madre de Dios has a large percentage of its region as protected natural areas. It is important for the indigenous peoples to have their land demarcated. It is a historic debt,” he said.

The tropical Madre de Dios region in the southeast part of Peru covers 800,000 hectares and is under constant pressure from illegal logging, gold mining and oil exploration.

In the region, there are seven indigenous peoples living in 36



communities. Many of these communities require legal and physical clarification of their territorial claims before they can secure their titles.

This first pilot project supported by the Tenure Facility helped to map five communities. Over 112,000 hectares were geo-referenced, enabling three communities to actually obtain the title of their land.

Securing tenure would also set the stage for more sustainable and equitable development, as well as reducing conflict over land, agrees Nonette Royo, the Tenure Facility's executive director.

"The whole world is looking at the Amazon forest," she told IDN. "At the moment, the indigenous peoples are experiencing such a huge challenge: they occupy places where most of the forests

are still growing and stand. They have protected these places for generations."

At least one-quarter of the carbon stored above the ground in the tropical forests is found in the collectively managed territories of indigenous peoples and local communities, according to a study released in November 2016.

This amount represented 70 percent of what was emitted globally in 2015, according to the International Energy Agency. [IDN-In-DepthNews – 7 October 2017]

Image: Courtesy Tenure Facility / Madre de Dios region, Peruvian Amazon

Orphans of Conflict in DR Congo Learning a Brazilian Martial Art to Overcome Pain

By Fabíola Ortiz

GOMA (IDN) - Since February this year, 16-year old Melvin* lives in a shelter for former child soldiers in the suburbs of Goma, the capital city of North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He belongs to a small community.

His story resembles that of many Congolese boys living in the faraway communities in eastern DRC. He was abducted from his home village to forcibly join the Nyatura rebels – a Mayi-Mayi ethnic community-led armed group founded in 2010 mainly by the Congolese Hutus. Among the human rights violations they have been accused of is the recruitment of child soldiers – one of the most heinous crimes they have committed.

It is two years now that the introverted Melvin, who has lost track of his family, has not been able to return to his community. He is likely to be one among thousands of orphans from the conflict.

Between 2010 and 2013, the UN documented no less than 4,194 cases of child recruitment, according to the last DRC country report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict. Approximately one-third of the documented cases involved children less than 15 years of age. 76 per cent took place in North Kivu. Their testimonies accounted for being used as combatants, escorts, cooks, porters, guards and sex slaves.

At least 65,000 children have been released from armed forces and armed

groups worldwide in the past ten years (2007-2017), said the UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake in February 2017. More than 20,000 were in the DRC. Exact data on the number of children used and recruited in armed conflict are difficult to confirm because of the unlawful nature of child recruitment. However, UNICEF estimates that tens of thousands of boys and girls under the age of 18 are used in conflicts worldwide.

“UN verified figures are likely to represent only a portion of the problem given access issues for the purposes of verification, including insecurity and fighting, terrain and infrastructure problems, and government restrictions on access to armed groups,” according to the Senior Program Manager Bonnie Berry of Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.

The introverted Melvin is now being taken care of by a local non-profit organization named Programme d’Appui à la lutte contre la Misère (Program to Support the Fight Against Poverty – PAMI) based in Goma. Created in 1997, it is one of the Congolese partners of UNICEF to work on the verification process of children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups (called CAFAG) and to run a center sheltering unaccompanied children.

After months of fighting in the bush, Melvin decided to escape with other nine boys. “There were a lot of young people and chil-



children in the group. I would say there were in total around 2,000 rebels. I ran away carrying a weapon. It would be very dangerous if I ever go back to my village, they would kill me,” Melvin told IDN.

Now, he is living under the PAMI premises in Goma. Life has completely changed for him since he was welcomed in the shelter. “It is very different from the life I led in the armed group,” he said.

The reclusive and introspective boy has now found a new meaning for his daily life and a way of expressing himself and regain self-esteem. For five months, he has been playing a Brazilian martial art with African roots called Capoeira.

This cultural practice, simultaneously a fight and a dance, promotes mutual respect and social cohesion and was inscribed in 2014 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in UNESCO.

In the DRC, a UNICEF initiative named “Capoeira pour la Paix” (in French) – fund-

ed by Canada, Sweden, AMADE-Mondile, Belgium and the Brazilian Embassy in Kinshasa – has been included in the DDR program (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) for children.

“We knew about the fact that Capoeira was being used with vulnerable children in Haiti and also in Panama. It started like a pilot project to see how we could integrate ‘Capoeira for Peace’ within the DDR children program to support the rehabilitation of children released from armed groups and armed forces,” explained Marie Diop, a UNICEF child protection specialist in eastern DRC bureau.

This last summer, the initiative commemorated three years and has now been fully integrated in the psychosocial support activities in the transit care centers in Goma. “It is through Capoeira that children are now able to cohabit in a very peaceful manner with other children and adults. Capoeira has helped a lot in de-stigmatizing the children,” said Diop.

The 29 year-old Alex Karibu born in Kinshasa became one of the Capoeira teachers of the initiative. As a UN volunteer, he develops the Capoeira classes for children who have been demobilized from rebels in eastern DRC.

“It has been twelve years that I practice, Capoeira came to my life as a positive change and inspired me to recover my self-confidence. I thought to myself from the very first moment that I wanted to become a Capoeira ambassador in my country,” said Karibu.

For him, this martial art enables to bring people together, overcome social differences and gather the participants as a family reunion. “It makes us all become brothers and sisters, it does not induce aggressiveness and helps in promoting harmony, peace, love and mutual respect,” suggested.

Since he arrived in North Kivu, early 2016, he has noticed progressive change within the children. “It is not easy for boys who have been in armed groups, most of them had to leave behind their families. I tell them I’m here to help and they can trust me. Many of them have been abused and mistreated.”

As a consequence of trauma, children naturally close themselves as a ‘rock’, but little by little they learn they can regain trust. “We do as with a flower, we irrigate with drops of love and respect to help them in their transformation process. We’re planting a seed

for these children to bloom.”

For Joachim Fikiri who coordinates PAMI, the first step would be the breaking of the cycle of violence within the communities. The use of Capoeira, he said, is helping to integrate and to spread peace when children are back to their families.

“Children’s needs are enormous due to the conflict. Together with UNICEF and UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), we work in all stages of the DDR for children, verifying their situation and defending their rights. I wished Capoeira was taught and practiced in every community to gather different ethnicities,” he suggested.

Some unaccompanied children who are under the care of PAMI live with hosting families, familles d’accueil (in French), as a stage of introducing them to the civil and family life again.

It has been five years that Françoise Furaha, 38, became a hosting family to receive vulnerable unaccompanied children. Her small two bedroom sized house located in Quartier Keshero, in the surroundings of Goma, has received throughout the years 28 girls and 16 boys. Nowadays she hosts a Rwandan boy who regularly attends Capoeira classes in PAMI.

“It was my inner instinct that made me choose to become a hosting family. We all learn from him and from his life story. In the morning we pray, we have meals together and when he is back from PAMI centre, he is always happier. He usually says: ‘let me teach you Capoeira, let me teach you how to do ginga [the basic swing of the martial art]’. It is a good thing for all of us,” said Furaha.

*The name has been changed to protect the identity of the person. [IDN-InDepthNews – 5 October 2017]

Image: Capoeira classes with boys formerly associated with armed groups in North Kivu | Credit: Flavio Forner/IDN-INPS

Myanmar May be Able To Learn From Sri Lanka To Resolve the “Bengali” Problem

By Jayasri Priyalal

SINGAPORE (IDN) - The Rohingya crisis and influx of refugees to Bangladesh is headline stories in the media at present. As a Sri Lankan I could note the similarity of the conflicts of statelessness that prevailed in Sri Lanka then and Myanmar at present, and Sri Lanka's approach to solving the crisis with India could be a framework for Myanmar to follow.

In 1948 when Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain, the island nation was left with about one million Tamils who were called “Indian Tamils” in Sri Lanka. They were brought to Sri Lanka from South India from the lowest Dalit caste to work in tea plantations that were set up on land the British confiscated from Sinhala peasants, who refused to work in those plantations. Thus the presence of these Tamils was deeply resented by the Sinhalese. British have created a stateless community who were neither Indian nor Sri Lankan citizens.

Statelessness creates hopelessness and helplessness in any person irrespective of one's economic status. An uncertainty arising from such situations brings untold miseries to those who are caught up in conflicts; many of them are poor and destitute as seen in the tense situation between Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Media report that the Myanmar Army is behind all the atrocities leading to violence in Rakhine state targeting Rohingya community. The Myanmar government

responds claiming they are Muslim extremist, identified as Arkhine Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) who attacked 35 police posts, and one military camp in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border on August 25, 2017, the day Advisory Commission of Rakhine State, headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, was scheduled to release the interim report. As claimed by the Myanmar Government, the military crackdown was initiated to protect all citizens in Rakhine, including the Bengalis who are now living under pathetic conditions subject to all forms of violence.

Media and lobby groups are blaming Myanmar State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi for not taking steps to prevent a textbook ‘ethnic cleansing’. Blame and criticism are two sets of functions; usually, take cognizance to dramatize issues to make stories newsworthy to attract attention to win public sympathy. But, policymakers need to maintain the right balance between the emotional and rational approach to come up with lasting solutions to issues that often have roots from the colonial rule.

If one looks at the timing of the ARSA attacks, in addition to the release of the Kofi Annan report, there were also the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Myanmar, and the international media campaign against Suu Kyi for not responding and taking actions to prevent human rights violations in Myanmar on the eve of her vis-

it to address the UN General Assembly. Her critics and the human rights lobby groups are blaming her for remaining silent as the State Counsellor did not yield to pressure tactics.

There are three infamous historical lines of divisions created in the 20th century by colonial powers that embedded seeds of rivalry and birth of terrorism resulting in wars, leading to untold human sufferings even up to this day. First: the partition of India and Pakistan on August 15, 1947. Second: the division on May 15, 1948, between Arabs and Jews and creation of the state of Israel. Third: separation, in the same year (1948) of Burma from India. This is history.

These geopolitical decisions opened up to numerous separation struggles, with the feeling of statelessness and lack of ownership amongst the population living within these territories surrounded by the lines of conflicts. Often, mythical beliefs, distorted historical facts were used to legitimize cases for separation fanning flames lobbying for opinions to justify the cause of freedom struggles and supporting and aiding groups to resort to violence to resolve issues.

Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Myanmar (then Burma) had to face the challenge of awarding citizenship to the indentured labour, brought as a cheap source of labour to work in the plantations set up by the British during the colonial rule.

Indentured labour was the alternative



Image: Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The camp is one of three, which house up to 300,000 Rohingya people fleeing inter-communal violence in Burma | Credit: Wikimedia Commons

method to replace slave trade by the colonial masters; executed professionally, by getting the labour families identified as “Coolies” and getting them to sign a contract written in English and getting them to agree with a thumbprint. None of them knew what was in the contract; they were assured of a job/work but did not know where they were heading for when they were packed into steamers.

Many of them, being of Indian origin did not realize they would never return home, and end up as stateless citizens in faraway places, such as in the Caribbean and South Pacific Islands such as Fiji to work in sugarcane plantations, nearer places such as Burma and Ceylon. These groups of indentured labour introduced two Tamil language words starting with letter ‘C’ into the English dictionary: these are CURRY and COOLIES. Fortunately, in many of these colonial plantation economies, the statelessness has been resolved but there are tensions between minorities and majorities to seek socio-economic and political power.

The stateless situation of the Indian indentured labour working in tea plantations in Sri Lanka was resolved in 1964 by way of a pact between then Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Ceylonese Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Both countries agreed to absorb the stateless citizens’ through repatriation and awarding citizenship. By 1980 statelessness issue was resolved completely. But in Sri Lanka, there is a lot of work to be done to improve the quality of life of these marginalized groups in the plantations.

Similarly, Bangladesh and Myanmar entered into an agreement in 1993, but Bangladesh government had difficulties in dealing with the dictatorial military government in Myanmar. We should welcome the statement made by Myanmar State Counsellor Suu Kyi, during her address on September 19, 2017, indicating to absorb legitimate Rohingya community back to the Rakhine state.

Similarly, due credit also should be given to Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheik Hasina for welcoming the Rohingya victims and providing support and care to the refugees now taking shelter in various makeshift camps in Cox Bazar in trying conditions.

Therefore the international agencies should push the govern-

ments both in Bangladesh and Myanmar to resolve the issue through dialogue and discussions, as did India and Ceylon through a pact in 1964.

It will be disastrous to justify violence as a means of supporting terror on either party giving the issue a twist as the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in religious and communal beliefs. The problem needs to be seen as humanitarian arising from statelessness and hopelessness leading to poor economic conditions. The plight of refugees crossing many African territories to reach Europe as migrants is a good living example.

Right diagnosis is half of the solution, provided the causes and effects supported with facts are established. Both the ladies in power in Bangladesh and Myanmar have the capacities to find creative and innovative solutions with a rational approach for long-standing peace and prosperity in their respective countries. What is necessary is to create an enabling environment not leading to emotional actions and reactions fanning the flames of discrimination based on ethno-religious differences. [IDN-InDepthNews – 25 September 2017]

Making the 3rd Industrial Development Decade for Africa a Reality with Actions on the Ground

By J Nastranis

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – When the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution to declare 2016-2025 as the Third Industrial Development Decade for Africa (IDDA III) in August 2016, it stated: “Africa remains the poorest and the most vulnerable region in the world.” And this despite the two previous decades.

The Resolution A/RES/70/293 noted “the need for the continent to take urgent action to advance sustainable industrialization as a key element of furthering economic diversification and value addition, creating jobs and thus reducing poverty,” and contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Agenda with 17 Goals and 169 targets was adopted in September 2015. The Resolution reaffirmed “the importance of industrialization in supporting Africa’s own efforts towards sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and accelerated development.”

The Resolution encourages the international community to take action and use inclusive and sustainable industrialization as a vehicle for meeting the targets set in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It calls on the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to develop, operationalize and lead the implementation of the programme for IDDA III.

It invites UNIDO, the specialized agency of the United Nations with the mandate to support Member States in achieving inclusive and sustainable industrial development, to foster partnerships and coordinate with other relevant United Nations entities, and to build joint initiatives in favour of industrialization.

The Resolution also calls for stronger public-private partnerships with multiple stakeholders and enhanced international cooperation, including North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation, in order to expedite Africa’s industrialization.

The Resolution highlights that the common goals formulated in the IDDA III cannot be achieved by one organization or govern-

ment alone. Successful industrial development in Africa requires effective partnerships and concerted efforts by governments, public and private investors, UN entities, civil society and other stakeholders.

The Resolution was an outcome of the joint high-level event organized by the African Union Commission, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) on the theme Operationalization of the 2030 Agenda for Africa’s industrialization, held on the margins of the 70th session of the General Assembly, on September 26, 2015.

Two years on, a high-level event at the United Nations Headquarters on the side-lines of the 72nd session of the General Assembly on September 21, 2017 discussed how IDDA III political commitments could be into “actions on the ground.”

Against the backdrop that unemployment and poverty are serious concerns for the continent, where more than 70 percent of the working age population is unemployed or has no job security, African leaders, UN officials, and representatives of international finance institutions and of the private sector reaffirmed their commitment to a broad-based international partnership to industrialize Africa in a socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable manner.

They reiterated the importance of industrialization to eradicate poverty and to ensure that Africa’s fast-growing population yields its demographic dividend. A joint communiqué signed by the UNIDO, the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the UNECA, and the OSAA acknowledged that the implementation of the ambitious goals of the Decade will require the mobilization and deployment of significant amounts of resources.

The UNIDO, which is tasked with leading the implementation of IDDA III, proposed to implement its new approach based on a country-owned model known as the Programme for Country Partnership (PCP) that leverages financial and non-financial

resources, promotes regional integration and mobilizes cooperation among Africa's development partners.

UNIDO Director General LI Yong said: "It is high time to move the IDDA III agenda steadily forward in order to foster inclusive and sustainable industrial development in Africa. Today's presence of high-level participants from the public and private sectors, development financial institutions, the United Nations system, and bilateral and multilateral institutions confirms that Africa's industrialization is of global importance."

The African Union's Commissioner for Trade and Industry, Albert M. Muchanga, said: "Let me stress that, in line with the theme of this event – from political commitment to action on the ground – and the underlying principle of inclusiveness, it is my expectation that resources mobilized under the Third Industrial Development Decade will be deployed so as to significantly show benefits accruing to the ordinary Africans on the ground through decent employment, and access to high-quality, safe and affordable manufactured goods that are made in Africa, among other direct and tangible

benefits."

Promoting industrialization has featured high on the agendas of African governments for decades. In addition to regional and country-level efforts, the African Unions Agenda 2063 – and its 10-year implementation plan, in coordination with other relevant stakeholders, including regional economic communities and national entities – also prioritizes industrialization in its development planning strategies.

Amadou Hott, AfDB Vice-President, Power, Energy, Climate and Green Growth, said "The African Development Bank recently adopted an ambitious 'Industrialize Africa' strategy, developed together with UNIDO and UNECA, which aims at more than doubling industrial GDP of the continent within the next decade. We strongly believe that partnering with governments, the private sector, regional organizations and other development partners is key to address the major bottlenecks in the area of industrialization for a more prosperous Africa."

The President of Zambia, Edgar Lungu, said: "My government is proud to be associated to this event and values the role played by organizations such as UNIDO and other government partners which seek to work closely with Africa to promote inclusive and sustainable industrial development in the continent."

He added: "Over the past two decades, the African continent has witnessed significant changes in policy orientation with more emphasis placed on building productive capacities in order to take advantage

of opportunities emerging from the global economy. Many African countries have restructured their economies and have embraced liberal economics and trade policies to support development strategies.

However, these reforms have come with their own challenges, including the influx of imported commodities and unfortunately closure of industries with consequential job losses."

Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, said: "The lack of skills is the major problem in Africa. With an integrated industrial strategy, African states will hopefully mobilize funds, build the capacity of local employment and promote small, medium enterprises with domestic development projects."

Among other Development Finance Institutions, the World Bank Group also announced strong support for the implementation of the decade.

Participants also agreed on the importance of strengthening private sector engagement, in view of its fundamental role in driving growth, creating jobs, generating income and wealth, and contributing to fiscal revenue. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 September 2017]

Image: UNIDO DG LI Yong addresses a special event, "Third Industrial Development Decade for Africa (2016-2025): From political commitment to actions on the ground". 21 September 2017| Credit: Manuel Elias/UN Photo



Over 110 Countries Commit to Halt Land Degradation

By Jaya Ramachandran

BERLIN | ORDOS CITY, China (IDN) – Land degradation is one of the planet’s most pressing global challenges. A third of the world’s land is degraded. But the good news is that by the end of the 13th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 13) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) on September 16, 2017 in China’s Ordos City, 113 countries had agreed to specify concrete targets, with clear indicators, to reverse degradation and rehabilitate more land.

A new global roadmap to address land degradation was also agreed. The UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework is regarded as the most comprehensive global commitment to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) in order to restore the productivity of vast swathes of degraded land, improve the livelihoods of more than 1.3 billion people, and to reduce the impacts of drought on vulnerable populations.

“Some battles took place, but you took bold measures for our Convention. We have a new strategic framework and a new reporting cycle. We have a Drought Initiative. We have taken fundamental decisions on gender, capacity-building, migration and sand and dust storms,” said Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary.

Established in 1994, the UNCCD is the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management. The Con-

vention - with 195 parties – addresses specifically the arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, known as the drylands, where some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and peoples can be found.

The Conference from September 6-16 in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, China, also witnessed the birth of the first global private sector fund dedicated to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed in September 2015 by the international community. Known as the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund (LDN Fund), it will be a source of transformative capital bringing together public and private investors to fund projects to restore degraded lands, which come with environment, economic and social benefits.

With an initial target size of USD 300 million fund capital, the LDN Fund is co-promoted by Mirova, an affiliate of Natixis Global Asset Management that is dedicated to socially responsible investment, and the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD. A separately-operated Technical Assistance Facility (TAF) will advise the Fund on the development of promising sustainable land use activities in order to build a strong portfolio of projects.

Another highlight of the Ordos gathering was the unveiling of a landmark publication, The Global Land Outlook (GLO), which spotlighted the urgency for swift action. It reported that 20 percent of

the world’s land has become degraded in just the last two decades.

“Consumption of the earth’s natural reserves has doubled in the last 30 years, with a third of the planet’s land now severely degraded. Each year, we lose 15 billion trees and 24 billion tonnes of fertile soil. Smallholder farmers, women and indigenous communities are the most vulnerable, given their reliance on land-based resources, compounded by their exclusion from wider infrastructure and economic development,” notes the GLO.

Currently, more than 1.3 billion people are trapped on degrading agricultural land, drastically increasing competition for crucial ecosystem services such as food, water and energy. The GLO draws on an analysis of recent trends in land productivity and modelling of land demand scenarios up to the year 2050. It outlines how reversing trends in the condition of land resources could accelerate efforts to achieve many of the SDGs, by adopting more efficient planning and sustainable practices.

Speaking at the launch, UNCCD Executive Secretary Barbut said, “Land degradation and drought are global challenges and intimately linked to most, if not all aspects of human security and well-being – food security, employment and migration, in particular.”

As the ready supply of healthy and productive land dries up and the population

grows, competition is intensifying, for land within countries and globally, she added, and as the competition increases, there are winners and losers.

“To minimize the losses, The Outlook suggests it is in all our interests to step back and rethink how we are managing the pressures and the competition. The Outlook presents a vision for transforming the way in which we use and manage land because we are all decision-makers and our choices can make a difference – even small steps matter,” Barbut stressed.

Welcoming the UNCCD’s new flagship publication, UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner said: “Over 250 million people are directly affected by desertification, and about one billion people in over one hundred countries are at risk. They include many of the world’s poorest and most marginalized people. Achieving land degradation neutrality can provide a healthy and productive life for all on Earth, including water and food security. The Global Land Outlook shows that each of us can in fact make a difference, and I hope that in the next edition we are able to tell even more stories of better land use and management.”

This landmark publication on the current and future state of the world’s land resources is the first in-depth analysis of the multiple functions of the land viewed from a wide range of interrelated sectors and thematic areas, such as the food-water-land nexus, as well as the ‘less obvious’ drivers of land use change, notably the nature of economic growth, consumer choice and global trade patterns. Crucially, the report examines a growing disconnect between the financial and socio-economic values of the land and how this affects the poor.

The first edition of the GLO was published by the UNCCD secretariat, based in Bonn, with the support of numerous partners, including the European Commission, the Governments of Korea, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and UNDP.

To reaffirm the progress made at the summit, more than 80 Ministers from around the world issued the Ordos Declaration urging countries to step up efforts on all fronts to tackle desertification – one of the planet’s most pressing global challenges.

“The Ordos Declaration reaffirms the contribution of ecological



services to food security, private sector, civil society and youth.... It also recognizes the importance of addressing climate change, protecting biodiversity and addressing food security,” said Zhang Jianlong, China’s Minister of State Forestry Administration, while closing the Conference.

He said the Convention will pay attention to regional hotspots and intensify cooperation, and underlined the Belt and Road Cooperation Mechanism that will support capacity building along the Silk Road in the region.

The Conference also took action to address three new and emerging issues linked to increasing land degradation – drought, sand and dust storms and migration. Sand and dust storms threaten the health of millions of people across the globe, and is a major concern in China where the Conference took place.

“Equally, drought mitigation,” Barbut asserted, “would for the first time be an area of focus under the New Strategy.” National drought policies with effective early warning systems would be crucial in promoting vulnerability assessment and risk mitigation measures, particularly in light of the devastating droughts witnessed in Africa this year that have left more than 20 million people on the verge of starvation, she added. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 September 2017]

Image credit: Francis Dejon/IISD/ENB

Safe Piped Water Remains a Luxury Across Africa

By Jeffrey Moyo



MWENEZI; Zimbabwe (IDN) - Raviro Chawuruka scoops out sand from a well on a stream bank closer to her rural home in Rutenga, 443 km west of Harare, in Mwenezi district in Zimbabwe's Masvingo Province.

At the age of 72, Chawuruka says she has known no rest while scavenging for water, this as she daily battles it out with the sand-filled water well in the vicinity of her home. She stands out among millions of Africans to whom piped water still remains a luxury, decades after several African nations gained independence from their former colonisers: Zimbabwe over 37 years ago.

According to the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 65 percent of Zimbabwe's 14 million people such as Chawuruka are domiciled in rural areas, where they have become the number one victims of lack of piped water.

"I have lived in this area for as long as I can remember and

sourcing water for daily use from rivers, streams and wells is a norm here. There has never been a borehole here. I don't know what it is to have piped water," Chawuruka told IDN.

She said in order to find the scarce precious liquid, she has to struggle to access it underneath the sand by scooping out the sand so that diminishing water underground starts simmering out before Chawuruka and many other villagers start accessing it.

Based on a report released four years ago by the Human Rights Watch, titled *Troubled Water: Burst Pipes, Contaminated Wells, and Open Defecation in Zimbabwe's Capital*, people here have little access to potable water and sanitation services, and often resort to drinking water from shallow, unprotected wells that are contaminated with sewage, and to defecating outdoors. Yet in 2010, Zimbabwe voted for a UN General Assembly resolution establishing the right to water and sanitation, according to the Human Rights Watch.

A similar situation that has hit many Zimbabweans like Chawuruka has not spared several other Africans like 56-year old Armando Sinorita in Mozambique's Tete Province.

"We always struggle to find water for use because we have no boreholes in my area. The only borehole we used to have which is far away, broke down over 10 years ago and we have turned to wells and streams to get water," Sinorita told IDN.

But Sinorita said hard times always follow after the rivers, wells and streams run dry. As such, for many Africans like Sinorita, piped water remains a luxury, worse in Mozambique's remote areas, despite the Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) of the United Nations aiming at ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Even in East Africa, in Southern Africa and in West Africa, piped water remains scarce for many people who still scrounge for water from unprotected sources.

The situation is worse in Kenya, where a population of 47 million, which is 37 percent of the people there still rely on unimproved

water sources, such as ponds, shallow wells and rivers, while 70 percent of Kenyans use unimproved sanitation solutions. The 2013/2014 review of Kenya's water services sector by the Water Services Regulatory Board (Wasreb), also shows that only 53 per cent of town dwellers have clean piped water. According to the report, 51 per cent of approximately 34 million rural Kenyans lack access to clean piped water.

Neighbouring Zimbabwe, South Africa, deemed Africa's economic super power, has made less strides towards effective achievement of water supply and sanitation goals, according to development experts.

"South Africa has joined other countries on the continent which have a mountain to climb to achieve UN SDG on access to water by 2030. Yes, water usage in SA has increased, but the water infrastructure legs behind. Consequently, in many communities here, particularly in the poorer rural areas, water has over the years after this country gained independence in 1994, stopped flowing out of the taps," Nkosi-lathi Mapule, an independent development expert based in the South African capital Pretoria, told IDN.

Further up, in Ghana, close to three million people (nearly 11 percent) rely on surface water to meet their daily water needs, leaving them vulnerable to water-related disease, this while 85 percent of the people there lack access to improved sanitation or are entirely without toilet facilities. Ghana has a population of about 29 million people.

With less than 15 years before the deadline of the attainment of the UNSDGs, even Ethiopia at the Horn of Africa, water supply and sanitation stands amongst the lowest in Sub Saharan Africa, according to human rights defenders.

"While access has improved significantly with funding from donors, much still remains to be done to ensure access to water and sanitation for all in line with the UN SDG six here although in 2001 the government adopted a water and sanitation strategy that called for more decentralized decision-making in as far as water issues are concerned," Hermela Mulugeta, an Ethiopian human rights activist, told IDN.

The situation is worse for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), according to the UN. Based on findings from the United Nations Environment Programme, about six years ago, an estimated 51 million people in DRC, which is three quarters of that country's population – had no access to safe drinking water despite the country housing half of Africa's water reserves.

"DRC's legacy of war coupled with environmental degradation and poor investment in water infrastructure, has over the years extremely affected the accessibility of drinking water," a top DRC diplomat based at the country's embassy in Zimbabwe, told IDN on condition of anonymity for professional reasons as he was not allowed to speak to the media.

Water and sanitation are among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted by the 193 Members

of the UN in September 2015, and which are guiding the work of the development efforts of the international community through 2030.

As UN General Assembly President Peter Thomson pointed out in his keynote address on August 28, 2017 at a special event in Stockholm to start World Water Week, combined with the Paris Agreement on lowering the impact of climate change, the SDGs represent "the best chance our species has to achieve a sustainable way of life on Planet Earth before it is too late." [IDN-InDepthNews – 9 September 2017]

Image: Lack of piped water across Africa has impelled villagers to turn to unprotected water bodies to access the precious liquid |

Credit: Jeffrey Moyo/IDN-INPS

Poverty Swoops on Southern Africa's Urban Dwellers

By Jeffrey Moyo

HARARE (IDN) – At one stage in her life, she was a top accountant with the National Railways of Zimbabwe. Now, domiciled in Epworth, a crowded informal settlement in south-eastern Harare Province, 25 kilometres outside Harare, the Zimbabwean capital, hers has turned out to be a riches-to-rags tale.

Shuvai Chikoto, a 48-year-old mother of three who was widowed five years ago, is just one of millions of other Southern African urban dwellers who have plunged into poverty over the years – and she is not particularly impressed that the United Nations has set the goal of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere within the next 13 years.

For Chikoto, the strides by the United Nations to fend off poverty are as good as non-existent. “I’m aware of those aims tabled by the UN in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but look where I stand today, deep in poverty. Would you believe that I was once gainfully employed in a government parastatal?” Chikoto asked, speaking with IDN.

Chikoto’s situation is matched in Malawi by that of 66-year-old Kondwani Chiyemekedzo, who lives in a slum area in Blantyre, Malawi’s oldest city established by Scottish missionaries in the 1870s.

“I live here in this two-roomed makeshift home with my grandchildren and none of us has a job and we all sell various items by the roadside to survive,” Chiyemekedzo

told IDN, adding that she has since stopped sending her grandchildren to school because she has no money to pay their school fees.

She lost her own five children to AIDS, leaving her to take care of their orphans, but with poverty in hot pursuit.

Although Malawi’s extreme poverty rates have been cut by more than half since 1990, one in five people there still live on less than 1.25 dollars a day, according to the United Nations.

For Malawi’s urban dwellers like Chiyemekedzo, things have even become worse.

“Food is also hard to come by, but this has become my home over the years, for generations, and I can’t leave because I have nowhere else to go; I will die here although poverty hits me harder,” Chiyemekedzo said with a sad chuckle.

In South Africa, children are hit hard by the scourge of urban poverty. According to Statistics South Africa, 9.7 million children in the country are domiciled in urban slums.

In a country with an estimated population of 52 million people, approximately 1.9 million South African households live in informal dwellings, according to South Africa’s Department of Social Welfare.

As in many other African countries, over the years this has been linked to increased urbanisation, and there are South African development experts like Johannes-

burg-based Mehluli Khumalo who blame the country’s urban poverty on the pre-independence white minority government.

“The apartheid government of the Boers didn’t create adequate urban space for local black South Africans, yet blacks kept coming to the cities over the years, over the centuries in search of jobs while moving from their remote homes, and now what we have are increasing slums erected by poor people living in towns and cities,” Khumalo told IDN.

Poverty is rampant in the city of Johannesburg where, according to Statistics South Africa, there were 47,000 poor households with approximately 150,000 people who had become food insecure.

For Zimbabwe’s human rights defenders, it is greed by the country’s leaders that has led to increased urban poverty.

“It’s an infringement of citizens’ rights when in towns you find people having inadequate meals, having poor shelter and this is because of a government that has not placed its focus on improving people’s livelihoods, but has chosen to look after its own political elite,” Terry Mutsvanga, Zimbabwe’s award-winning human rights defender, told IDN.

According to civil society organisations, urban poverty in Zimbabwe reigns supreme.

“Based on poverty measurement tools (household income and expenditure sur-

veys) that we used in the poor urban communities living in Mutare, Bindura, Masvingo, Bulawayo, Gweru and Shurugwi in the period between June 2016 and May 2017, we observed that more than 80 percent of the households surveyed are earning income below the average cost of the urban basic needs basket,” Judith Kaulem, executive director of the Poverty Reduction Forum Trust (PRFT), told IDN.

According to PRFT, the urban basic needs basket is the minimum amount required by a family of five to live a decent and dignified lifestyle.

PRFT is a Zimbabwean civil society organisation founded in 2008 from the then Poverty Reduction Forum to conduct research with the aim of influencing the formulation and implementation of pro-poor socio-economic policies.

North of Zimbabwe in Zambia, about 40 percent of Zambia’s population of 17 million people (6.8 million) live in cities, with 23 percent of these mired in abject poverty, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Poverty is even worse in Angola where, according to USAID, 68 percent of the 4.8 million people in the capital Luanda are living under the poverty line.

About 70 percent of Angola’s population of approximately 25 million people live in Luanda’s peri-urban shantytowns called musseques, where public services are very limited, providing deteriorated facilities, resources and basic services.

For Hodukoma Bagamba, an independent development expert based in the Angolan capital, poverty is spiralling consistently across the country’s towns and cities.

“There is no respite for people living in towns here in Angola as poverty takes its toll on millions of city dwellers here because everyone just wants to be in the city although not everyone is liable to getting decent employment and so poverty is finding more room in towns,” Bagamba told IDN.

In Botswana, poverty is said to have become more urban than rural in a country with a population of 2.3 million people.

In a report titled “Botswana Poverty Assessment”, the World Bank noted that “although urbanisation levels were unaltered



between 2002/03 and 2009/10, poverty became more urban. In 2009/10, 43 percent of Botswana’s population lived in rural areas, a decrease of only 1 percentage point since 2002/03. Poverty in Botswana became relatively more urban between 2002/03 and 2009/10.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 28 August 2017]

Image: Slums like this have emerged over the years as poverty erupts in an area called Lion’s Den, 20km outside Chinhoyi town in Mashonaland West province in Zimbabwe | Credit: Jeffrey Moyo/IDN-INPS

Environmental Risks Behind Peace Accords in Colombia

By Fabíola Ortiz



CARTAGENA, Colombia (IDN) – The peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) – signed in November 2016 and ratified early December by the Colombian Congress – ending five decades of conflict now poses enormous threats for the environment, according to scientists and experts at the International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB 2017) held in Cartagena July 23-27.

The global forum gathered almost 2,000 scientists to address ecological challenges and present new research in conservation science and sustainable practices.

Colombia, a country with 40 million people, is one of the 17 world's megadiverse nations concentrating 10 percent of biodiversity with 59 national parks and other protected sites covering an area of 23 million hectares.

“There is a need to improve the decisions related to conservation in Colombia taking into account the post-conflict scenario,” biologist Pablo Negret, who is specialised in tropical forests and a PhD researcher of Queensland University, told IDN

“We had one of the longest conflicts in history and a lot of territories had been isolated under the control of the guerrillas,” he

explained. “Areas where armed groups acted did not receive any development project over this period. With the post-conflict era and the peace accords, there are other groups taking over the areas liberated by the FARC which is now being demobilised.”

That is precisely where the danger lies, warn experts. Around one-third of the country had once been under the control of the rebels and now, having been liberated, opens the way for newcomers and economic interests avid for the rich natural resources that vast unexplored lands contain.

“Many areas are now free for development projects, mining, oil drilling and extensive agriculture. We see how the deforestation is rising especially in the Amazonian Piedmont,” warned the biologist.

The Amazonian Piedmont is a series of foothills at the junction of the Andes and the Amazon basin located in the southwest of Colombia in the states of Putumayo and Caquetá. It has high levels of diversity considered a site of interest for biological conservation and research. The Amazon River is originated in those foothills and its streams flow to the lowlands through dense forests home for more than 900 bird species and other hundreds of mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

“There is also a huge expectation regarding the restitution of land. The government plans to give economic payments for those families willing to replace the illicit crops such as coca, so many settlers and farmers are heading to those areas, clearing the forest and start cultivating coca to receive the payment,” stressed.

This move has made the deforestation rates in the Amazon grow higher. The last monitoring accounted for 34% of the forest devastation, according to the Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies in Colombia.

Asked about the risk that threatens the environment in the post-conflict Colombia, Negret said the major threat is that no rigorous planning is being done regarding land distribution and the interests on the verge of reaching those areas. As consequence,

poor planning will be unable to prevent biodiversity rich areas from remaining untouched.

“Many zones with high biodiversity might be destroyed,” warned Negret. “There should be plans prioritising the post-conflict areas which take into account their ecological characteristics so that when the development projects and roads arrive, they will not collapse. We should be thinking about alternatives such as establishing ecosystem services that can bring positive benefits with even higher economic pay-offs than mining activities.”

According to the biologist, Colombia’s development should be focused on conservation expanding protected areas and avoiding rainforest deforestation in already existing national parks. “We need to be more rigid in managing the protected areas and especially the parks in zones where there is still the presence of armed groups other than FARC,” he argued.

“This is a tipping point, people do not wish to live in war any longer. The peace process with FARC might be a good example for other groups to be disarmed. Change is about to come.”

A historic move took place on June 27 when former FARC combatants handed over their weapons -- more than 7,000 firearms – in a process monitored by the United Nations and 450 international observers.

“We are waiting for the international community to support the peace process and our environmental goals,” said Colombia’s Minister of Environment and Sustainable

Development Luis Murillo. “We need to put environmental goals into a context of implementation of the peace process. We have policies and institutional reforms to cope with the challenges of the new era in Colombia,” he added.

Speaking at a press conference at the ICCB in Cartagena, Murillo said peace will permit the mobilisation of resources in order to develop the country. “We know very little about our biodiversity. The peace process allows us to get to areas rich in biodiversity,” told Murillo international journalists, saying that the country is now creating bases for guiding its development on the basis of the “bioeconomy” concept, “conserving the ecosystem, but at the same time knowing what we have and how we can use it to provide an economic base for communities and the country.”

Meanwhile, however, the peace deal is not unanimous. There are dissonant voices complaining that the negotiations left indigenous people out. Of the 30 national decrees resulting from the peace process, only one included indigenous tribes, the one concerning payment of environmental services.

“This is not very much. The negotiations were done between the government and the guerrillas and excluded the greater part of society. The indigenous peoples were indirectly involved and victims of the conflict,” Mateo Estrada, coordinator of the National Organisation of the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC) founded in 1995, told IDN.

Of Colombia’s 105 indigenous peoples, 56 live in the Amazon, totalling a population of 120,000 living in 29 million hectares out of 33 million hectares of indigenous lands in the entire country. This means almost 90 percent of the country’s indigenous lands are in the Amazon.

“The areas that we protect were impacted by the guerrillas,” said Estrada. “We were not allowed to move around, hunt or fish. There were a lot of restrictions imposed and some indigenous people were even forcibly recruited. We want to have some space of dialogue about our environmental problems.”

The indigenous people in Colombia are now identifying threats and alternatives in order to present a concrete proposal to the government for establishing a specific environmental policy for the Amazon region.

“We suffer from the lack of policies and special regulatory frameworks for the Amazon,” Estrada stressed. “Today is the moment to design these new policies in the framework of the peace process. But the government has not really been willing to do so. We want a proper policy for the Amazon.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 31 July 2017]

*Image: Colombian Amazon |
Credit: Indigenous organization OPIAC*

Women Bear the Brunt of Violence in Papua New Guinea

By Neena Bhandari



Whether I was dead or alive,
I did not think of that.

SYDNEY (IDN) – Violence is one of the most pressing issues, especially in the highlands, of Papua New Guinea (PNG) – one of the world’s most ethnically and linguistically diverse nations.

“Increased access to high-powered guns such as military style M16s and home-made shotguns, and the breakdown of traditional rules of warfare, has amplified the effects of violence, resulting in dozens

– if not hundreds – of violent deaths and thousands of displacements each year, especially in the Highlands,” says International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) chief official in PNG, Mark Kessler. “We are seeing wounds that one would see in war zones.”

The Pacific island country is divided into four regions – Highlands, Islands, Momase and Papua Region – and 22 province-level

divisions: 20 provinces, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) and the National Capital District (NCD). Tribal fighting is most prevalent in the Highlands, where it is relatively easy to hire guns and people to fight.

“The economic boom from natural resource extractions and [the country’s] liquid natural gas project has led to an influx of money in the Highlands, but there is no

flourishing economy for people to invest their money. So, when people have money, especially men, they buy weapons as it gives them power, or engage in the marijuana trade”, says Kessler.

Improved modes of transport and mobile phones have further made it easier to coordinate attacks and for violence to spread. The ICRC has documented the humanitarian consequences of modern-day tribal fighting in PNG and initiatives being undertaken by local and international organisations to mitigate the impacts of the violence in a short film, *Spears to semi-automatics: The human cost of tribal conflict in Papua New Guinea*.

“Traditionally, fights were over pigs, women and land,” notes Kessler. Now fights are often “sparked by minor disagreements, such as a fight over a mobile phone, where one person slashes the other with a bush knife and the latter retaliates by burning the house and 10 days later you have displaced families and several hundred houses burnt. Sometimes, there can be grave issues relating to land disputes, resources or community grievances against sorcery or sexual violence.”

Adding that “today, the rules of conflict – Don’t kill civilians and children, don’t rape women, don’t burn school and hospitals or threaten health workers – are less respected,” Kessler stresses that “sexual violence has increased in tribal fights.”

The ICRC has been training clinical staff in treating sexual violence and rape as a healthcare issue, and helping to build a

better referral system.

“Access to healthcare is not easy and women do not necessarily understand that they should be taking medication to protect against risk of hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS, contraceptive pills and vaccination,” Kessler told IDN. “The risk that they usually see is pregnancy. Most women don’t talk about it. When they do go to the police or the health posts, it is to get certification that they have been raped so that they can ask for compensation from the perpetrator.

“But the victim doesn’t get compensated, it is her husband or brother or father. The women continue to live in the same village, communities, sometimes houses, as the perpetrator.”

A Médecins Sans Frontières report titled *Return to Abuser*, released in March 2016, identified a lack of appropriate training and an under-staffed police force, which resulted in abusers being rarely brought to justice. The report’s main message was that gaps in services and protection systems must not force survivors to remain with or return to their abusers to experience repeated, worsening violence.

When it is election time – the most recent were held from 24 June to 8 July 2017 – tensions during polling, irregularities in vote counting and the announcement of winners erupts into widespread violent protests, leading to burning of buildings and deaths.

It is the safety and security of women that is particularly at risk during elections. “Candidates’ supporters indulge in bribing, harassing and even raping. Some political

parties, especially those in the Highlands, use rape as a weapon against their opponents during elections,” says Helen Samu Hakena, co-founder of Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency (LNWDA) and member of the Pacific Women Against Violence Network which is administered by the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC).

Born as a ‘woman chief’ in Gogohe village on Buka Island in ARB, Hakena has suffered and witnessed violence at close quarters, which has made her an ardent advocate for justice, peace building and women’s rights.

“Colonialism and the war have eroded women’s traditional leadership, conflict resolution and custodial roles,” she told IDN. “Domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, verbal and emotional abuse of women is all too common. Through our advocacy work we are trying to re-establish women’s roles. By putting women in positions of power, we can break this cycle of violence. We have been successfully lobbying for more women in government.”

There are 44 political parties in PNG, but few parties have gender equity and equality in their election manifestos. In 2012, there were 135 women candidates contesting the elections and only three women were elected to the National Parliament.

This year that number increased to 165, but the percentage of women candidates is far short of what some of the other Asia-Pacific countries have achieved and, despite a record number of women candidates standing in this year’s general election, there will

be not a single female MP.

“Women still face a number of challenges,” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) senior electoral advisor Ray Kennedy told IDN. “There are reports of women being browbeaten into not running or heckled for being a candidate. The electoral office has been training poll workers to establish separate queues for men and women so that women feel safer going to the polls.”

The unicameral National Parliament of PNG has 111 seats, 89 members are elected from single member open constituencies, 20 from province-level constituencies, one from ARB and one from NCD. Under the limited preferential voting system, voters list their top three choices.

“The number of candidates contesting the elections has declined from 3443 in 2012 to 3324 in 2017. Candidate numbers have fallen in the Highlands and Southern Regions, but they have stayed the same in the Islands, and actually increased in Momase”, says Terence Wood, Research Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy of the Australian National University (ANU).

“Most of the fall in candidate numbers has been driven by a small number of the electorates, some of which had particularly high numbers of candidates in 2012,” Wood told IDN. “The reasons cited for falling candidate numbers was the talk of candidate registration fees rising, which eventually didn’t go up; and sitting Members of Parliament having very high constituency funding and challengers viewing their chances of beating incumbents as too low to be worth the bother.”

For this year’s elections, UNDP coordinated and supported over 100 international electoral observers. Besides the 270 Papua New Guineans fielded by ANU and another contingent of 400 Papua New Guineans from Transparency International PNG, there will be international observers from ANU, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Australian, United Kingdom, Solomon Islands and New Zealand High Commissions, the United States, France, Israel, Japan, Republic of Korea, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

According to Kennedy, “election observation helps deter, though not completely preclude, malfeasance in the electoral process.”

In fact, the Commonwealth observer interim report noted “widespread” electoral roll irregularities and four people were reported to have died in election-related violence in the capital of Enga province. [IDN-InDepthNews – 29 July 2017]

Image: Spears to semi-automatics: The human cost of conflict in Papua New Guinea Highlands | Credit: ICRC

Clean Energy Coming to Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp

By Justus Wanzala

KAKUMA, Kenya (IDN) – As the sun shrinks into a red ball steadily disappearing beyond the horizon, residents of Kakuma refugee camp in Turkana County, north-western Kenya, adjust to their evening routines. Late shoppers rush out to food stores, school children pick up their books and mothers start preparing the last meal of the day.

Darkness quickly envelopes the camp – which is administered by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) – and only a few businesses and homesteads are in the fortunate position of possessing diesel generators or solar and kerosene lanterns to provide lighting. Like most places in northern Kenya, Kakuma refugee camp – home to some 170,000 refugees from neighbouring South Sudan, Burundi, Somalia and Congo among others – is off grid, meaning that access to electricity for lighting and other uses is limited.

Even for those refugees and displaced people who might have heard talk of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goal 7 on “access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” may seem like a faraway dream.

Indeed, living without access to electricity is something that refugees like Diana Byulwesenge from Rwanda have learned to live with since the camp became her home five years ago. She complains that the paraffin she uses for cooking and lighting emits smoke and is not the safest source of energy for her health and that of her children.

She says would welcome access to solar energy but is concerned about the price. “The money I receive from the UNHCR is only sufficient to feed my family. For cooking, I use fire wood and briquettes or charcoal.”

Najma Hassan, another refugee, says she uses a diesel generator to power her home and due to the high fuel cost she only uses it for lighting. She is forced to buy charcoal for her cooking needs.

However, Diana and Najma now seem set to benefit from a project that will ensure greater access to affordable, clean energy for their camp, and this energy will be sufficient for domestic use and

the powering of micro-businesses.

The Moving Energy Initiative (MEI) has unveiled projects that will benefit the refugees in Kakuma, including a solar-powered information communication technology (ICT) hub in the camp and health clinics that will serve refugees and the host community with solar power.

MEI is a partnership involving several organisations: Chatham House, Energy 4 Impact, Practical Action, UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). The programme is funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) and its main partner is UNHCR which is working closely with the Kenyan government.

Under the projects, solar power will be used for delivery of education services and creation of opportunities for local entrepreneurs. These include mobile phone charging businesses and small shops. Refugees and locals will also be trained on the use and maintenance of clean energy technologies.

The consortium already has similar projects under way in Burkina Faso and Jordan aimed at sustainably addressing the energy needs of refugees and displaced persons, and the communities hosting them.

Two firms in Kenya, Kube Energy and Crown Agents, have been selected to implement the Kakuma camp projects, with Kube Energy to instal solar systems at two primary health care clinics operated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in the camp. Crown Agents will build a solar-powered ICT and learning hub for the displaced community living within the camp and for its host community. The hub will be used for skills training and provision of commercial services for local entrepreneurs.

It is envisaged that the projects will use the learning hub as a location for selling pay-as-you-go (PAYG) solar home systems to local residents. One significant aspect of the one-year project is that reductions in CO2 emissions and access to services and livelihood opportunities will be enhanced.

Joe Attwood, MEI Programme Manager explained that the goal of MEI is to help address challenges that the humanitarian community faces in delivering affordable and safe energy to refugees. “Many attempts have been tried before and many have failed, we are using a new approach that brings the skills and experience of the private sector into providing energy to camp occupants,” he said.

According to Attwood, who did not reveal the cost of the projects, several sustainable energy solutions will be offered, including photovoltaic cells to provide electricity to one of the clinics in Kakuma and also to an education/community hub.

He said that the projects are eventually expected to finance themselves. “Many of the energy projects fail in refugee camps because there is no long-term thinking in order to develop the finance to keep systems running. We want to change that using private sector skills in creating revenue and using it to keep the systems afloat,” he explained.

Attwood also stressed that the initiative will also lessen dependence on firewood for cooking, improving people’s health and curbing deforestation, while in terms of social development, it will help improve livelihoods.

“Our education and community hub will help train refugees and local community members in vocational/jobs skills.” said Atwood, adding that MEI is putting in place interventions to ensure vulnerable populations are not taken advantage of because “the two organisations we are financing recognise the socio-political vulnerabilities of refugees.”

Kate Hargreaves, director of Crown Agents Foundation, said it intends to establish a solar-powered ‘one-stop shop’ in Kakuma for access to the internet, computer equipment, skills training and social events which will be available to refugees and the local community.

She echoed Attwood in noting that care has been taken to ensure that facilities are affordable for both refugees and local community. He adds, “because of the technology we are using we can keep costs low”.

According to Hargreaves, the project will stimulate a reduction in

household pollution and lower the carbon footprint at Kakuma.

When informed about the project, Diana and Najma were enthusiastic, with Najma saying that her prayer is that MEI introduces a multi-purpose solar appliance that can be used for the provision of energy for lighting and cooking. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 July 2017]

Image: Najma Hassan cooking in her kitchen in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya | Credit: Justus Wanzala/IDN-INPS



Inter-Religious Coalition Aims For Peace in the Middle East

By Joan Erakit

NEW YORK (IDN) - There is a famous bible passage that alludes to the unfortunate kinship between siblings; a child is questioned by God about his brother and he, at the time having killed his brother, denies allegiance by asking: "Am I my brothers keeper?"

Some may interpret the parable about Cain and Abel as follows: being humans, we are brothers by birth meant to look out for one another, yet circumstances have arisen that have turned us against each other. In the end, it is religion that is called upon to solidify bonds, bringing people from various backgrounds and points of view, together on the same page.

Religion, an often complex topic within political arenas, found its way to the United Nations Headquarters in New York for a political panel around the role of religious leaders in the peace building process in the Middle East.

With the support of the government of Spain, represented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Alfonso Maria Dastis, and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), led by High Representative Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, religious leaders from Israel and Palestine converged on July 18 at the UN defending and demanding their seat at the peace building table, emphasizing the need for the UN to formally acknowledge that religion can no longer be kept out of the Israeli-Pal-

estinian conflict.

Representatives of the three monotheistic faiths in the region – Christianity, Islam and Judaism -- attended the meeting in New York, and in a show of support, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres joined the discussion.

He delivered his remarks to a packed room that also consisted of the esteemed panelists: Sheikh Raed Badir, member of the Palestinian Ulama Council; Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem, Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem and all Palestine, Syria and beyond the Jordan River; Dr. Adina Bar Shalem, founder and president of the Haredi College in Jerusalem, Rabbi Avraham Giesser, Rabbi of Ofra and Council Head for the State religious educational system of Israel; and Rabbi Michael Melchoir, the community Rabbi of Jerusalem and president of the Mosaica Religious Peace Initiative.

Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, one of the panelists, Sheik Imad Abed Al-Hamid Al-Falouji, chairman of the Adam Center for Dialogue of Civilizations in Palestine and a collaborator of Rabbi Melchoir, could not obtain a visa to the U.S. and thus joined the discussion via video-conference.

"The Holy Land has a special place in the hearts of billions of people around the world," Guterres said, later adding, "With every passing day, frustration grows, hope

diminishes, and the perspective of a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems more distant."

The Secretary-General's words were well received given that the speakers gathered had spent time together in Spain for the Alicante Declaration, a summit for religious peace in the Middle East hosted by the Spanish government and UNAOC in November of 2016.

The Declaration itself was devised as proof that religious leaders from all three monotheistic faiths had agreed to partner and become responsible for creating a peaceful co-existence among their followers, more specifically stating: "We vehemently call for the cessation of incitement, misrepresentation and distortion of the image of the other and of the neighbor. We commit ourselves to educate future generations to uphold mutual respect. Drawing upon the religious traditions, and our understanding of what is best for our communities and peoples, we call for a solution that recognizes the right of the two peoples to exist with dignity."

The significance of this statement is underscored by the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has troubled the Middle East – and in fact the entire world – for decades and that groups and individuals on both sides of the fence have undertaken various initiatives to mediate a solution – though almost always failing.

Nevertheless, as Al Nasser stressed, religion at its core has the power to influence people. “We firmly believe that Religion is not the source of the problem. On the contrary, religion can be part of the solution.”

Thus in an effort to offer a new avenue for which to broker mediation, UNAOC has approached the situation differently by working with religious leaders on both sides of the conflict in hopes of securing them a seat at the peace building table.

“The Alliance is one of the UN’s main leading entities promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. We recognize that peace cannot be attained through the endeavors of politicians alone. For this rea-

son, we value the partnership and engagement of various players such as the civil society, the private sector, the academia and most of all, the Religious Leaders and faith-based organizations,” Al-Nasser added.

Given that religious leaders are there to provide guidance to those who seek its solace and understanding, and because their status in society tends to hold extreme gravitas, it is only fitting that they play an important role in shaping the spiritual journey’s of humanity – especially when it comes to conflict.

Whether it was the passionate words of Al-Falouji, who shared in a videoconfer-

ence his personal experience of working across religious lines or the poetic words of the Patriarch Theophilos who confidently deemed Jerusalem as the common home for Jews, Christian and Muslims – one thing was certain: religion is a political tool, and in this case, one that is seeking to bridge peace between two historically fraught sides.

“As I have continuously stressed, the two-state solution is the only path to ensure that Palestinians and Israelis realize their national and historic aspirations and live in peace, security and dignity. The expansion of illegal settlements, or the violence or the incitement undermine this prospect,” said



Guterres.

Speaking with candor, the Secretary-General urged religious leaders in the audience not to dismiss the opportunity for which they had to change the narratives about their respective faiths – narratives that had been distorted by extremism and radicalization. Instead, it was his solemn plea that religious leaders, local and regional might utilize their influence to foster messages of peace, resolution and commonality among congregants.

By appealing to the core values of all three monotheistic faiths irrespective of both conflict lines through the Religious Peace Initiative, Guterres believed that a dialogue could at least be started.

In theory, this is a promising desire that would hopefully do just as the Secretary-General hopes. In practice, it will require a concrete action plan that not only holds religious leaders in the region accountable for their declarations, but also provides them with capacity building, tools and spaces to begin these dialogues among their followers.

“We firmly believe that religion is not the source of the problem. On the contrary, religion can part of the solution,” Al-Nasser concluded.

Sitting in the room at the UN Headquarters, one could not help but notice the sense of urgency possessed by the panelists to engage in the peace building process – they were all thoroughly prepared with passionate statements of a life that would see no conflict in the Middle East, “a dream” as Rabbi Melchoir put it.

After a fruitful summit in Spain and a productive meeting at the United Nations, the coalition of religious leaders ready to bring Muslims, Christians and Jews together must prepare to develop not only a cohesive message, but a method of dialogue that speaks to all three faiths and that is felt by men, women and children in such a way that they look upon each other as a brothers keeper, and not his enemy. [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 July 2017]

Image: Religious Leaders from Israel and Palestine pose with UN Secretary-General António Guterres (6th from left) and UNAO High Representative Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser (6th from right) | Credit UN Photo



Image credit: Soka Gakkai

Education Key to Promoting Sustainable Development

By Shanta Rao

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – Speaking of the UN’s post-2015 development agenda, the President of the UN General Assembly Peter Thomson of Fiji last year zeroed in on a home truth: very few human beings in the world, he said, know anything about the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

So, he argued, SDGs should be part of every school curriculum. The UN will make a big push for it and youth should be taught about the importance of SDGs in the development agenda, he told reporters.

“If every school curriculum in the world incorporates the Sustainable Development Goals, every school teaches them, and every young person on the planet is made aware of them as rights and responsibilities, the world will stand a very good chance of attaining the Goals by 2030,” he declared.

In November 2016, Thomson wrote a letter to 193 Heads of State and Government to emphasize the importance of teaching children and young people about the SDGs. “Youth will be the inheritors of the success or failure of the Sustainable Development Goals,” he wrote in his letter.

Long before that declaration, the Tokyo-based Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a lay Buddhist organization was perhaps one of the few institutions in the world which has placed heavy emphasis on the role of students, as it focuses on Goal 4

of the SDGs: ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

And at a SGI panel discussion held July 12 at the Sri Lanka Mission to the UN -- and on the sidelines of a High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development the subject under discussion was: “Can Non-Formal Education Be Measured?. A Case Study on the Use of Exhibitions in School Settings.”

The SGI event was partnered by Earth Charter International (ECI) and the Centre for Environment Education (CEE).

In a message to the delegates and participants at the event, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda said one of the noteworthy aspects of the SDGs is that they are backed by a vision and determination to leave no one behind.

To realize this vision, he pointed out, “it is vital that each of us deepen our understanding of present realities – along with the recognition that we have/no choice but to live together on this planet with our fellow human beings.”

“A powerful momentum for transformation can arise and spread from the actions we take in our immediate environment, our respective communities. I firmly believe that the driving force behind this vision will be education and learning; in particular, I am referring to the value of education for sustainable development and global citi-

zenship,” he declared.

Over the years, President Ikeda has continuously stressed the importance of education in promoting sustainable development.

On the occasion of Rio+10, The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002, he proposed three goals in relation to education for sustainable development: 1) To learn and deepen awareness of environmental issues and realities, 2) To reflect on the modes of living, renewing these toward sustainability, 3) To empower people to take concrete action to resolve the challenges they face.

Based on these goals, the SGI and Earth Charter International have jointly produced the educational exhibition “Seeds of Hope: Visions of Sustainability, steps toward change.”

To date, this exhibition has been successfully showcased in 36 countries and territories around the world and helped create a space for young people and civil society actors to engage in non-formal education and learning for sustainable development.

The project, based in India, was intended to measure the impact of non-formal education through using an exhibition. Eighteen different schools from three different Indian cities were brought into the project.

One group of students was presented with only the exhibition while another group was provided with both the exhibition and some related activities.

Surveys were conducted both before and after the project to evaluate what has been learned among the students.

The exhibition used for the project was “Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change” created by SGI and the Earth Charter International.

The results of the survey were presented to delegates by Dr Pramod Kumar Sharma, Programme Director at the Ahmedabad-based Centre for Environment Education (CEE). He is also a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.

Asked about his role in the joint project, Dr Sharma told IDN that CEE was responsible for conducting the study. “I was involved in preparing the research design, preparation of the tool to collect data and analysis of the report along with other colleagues of the Centre.”

Asked to define “non formal education”, he said: “In this context, the non-formal is the approach and material used for educating children on the sustainability issue and motivate them to change.”

On the proposal made by the President of the UN General Assembly, he said It might help to have SDGs in the school curriculum and educate children on the SDGs – “why, what and how they will lead to sustainability”.

“Most important is to make them relate it to their daily life and how they are connected. As citizens now and in future, we need to make their involvement in SDG tangible, take it beyond UN agreement between countries,” he declared.

According to the UN, more than 750 million adults are illiterate, including 115 million young people. Two thirds are female. Some 250 million children of primary school age lack basic literacy skills and 124 million children and adolescents receive no schooling at all.

“These obstacles to sustainable development can and must be overcome by developing and implementing the right policies, backed up by commitment and resources.”

“We need to ensure that those out of school get access to quality learning opportunities, we need to improve the quality of schooling and we need to promote adult education and learning,” the UN says.

And by teaching the SDGs, progress is made towards the implementation of SDG 4.7 which states: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

Meanwhile, in November of 2016, the SGI and the Earth Charter International jointly developed and launched a new non-formal education tool called “Maping,” described as a mobile application designed to promote interest and engagement in the SDGs.

Maping is a mobile participatory app that enables users to take photos or videos of activities related to SDGs and share these on a world map.

By sharing information, as President Ikeda pointed out, users can see and sense more directly the ways in which the SDGs are relevant in their lives. The Maping experience will enable them to see the world through the lens of their own community, and vice versa.

“I believe that such forms of direct engagement with the SDGs can play an extremely significant role in raising public awareness and inspiring increased activism. SGI hopes to take full advantage of our grassroots network across local communities and to work with other like-minded groups and institutions to further advance non-formal education in the construction of a sustainable global community,” he added. [IDN-InDepthNews – 18 July 2017]

Nordic States Support Sustainable Development Goals

By Lowana Veal

REYKJAVIK (IDN) – Leaders of the five largest Nordic countries recently announced support of the Nordic countries as a whole for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed under UN auspices.

The initiative, called Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges, was initially flouted in 2015 when the Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted. As part of the Agenda, 17 SDGs were outlined.

Since the UN climate change in Paris in 2015 (COP 21), the programme has been further developed and was launched at a meeting of the Nordic Council of Ministers on May 30, attended by the Prime Ministers of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

One of the aims is to present Nordic knowledge of green transition, gender equality at work and sustainable food and welfare solutions, and to use the Nordic region to demonstrate that sustainable development does not have to interfere with economic growth.

With funding amounting to almost 10 million euro, the two-year initiative involves six flagship projects, all based on the Nordic experience – energy solutions, climate solutions, sustainable cities, gender effect at work, welfare solutions and food policy lab – and addresses most of the SDGs.

Among them, the Nordic countries have substantial experience in solar, wind, hydro, geothermal and biomass power, and many of their solutions could be applied elsewhere.

Prioritised activities in the ‘energy solutions’ initiative include identifying gaps in policy, financing and technology for renewables in developing countries and ways in which to reduce these gaps in order to leverage further investments.

The aim is to complement rather than duplicate existing solutions and setups for the UN goal of ‘sustainable energy for all’ at both national and international levels.

The project will focus on a few specific countries in East Africa

where Nordic governments, companies and other organisations are already involved and where scope for further expansion has been identified.

According to project coordinator Svend Søyland, although the ‘energy solutions’ initiative primarily addresses SDG 7 on ‘affordable and clean energy’, “it also serves as a key enabler for poverty reduction, improved health, education, gender equality, economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, and climate action (SDGs 2,3, 4, 5, 8, 11, 13). Finally, it realises the partnership approach (SDG 17) needed to realise all these goals.”

‘Climate solutions’ covers two aspects: Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFSR) and Nordic Green to Scale.

The ultimate goal of FFSR is to support voluntary reforms, preferably by introducing policies like carbon pricing or redistribution of budgetary savings as alternatives to climate mitigation and similar measures. Besides cutting emissions in the partner countries, this will also serve as inspiration for other developing countries that face similar conditions.

The Green to Scale programme involves scaling up 15 successful, existing climate solutions that are used in one or more of the Nordic countries, such as residential heat pumps, low-carbon energy in industry and manure management. If implemented widely in comparable countries, this initiative could save 4.1 Gt CO₂equivalents by 2030, or even more if countries extend their programmes beyond Nordic levels.

The ‘sustainable cities’ initiative, headed by Hans Fridberg, addresses SDG goal 11, ‘sustainable cities and communities. The programme will be run in close collaboration with national trade promotion agencies, clusters and businesses, and will highlight cooperation between Nordic stakeholders and increased opportunities for export. A conference in September will examine the role of the Nordic model in building the cities of the future.

Nordic countries have had a long-standing commitment to gender equality. The ‘gender effect at work’ programme is closely linked

to SDGs 5 ('gender equality') and 8 ('decent work and economic growth').

"The [Nordic] region has proven that equal rights for women and men at work generate prosperity, productivity and economic development," says Julia Fäldt-Wahengo, who launched the project idea and crafted the concept for it. As senior advisor, she now guides the work ahead, while project implementation is led and coordinated by Line Christmas Møller.

Like gender equality, health and welfare have always been cornerstones of Nordic society. "Welfare technology includes user-oriented technologies and robot solutions," says Mona Truelsen, project manager of Nordic 'welfare solutions'.

"With the Nordic countries leading healthcare transformation, new opportunities to bring solutions and concepts into the market have emerged. The healthcare transformation that the Nordic countries are undergoing creates opportunities to establish the solutions for future healthcare systems earlier than in other countries, where the transformation is not occurring at the same pace," she explains.

Truelsen points to the extensive use of telemedicine and e-health systems, as well as making patient information accessible for all. "The Nordic countries are world leading at sustainable hospitals ... Environmentally sustainable solutions have been developed in the Nordic region due to rigorous rules and regulations within areas such as construction and waste management," she says.



Nordic 'welfare solutions' addresses SDGs 3 ('good health and well-being'), 9 ('industry, innovation and infrastructure') and 12 ('responsible consumption and production').

The last flagship project, the Nordic 'food policy lab', is designed to encourage the use of Nordic policy solutions as a way of contributing to solving the food issues outlined as challenges in the SDGs. The intention is to educate consumers to take sustainability into account when making food choices.

Russian-Danish activist Selina Juhl established the highly successful Stop Wasting Food movement in Denmark in 2008 which has led to a huge reduction in food waste in Denmark.

"Selina's work – along with other Nordic initiatives on food waste – is also going to be part of the work of Nordic Food Policy Lab," says coordinator Mads Frederik Fischer-Møller.

"There is huge interest from abroad in our policies. I was in Holland last week and am currently in Scotland, talking both with

parliament and government ... the EU is very interested in a food waste approach, many countries are interested in nutrition and food culture policies. Local governments want to learn food innovation from New Nordic Kitchen. And I could go on. Overall, we believe there is most demand from developed countries (Europe, North America)," he adds.

Independently of the Nordic initiative, Sweden announced on June 15 that it will become carbon-neutral by 2045. Its Climate Act has the ultimate aim of no net greenhouse gas emissions by that date, but has also set new interim targets for 2030 and 2040.

Meanwhile, the first World Circular Economy Forum was held recently in Helsinki (June 5-7) and was co-hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The circular economy is widely seen as a key to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda and its associate SDGs. Asked whether the circular economy comes into the Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges initiative in any way, Heidi Orava from the Nordic Council of Ministers replied: "The initiative as such is not about circular economy, but there is a no waste and resource efficiency perspective, for example in the food part." [IDN-InDepthNews – 18 June 2017]

Image: Leaders of the five largest Nordic countries announce support for sustainable development goals (SDGs) | Credit: Nordic Cooperation

Historic UN Conference Vows to Restore Ocean Health

By J Nastranis

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – Our ocean is critical to our shared future and common humanity in all its diversity. Our ocean covers three quarters of our planet, connects our populations and markets, and forms an important part of our natural and cultural heritage.

It supplies nearly half the oxygen we breathe, absorbs over a quarter of the carbon dioxide we produce, plays a vital role in the water cycle and the climate system, and is an important source of our planet's biodiversity and of ecosystem services.

It contributes to sustainable development and sustainable ocean-based economies, as well as to poverty eradication, food security and nutrition, maritime trade and transportation, decent work and livelihoods.

One would think, these excerpts from a 14-point Call for Action emerging as consensus from the week-long United Nations Ocean Conference are common knowledge, taken into account by generations through history.

But the fact is that these are far from being common knowledge. In fact the gathering that wrapped up on June 9 at the United Nations headquarters in New York was the first summit on oceans. But it concluded with a global agreement to reverse the decline of the ocean's health, and more that 1,300 pledged actions for protecting the blue.

The Call for Action was adopted by consensus by the participating Heads of State and Government and senior representatives who "affirm our strong commitment to conserve and sustainably use our oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development."

"The bar has been raised on global consciousness and awareness of the problem in the oceans," the President of the UN General Assembly, Peter Thomson, told journalists in New York.

Thomson, whose native Fiji co-sponsored the event along with Sweden, said the organizers got what they wanted from the conference: "I'm 100 per cent satisfied with the results of this confer-

ence. Our aim was high. Our aim was to start the reversal of the cycle."

Speaking alongside Thomson, the Secretary-General of The Ocean Conference, Wu Hongbo, said the negotiated document lists specific measures "to galvanize global commitment and partnerships" for the oceans.

The main points from the political document and the discussions (from June 5-9) will be part of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the UN's central body for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in September 2015. The HLPF is scheduled to meet next month in New York.

In addition to the political Call for Action, participants – who also included thousands of civil society representatives, academics, artists, financial institutions and other practitioners and activists – pledged actions to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources. This is the goal of SDG14. By the afternoon of June 9, more than 1,300 voluntary commitments had already been registered.

Calling the figure "truly impressive," Wu, who is also UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, underscored that the commitments now comprise "an ocean solution registry."

In 'Our Ocean, Our Future: Call for Action', participants underline the integrated and indivisible character of all SDGs, as well as the inter-linkages and synergies between them, and reiterate the critical importance of being guided in their work by the 2030 Agenda, including the principles reaffirmed therein.

They acknowledge that each country faces specific challenges in its pursuit of sustainable development, in particular least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries, small island developing States (SIDS), and African States, including coastal ones, as do others recognised in the 2030 Agenda. There are also serious challenges within many middle income countries.

In the Call for Action, they “reiterate their commitment to achieve the targets of Goal 14 within the timelines, and the need to sustain action over the long term, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.” They recognise, in particular, the special importance of certain targets in Goal 14 for SIDS and LDCs

The Conference, where some 6,000 people participated, also recognized that ‘it’s all of us or nothing’. “When it comes to the ocean, it’s the common heritage of humankind. There’s no North-South, East-West when it comes to the ocean,” Thomson said. “If the ocean is dying, it’s dying on all of us.”

He underscored that by “getting the wheels turning” on SDG 14, the conference helped push forward action on all 17 SDGs, finance ocean science, but much more is required to fill the capacity gaps,” he explained.

Topics that were discussed ranged from plastic pollution in the oceans and seas to ocean acidification and illegal fishing – which tie in with topics of alleviating poverty, ending hunger, promoting health, ensuring access to water and sanitation, and so on.

Thomson attributed the success of the conference to the “wonderful way” in which all the different participants came together to discuss and work together.

He lauded the “openness to civil society, to the science sector, to private society”

in breaking down the typical divisions between governments and other sectors. “There’s no them and us. It’s all of us or nothing.”

In addition to eight plenary meetings and seven partnership dialogues, The Ocean Conference included 150 side events, 41 exhibitions and interviews at the SDG Media Zone.

These included events with New Oceans Advocate and globally-acclaimed Australian singer-songwriter Cody Simpson, as well as Marine biologist Douglas McCauley, Aboriginal artist Sid Bruce Short Joe and Spanish philanthropist Álvaro de Marichalar.

The mix of personalities and strong support for action brought “creativity and a sense of unity” to the action for oceans, said conference co-chairwoman, Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden Isabelle Lovin.

On the World Oceans Day on June 8, UN Secretary-General António Guterres drew attention to the fact that the future of the planet’s oceans is burdened by threats such as climate change, pollution and destructive fishing practices – and the lack of capacities to address these threats.

“Caring for, and using, our oceans in sustainable ways is critical to achieve ecological and economic goals for communities everywhere,” said Guterres in a message on the World Oceans Day.

“Looking forward, the conservation and sustainable use of oceans can be achieved only if we manage to address effectively the threats that oceans face,” the Secretary-General said, stressing that “our future

will thus be determined by our collective resolve to share information and find solutions to common problems.”

A healthy ocean requires robust global knowledge of ocean science, the Director-General Irina Bokova of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said in her message commemorating the Day. with a strong call to mobilize and harness the best scientific knowledge to protect our planet’s vital oceans.

“We cannot manage what we cannot measure, and no single country is able to measure the myriad changes taking place in the ocean. From Fiji to Sweden, from Namibia to the Arctic, all Governments and partners must share knowledge to craft common science-based policies,” Bokova added. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 June 2017]

Image: A school of Moorish Idols cruise over the coral reef, Ha’apai, Tonga | Credit: UNEP GRID Arendal/Glenn Edney



Where Forced Child Pregnancy is Not Fiction

By Phil Harris



ROME (IDN) - She is 10-years-old when she is raped by her mother's companion and becomes pregnant. Extremely ill, undernourished and underweight during her pregnancy, her mother requests an abortion and although the law permits termination of a pregnancy if authorities deem the carrier's health is in danger, the request is denied by the State.

The girl's mother is arrested and temporarily imprisoned for failing in her duty of care to her daughter, despite having previously reported the abuse to the police, who did not act.

Meanwhile, the State sends the girl to an institution against her wishes, where she is made to stay until the birth of her child. She is not allowed any visitors, apart from an aunt who is allowed to come once a week for two hours.

Against the odds, the girl survives her pregnancy and gives birth to a daughter.

Now a 12-year-old mother, she receives a miserable government stipend worth the equivalent of 50 dollars to care for herself and her daughter. As well as struggling financially, she is also finding it difficult to catch up on the education she missed through pregnancy, illness and being so badly bullied at school that she had to stop

attending.

A DNA test has confirmed that girl's abuser is the father of her child and, although in prison, he is still awaiting trial.

This is not fiction. The girl is Mainumby (not her real name) and she lives in Paraguay. Neither is hers an isolated case – forced child pregnancy is an issue not just in Paraguay, but throughout Latin America, according to the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights (CLADEM).

In a 2016 report titled *Child Mothers. Forced Child Pregnancy and Motherhood in Latin America and the Caribbean*, based on information from 14 countries, CLADEM found that tens of thousands of girls are raped and become pregnant in Paraguay and across Latin America every year.

"Forced child pregnancy is a serious problem in the region and there has not yet been an effective response from governments, says Elba Nuñez, Regional Coordinator for CLADEM in Paraguay. "Across Latin America, thousands of girls under the age of 15 suffer from sexual violence and are forced to become mothers against their wishes. This represents a serious public health and human rights problem. The negative consequences that a girl faces are physical, emotional and social."

According to Nuñez, "many girls like Mainumby are 'interned' in philanthropic institutions or homes run by religious groups linked to the Catholic Church, and are under court order to force them to continue their pregnancy. Some of their mothers are accused and detained for violating their duty of care, even though they have reported sexual abuse and the authorities have failed to protect the victims."

"Forced child pregnancy is violence – the result of sexual abuse and rape," says Shelby Quast, Director of the Americas Office of Equality Now, a non-governmental organisation founded in 1992 which works for the protection and promotion of the human rights of women and girls around the world.

"Events leading up to the pregnancy and the pregnancy itself are

deeply traumatic for a child and have lifelong implications, both psychological and physical. The body of a child mother is not fully developed and so pregnancy is often damaging to her reproductive system and other organs that are not yet ready for childbirth.”

In Paraguay, a recent report from the Paraguayan Ministry of Health revealed that 684 girls between the ages of 10 and 14 gave birth in 2014 – and that number was even higher in 2015. Paraguay has one of the highest rates of pregnancy among adolescents aged 10-14 years in Latin America, and nearly one in three girls in the country will suffer physical, emotional or sexual abuse by the age of 19.

In Paraguay, notes Nuñez, “there is a serious pattern of impunity towards the perpetrators of sexual abuse, firstly because of the fear that girl victims feel about denouncing abuse, given that attackers are predominantly a close relative. “If the mother is a victim of gender violence, it also hinders implementation of the complaint. Secondly, there is a lack of effective response by the justice system to investigate and deal appropriately with the abuse.

“Paraguay also lacks a framework for sexuality education in the school system to prevent cases of sexual abuse and enable the empowerment of girls and early detection. In addition to this, there are no protocols to care for cases of child pregnancy in order to avoid greater risks and provide adequate protection.”

Quast stresses the need for protocols, saying that “the creation of clear protocols is vital, and professionals such as police, doctors and teachers require training in how to respond appropriately and report sexual violence. Both perpetrators and duty bearers must be held accountable.”

According to Quast, “girls in Paraguay who experience sexual violence and assault are not receiving adequate protection from the State.” In addition, “religious fundamentalists and others groups, including some government officials, are threatening victims and human rights defenders to keep them quiet.

“Many want discussions to focus only on abortion, whereas organisations such as Equality Now and CLADEM are challenging the deep-rooted social norms and practices that allow the sexual assault and rape of girls to continue with impunity.”

To achieve positive change, says Quast, “conversation and action must incorporate prevention and the State has to improve how it responds holistically when girls are raped, not just concentrate on the pregnancies that result from this horrific violence.

“The State needs to provide stronger support for victims, especially child victims of sexual violence, and to human rights defenders who assist them. Awareness has to be raised about the widespread problem of sexual assault against girls, with community and religious leaders speaking out against sexual violence.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 9 June 2017]

Image: Across Latin America, thousands of girls under the age of 15 suffer from sexual violence and are forced to become mothers against their wishes | Credit: YouTube

Oceans in Crisis Around Africa

By Jeffrey Moyo

HARARE (IDN) – As soon as dusk falls, Petina Dube emerges from her house balancing a sack full of garbage which has been lying uncollected in her yard amid reports that the municipal garbage collectors have no fuel to carry out their job across many residential areas in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare.

At the age of 43, Dube, a resident of Warren Park high density suburb in Harare, apparently does not care where the garbage will go after she dumps it. “I am honestly not worried about where this garbage will end up; I will just dump it by a stream not far from here,” says Dube. But for many environmental experts like Happson Chikova, who holds a degree in environmental studies from Zimbabwe’s Midlands State University, waste dumped anywhere eventually ends up in oceans and this spells bad news for marine life.

“What people don’t know as they dump their waste at undesignated points is that the garbage won’t remain where they leave it, but it is washed away in rains, carried down along streams, along rivers, across borders and into the oceans, and this will happen over and over for as long as people choose to dump their garbage anywhere,” Chikova told IDN. “The end result is that ocean life will be threatened.”

Chikova noted that the growing threat to ocean life in Africa falls under Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG14), drawn up

by the United Nations “to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”.

The high-level United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 is taking place in New York from 5 to 9 June with the aim of being the “game changer that will reverse the decline in the health of our ocean for people, planet and prosperity”.

However, for many Africans like Fauzia Sinorita living off the Beira coast in Mozambique, whether or not their activities impact on the sea means very little.

“The sea supplies our food; we fish in it. It is also our transport route as we move to areas nearby, but we also use it as our dumping ground,” Sinorita told IDN.

As many Africans like Sinorita pounce on ocean habitats, experts here see life under oceans fading fast. “Life in oceans is fast disappearing as marine habitats and species – many of which have only recently been discovered – are threatened,” Jan Reuben, a South African-based scientist, told IDN.

As a result, according to the International Ocean Institute - Southern Africa (IOI-SA) which is based in Cape Town, South Africa, there is a growing need within the African region for awareness and training in the various disciplines associated with ocean governance in order to contribute to build-

ing a sustainable core of experts on the continent.

IOI-SA functions as the African regional training centre of the International Ocean Institute (IOI) which aims to educate mid-career professionals, educators, researchers and civil society members that have coastal and marine related responsibilities, functions or interests.

South Africa has a spectacular 3000 km coastline where the cold, nutrient-rich Atlantic meets the sub-tropical Indian Ocean, and nearby is the Southern Ocean, home to many whale species, making Southern Africa’s economic giant score very high in the marine biodiversity stakes.

And thanks to a concerted effort since 2003, South Africa has declared nearly 20 percent of its coastline protected by official marine reserves – close to the figure recommended by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

However, the country’s coastline is rife with illegal fishing activities and, like many other African countries, South Africa also has to contend with sub-standard ships and poor shipping practices that have led to massive marine pollution and damage, according to Musitheli Khumalo, an environmental activist based at Muizernberg beach in Cape Town.

Armando Chikanda is a 63-year-old retired sea captain who lives on the Beira coast in Mozambique. “The Indian Ocean is a

highway through which we ship goods here in Mozambique, but honestly, the traffic of ships which pass here daily leaves oil spills, ship groundings, anchor damage, and the dumping of rubbish, oily waste, which is endangering marine habitats not only here, but all over the world,” he told IDN.

“We have witnessed raw sewage, garbage, pesticides, industrial chemicals, plastics, all these pollutants on land make their way into the ocean, and this pollution is injuring the whole oceanic food chain, even humans,” Chikanda added.

With the UN Oceans Conference taking place in New York, it remains to be seen whether or not there will be any paradigm shift regarding the use of oceans, but many African environmental activists like Namibia’s Sarita Imbeni feel the conference may have come late because too much harm has already been done to the oceans.

“On our side here in Namibia, without mentioning what is already happening in other African countries closer to oceans, we have seen the ocean being overfished, the ocean being ruthlessly polluted, yet the ocean in itself is the largest living space on earth,” Imbeni told IDN.

For the Namibian activist, coastal areas, which are some of the most productive and biologically diverse on the planet, are fast disappearing as humans take them over with reckless abandon.

In Tanzania, the ocean crisis has reached alarming proportions, according to Sea Sense, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works closely with coastal communities in the East African nation to conserve and protect endangered marine species including sea turtles, dugongs, whales, dolphins and whale sharks.

Sea Sense reports that one of the biggest threats to the marine ecosystem and fisheries-based livelihoods in Tanzania is dynamite fishing, which is the act of using explosives to kill or stun large schools of fish for easy collection. Dynamite fishing indiscriminately kills many marine species with each blast.

Meanwhile, for Zimbabweans like Dube, giving a thought to ocean life may remain secondary. “Shall I breed diseases with garbage lying in my backyard because I have to protect some ocean life which I don’t see near me?” she asked.



[IDN-InDepthNews – 5 June 2017]

Image: The significance of ocean life across Africa means very little to many people here as they enjoy vacations on ocean-side beaches like Muizernberg beach in Cape Town, shown in the photo | Credit: Jeffrey Moyo/IDN-INPS

Aboriginal Australians Press For Constitutional Recognition

By Kalinga Seneviratne



SYDNEY (IDN) - In 1967, in a historic referendum, some 92 per cent of Australians voted for the original inhabitants to be recognized as “people” to be counted in the census.

Exactly 50 years later, over 250 Indigenous Australians met in a historic summit overlooking the sacred Uluru rock in Central Australia May 24-26 and called upon the Australian government to change the constitution to give them a voice in parliament and a treaty to recognize their relationship to the land.

Australian Aborigines have come a long way since the 1967 referendum that allowed them to be considered as people like the rest of the Australians.

There is a growing population of Indigenous Australians who are well educated and fluent in English. Some of them are even professors, lawyers, doctors, writers, journalists and politicians. It is

these leaders who are now raising the profile of Aborigines and articulating a special status for them as the original inhabitants of the vast continent.

Aboriginal people always had a spiritual link to the land and mother nature and this sovereignty was never ceded to the British crown, as the ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’ read out at an emotional end to the summit on May 26 pointed out and called for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution and a process leading to the signing of a treaty with its indigenous people.

Generations of White settlers have amassed great wealth exploiting the Indigenous land, especially in the north and central Australia, for its mineral resources.

Indigenous Australians had a landmark success in 1992 in re-

claiming their rights to these lands. Eddie Mabo, an Indigenous Torres Straits Islander, challenged the constitution written by the British that declared the continent as “terra nullius’ (nobody’s land) and annexed it for the British crown. The historic 1992 Mabo High Court decision led to the recognition of Native Title, increasing the footprint of Aboriginal-owned land in Australia. Today, more than a third of the Australian land mass is under some form of Indigenous title.

In spite of these successes, Aborigines are the “most incarcerated people on the planet” as the Uluru Statement pointed out. Before the 1967 referendum Aborigines were often referred to in Australian (and British) films and news reports as “savages”.

“We are not an innately criminal people,” the Uluru Statement said. “Our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future ... these dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness”.

Thus, the indigenous leaders want a Commission to be set up to supervise “a process of agreement-making” between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about indigenous history.

“In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard” was the powerful cry conveyed by the statement. “When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country,” it added.

The co-chair of the Government-appointed Referendum Council, Pat Anderson, told the media that the meeting “totally rejected” an endorsement in the constitution to acknowledge Aboriginal prior settlements, an idea that is supported by both the Government and the Opposition.

“In the discussions that we’ve had in the last six months, people want treaty ... they don’t want acknowledgment, they want treaty and a truth and justice commission.” She said that a working committee has been appointed at the summit to take forward these two ideas.

Fellow council member Megan Davies explained the process as acknowledging truth and justice. “This is part of the healing of the nation and coming together and having a mature nation,” she said.

“There has to be proper truth-telling, in the same way as in other countries in the world.”

Ms. Anderson said that having a voice in Parliament would mean people with cultural authority and integrity will be able to have their voices heard. “We will have a say in decision making, at the moment we’re locked out. We’re powerless and voiceless in our lands,” she lamented.

Former CNN news anchor and Aboriginal journalist Stan Grant writing in the national broadcaster ABC’s website said the 1967 referendum outcome was a powerfully symbolic moment. “It also allowed the federal parliament, for the first time, to make laws for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. It was part of a wave of activism and reform. It opened the doors of opportunity to education and employment,” he noted.

But Grant warned his people that an argument for lasting political change cannot be based purely on socio-economic inequality. “First, many of the people prosecuting that case are themselves – like me – privileged, and educated. We have closed the gap,” he notes. “Australians would be entitled to ask why we need special treatment.” He argues, Indigenous Australians as the first peoples have a unique status and heritage. “But, the challenge is how Australia can incorporate that into its democracy?”

Speaking at lunch to celebrate the 1967 referendum verdict on May 27 Opposition leader Bill Shorten said that politicians owed the Aboriginal people an “open mind” on the “big question” but did not commit himself to help implement the calls in the Uluru Statement.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull who is trailing in the polls leading to a national election later in the year, was more circumspect in his speech warning that constitutional changes are “very difficult”. He said that the constitution “cannot be changed by parliament (and) only the Australian people can do it”. [IDN-InDepthNews – 31 May 2017]

*Image: Uluru rock in Central Australia. Indigenous Australians met in a historic summit overlooking it on May 24-26 |
Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

People Must Not Be Ignored in Disaster Risk Reduction Planning

By Ek Soria

MEXICO CITY (IDN) – The 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction conference, held in Cancun from May 22 to 26, brought together disaster risk managers, policy makers and leaders from the private, scientific and civil society sectors to discuss the commitments of States to absorb, adapt to and recover from disasters in a timely and efficient manner.

High on the agenda was assessment of global progress in implementing the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction adopted in Sendai, Japan, in 2015 as a 15-year, voluntary, non-binding agreement which recognises that the State has the primary role to reduce disaster risk but that responsibility should be shared with other stakeholders including local government, the private sector and other stakeholders.

The Sendai Framework aims for the “substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries.”

The Cancun meeting was presented with a series of country reports on implementation of the Sendai Framework in which the need for participation of communities of people who are those affected by disasters in the most direct – and often dramatic – way was highlighted.

Participants heard calls for recognition of the role of marginalised and vulnerable people in filling gaps in disaster risk planning and mitigating damage, not least because they are also excluded in the broader field of development.

These people should be at the forefront of sessions discussing disaster risk reduction, according to Madeleine Redfern, mayor of Iqaluit, capital of the Canadian territory of Nunavut.

“The strongest message that has been sent is that we cannot afford the luxury of excluding,” said Redfern. “People must not be ignored. We have to go beyond, where women, indigenous people ... participate. There is so much knowledge, so much desire to participate that they cannot be ignored. Their involvement at national

or international level for disaster risk reduction is important. Otherwise our plans will not be effective.”

Participants stressed that only by doing this would the proposals of the Sendai Framework be matched by progress on the ground.

The framework calls for a substantial reduction in mortality as a result of disasters by 2030, as well as a decrease in economic losses and damage to critical infrastructure and basic services, including health and education.

Speakers noted that, almost two years after the Sendai Framework formulated goals and deadlines, some communities have learned to deal with disasters but there are still regions where chronic vulnerability caused by underdevelopment restricts the scope of institutions to cope with disasters in the future.

The Sendai Framework aims to prevent the emergence of new risks of disaster, reduce existing risks, increase preparedness for response and recovery, and strengthen resilience by implementing integrated and inclusive measures of an economic, structural, legal, social, health, cultural, educational, environmental, technological, political and institutional nature.

However, most of the countries and regions suffering the greatest impact of climate change face tasks that represent a major challenge.

From commitment to action

With the first session of the Cancun meeting dedicated to assessing the Global Platform, speakers also referred to other commitments signed by States – such as the 2005 Kyoto Protocol and the 2016 Paris Agreement, both within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to agree and establish binding measures for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions – which are necessary for recognising the real scope of prevention.

While the guidelines and priorities for action of the Global Platform include the strengthening of governance to manage and reduce risk, and to enable an effective response in the field of



recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction, solvency is required for countries to be able to do so. “Insurance is not the only solution, nor the best,” said Ingrid Hoven, Director-General, Department for Global Issues - Sector Policies and Programmes at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). “How do we generate the best conditions for reducing the risk of people staying in poverty?”

Governance understood as the interaction of public administrations with the market and the private sector or so-called civil society organizations requires greater coherence in the field of disaster risk reduction at a global level. “There can be no fulfilment of the objectives of sustainable development at the speed with which

losses are being generated by disasters,” according to Saber Chowdhury, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

While current indicators show that disasters are greater than the production of wealth, participants called for taking advantage of the momentum of similar meetings to create agendas with actions truly committed to full engagement between all levels of parliaments and social groups in order to reach agreements that would allow greater coherence. [IDN-InDepthNews – 30 May 2017]

Image: The 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction conference was held in Cancun, Mexico, from May 22 to 26 | Credit: UNISDR

Funding Needs for UN's 2030 Development Agenda Skyrocket – to Trillions of Dollars

By Shanta Rao

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – As the United Nations assesses the implementation of its 2030 Agenda for Development, including its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the estimated funding needs keep skyrocketing --- from the initial millions and billions to trillions of dollars annually.

The President of the General Assembly, Ambassador Peter Thomson of Fiji, said on April 18 that SDG financing, including the eradication of extreme poverty by 2030, is going to cost about \$6 trillion annually -- and then to a hefty \$30 trillion through 2030.

At the same time, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), which outlines the implementation of the 17 SDGs, points to an infrastructure gap of some \$1 trillion to \$1.5 trillion annually in developing countries, while estimates of the global gap generally range from \$3 trillion to \$5 trillion annually.

But the international community – and specifically the least developed and developing countries – is unlikely to succeed in raising the funds needed to achieve the UN's ambitious goals, including lifting some 550 million people out of poverty.

Nor does the state of global economic growth augur well towards achieving all -- or most – of the 17 SDGs.

Speaking to reporters on May 22, Wu Hongbo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and chair of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on

Financing for Development (FfD), said the challenging global environment in 2016 had significant impacts on national efforts to achieve sustainable development.

“The current global growth trajectory will not deliver the goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030,” he warned, pointing out that “despite expectations of improved growth in 2017 and 2018, the current global environment bodes poorly for the achievement of the SDGs,” said Wu, ahead of a May 22-25 Forum on FfD sponsored by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In the fight against poverty, Wu also said universal social protection floors are a tried and tested way to reduce poverty. They economically empower poor people by raising productivity and growth, along with incomes. The same principles apply at the international level, with an effective and sufficiently financed safety net for poor countries, he noted.

Putting it in perspective, Wolfgang Obenland, Programme Coordinator at the Bonn-based Global Policy Forum (GPF) told IDN that it is true, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will require additional resources.

“However, the repeated citing of ever higher numbers in the billions, trillions and beyond, hides rather than illuminates what is actually needed.” He said the new 2017 IATF report, released May 22, offers an

important, though not always consistent nor adequate, evidence-base for the policy discussions.

“Greater guidance by Member States for future reports will be needed on which issues they want to focus on, considering that tackling some may require longer preparatory process than others.” One problem with the report – and the outcome document of the Financing for Development Forum -- is an effect of the large sums cited, he noted.

Since it seems elusive that governments will be able to raise those amounts by themselves, there is a growing or rather over-reliance on the private sector and its potential contributions.

“What is especially worrying is that governments seem to be under the impression that they have to incentivize the private sector with the creation of ‘enabling environments’ – so-called ‘de-risking’ and other such instruments, sometimes collected under headlines like “public-private partnerships” or “blending finance” – that by and large are devoid of any environmental and or social safeguards, and as such are unlikely to be suitable to implement an agenda that is one of “sustainable development”,” said Obenland, who participated in the four-day meeting.

Roberto Bissio, Coordinator of Social Watch and also a representative of an international network of citizen groups mon-

itoring their government's commitments, was equally skeptical.

The World Bank, he told IDN, estimates the "poverty gap" (that is the amount of money that would be needed to lift everybody under \$1.90 a day, to that amount at 60 billion dollars a year)... a fraction of a US recent arms deal with Saudi Arabia estimated at over \$110 billion.

Bissio said the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that all but a few countries have the necessary resources domestically to offer a dignified social protection floor to everybody.

"Environmental damage in most cases requires countries to NOT take actions, rather than to spend more... where does the figure of "trillions" needed come from? It is only about infrastructure, which is of course necessary, but which also happens to be the most corrupt sector," he added.

The ILO also says that social consequences of the economic growth trend delineated are profound.

The Geneva-based organization estimates that over 200 million people are expected to be unemployed in 2017, 3.4 million more than in 2016, with further increases expect-

ed in 2018, as more people come of age and join the global labour force.

"There is reason for concern about below-target economic growth and its social impact in the least developed countries in particular."

Meanwhile, the report of the Task Force said the progress identified in all seven action areas of the Addis Agenda, included financing flows, namely domestic public resources, domestic and international private business and finance; and international development cooperation; trade, debt, systemic issue, and science, technology,



innovation and capacity building.

Nevertheless, said the report, “many implementation gaps remain.”

The Task Force also warned there is particular worry for the poorest and most vulnerable countries and people – and that the 48 least developed countries (LDCs) will fall short of eradicating poverty by large margins under the current growth trajectory.

Unemployment is expected to grow in both 2017 and 2018. And sluggish international trade growth is both a symptom of, and a contributing factor to, low investment and the global economic slowdown.

“It is clear that changes in policies will be needed,” the Task Force said in its report.

Currently, there is much uncertainty about the direction of the economic, financial, social and environmental policies of major countries.

This contributes to the higher-than-normal level of risks in the global economy, said the report which drew on the expertise, analysis and data from over 50 international institutions, including the World Bank Group, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), as well as UN agencies such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Just ahead of the FfD Forum, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on countries to take swift action on the implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda.

“Despite the huge strides in the fight against poverty, made possible by globalization and technological progress, inequality has increased markedly around the world. Conflicts are proliferating and other megatrends such as climate change, food security and water scarcity, are putting the progress of the last few decades at risk,” he declared.

Obenland said what is needed, are strong policy measures to regulate private sector activities and promote the realignment of corporate practices to the imperatives of sustainable development.

“Rather than regarding the private sector as a panacea, it is necessary to ‘unpack’ it by promoting virtuous and innovative mod-

els, such as agro-ecological approaches, circular economies and social solidarity frameworks.”

This kind of narrative on blended finance and public-private partnerships, he pointed out, is highly inconsistent with the AAAA’s (the agenda formulated to precisely achieve the means of implementation for the 2030 Agenda, among other things) commitment to developing principles and standards, in an inclusive and transparent manner, in order to safeguard the public interest;

One fundamental dimension of the FfD process since its inception, he said, was the overt attempt to strengthen the role of the United Nations – with its universal membership, inclusive nature and human rights foundations – in global economic governance. This would increase and rebalance the role of developing countries, promoting a more democratic global system.

To ensure international tax cooperation -- one of the most important priorities of developing countries--- the FfD outcome should therefore not include any encouragement for countries to invest in strengthening existing not-inclusive institutions as opposed to establishing institutions that are better fit for purpose, including an intergovernmental UN tax body with universal membership, Obenland said.

Similarly, the Global Infrastructure Forum should be clearly accountable to and guided by the FfD Follow-up process. Against this, the reference to “adequate voice of developing countries” is a regressive expression if compared to the AAAA commitment “to increasing the voice of developing countries” in the reform of international financial institutions (IFIs), he declared. [IDN-InDepth-News – 28 May 2017]

Image credit: UN

The World's Poorest and Most Vulnerable Want Climate Action

By Ramesh Jaura

BONN (IDN) – The world's 48 poorest countries that are particularly vulnerable to climate change are profoundly concerned whether “substantive progress” will be made in the months ahead on implementing the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement in all its aspects.

This was emphasised by Chair of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) group, Gebru Jember Endalew of Ethiopia, as delegates from 140 countries closed the two-week session of the United Nations climate change negotiations on May 18 in Bonn.

The LDCs are a group of countries that have been classified by the UN as “least developed” in terms of their low gross national income (GNI), their weak human assets and their high degree of economic vulnerability.

“The LDCs are pleased that some valuable progress was made during this conference but we are not moving fast enough,” Endalew said in a media release. “This November at COP23 we must make considerable progress towards finalising the ‘rulebook’ that will implement the Paris Agreement without a last minute rush.”

COP23 is the 23rd session of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) scheduled for November 6-17 in Bonn, the capital of post-war West Germany until re-unification of two German states in 1990. Meanwhile, the city hosts some 20 UN agencies and secretariats.

Significant progress in realising the Paris climate accord is inevitable because climate change impacts are already striking all corners of the world, and are anticipated to grow substantially over the next few decades, Endalew warned.

“The longer we wait, the more costly adaptation, loss and damage, and mitigation will become. We risk undermining our efforts to eradicate poverty and keep in line with our sustainable development goals,” he added.

The LDCs are in fact concerned that the international community is still far from addressing actual finance needs of developing countries, whose Nationally Determined Contributions underline



the need for “trillions not billions”. Mobilising climate finance is crucial for LDCs and other developing countries to implement the Paris Agreement,” the LDC Chair added.

Against this backdrop, Endalew emphasised that the global response to climate change must be consistent with the best available science. “We must limit warming to 1.5°C to protect lives and livelihoods, and this means peaking global emissions in 2020. Less than three years remain to bend the emissions curve down.”

With this in view, the LDCs are calling on all Parties “to redouble their efforts to tackle climate change with the urgency the climate crisis demands.” Going a step further, they are warning that “the livelihoods of present and future generations hang in the balance and depend on all countries taking fair and ambitious action.”

Closing the May conference that marked a staging-post for COP23, Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, the in-coming president of the November summit, pleaded for “a grand coalition to accelerate climate action before 2020 and beyond between civil

society, the scientific community, the private sector and all levels of government, including cities and regions.”

Among Bainimarama’s priorities are: “building greater resilience for all vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events and rising sea levels” and “boosting access to climate adaptation finance, renewable energy, clean water and affordable climate risk and disaster insurance and to promote sustainable agriculture.”

The island state of Fiji belongs to the 79 countries that comprise the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group. Together they make up more than half of the signatories to the Paris Agreement. Nearly 40 states of the ACP Group are LDCs.

Despite prevailing uncertainty derived from the U.S. “reviewing” its climate change posture, the ACP Group and European Union have reaffirmed their strong and steadfast commitment to full implementation of the agreement, urging all partners to keep up the momentum created in 2015.

The ACP Group and EU have agreed common positions on the next steps to implement the Paris Agreement and strengthened cooperation to promote low-emission, climate-resilient development.

As an example of this increased cooperation, the EU has announced support of Euro 800 million for the Pacific region up to 2020, with around half earmarked for climate action. The EU will also provide Euro 3 million to support Fiji’s COP23 Presidency. European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy Miguel Arias Cañete said: “Today more than ever, Europe stands by its long-term partners most vulnerable to climate change. We, developed and developing countries together, will defend the Paris Agreement. We are all in, and our joint commitment to this Agreement today is as in Paris: irreversible and non-negotiable.”

The ACP Secretariat in Brussels quoted its Secretary General Patrick Gomes saying: “The longstanding, ongoing cooperation between the ACP Group and the EU shows we are serious about addressing the impacts of climate change. Implementing the Paris Agreement is not only about ensuring the very survival of the 79 ACP countries, but also about building sustainable, resilient and

prosperous economies and societies worldwide.”

In Bonn the ACP Group and EU stressed the need to finalise the Paris Agreement work programme by 2018. This will be vital to ensure all countries can swiftly put their national climate plans into action, in order to contribute to the global goals. They also underlined the importance of making detailed preparations for the Facilitative Dialogue to be held next year.

This dialogue will be a key moment to establish a shared understanding of the impact of all parties’ contributions and the collective progress being made as well as to look into solutions that can allow us to achieve our collective goal.

The ACP countries and EU also gave their support to the consultations held by the outgoing Moroccan presidency and incoming Fijian presidency. The discussions aim at developing a clear proposal on the design of the 2018 Facilitative Dialogue, to be presented at the COP23 summit. [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 May 2017]

Image: A beach at Funafuti atoll, Tuvalu, on a sunny day |

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Strengthening the UN and its Creative Evolution into the Future

Interview with Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Dr. Daisaku Ikeda

BERLIN | TOKYO (IDN-INPS) – Why is it important to highlight the role of young people in ushering in a New Era of Hope? Will the landmark UN Conference to negotiate “a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination” succeed? How can UN Secretary-General António Guterres ensure sufficient support from the international community for implementing the SDGs and the Paris Climate Change Agreement?

Ramesh Jaura, Editor-in-Chief and International Correspondent of IDN, flagship agency of the International Press Syndicate group, asked SGI President Dr. Daisaku Ikeda these and related questions in an e-mail interview.

Q: You have been publishing a peace proposal every year since 1983. For 2017, you have focused on the role young people could play and titled the Peace Proposal “The Global Solidarity of Youth: Ushering In a New Era of Hope.” Could you please explain why it is important to pay attention to the role of young people?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: This is because I firmly believe that each young person is a source of hope, an embodiment of the future. The title of the proposal reflects my belief that if the world’s youth come together to act in solidarity, they can usher in a new era of hope even in the face of the many grave challenges that confront our world today.

In the process of developing the Sustain-

able Development Goals (SDGs), which are a key focus of this year’s proposal, the United Nations conducted a survey that drew a particularly strong response from youth. Of the more than 7 million responses to a UN survey, more than 70 percent came from members of the younger, under-30, generations.

The SDGs differ from the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in many ways. But what I think is especially important is their character as a “people’s agenda,” formulated and adopted through this kind of extended process of input from civil society, from youth in particular. The resulting SDGs comprise 17 goals and 169 specific targets related to eliminating poverty and hunger, combatting climate change and achieving gender equality, among other objectives.

To achieve these challenging goals will require a strengthening of efforts at the national level. Likewise, the strong support of civil society will be indispensable. The key to the success of the SDGs lies in taking full advantage of their character as a people’s agenda in order to forge a global solidarity of action. Young people can and must play a pivotal role in this.

As an NGO with consultative relations with the UN, the SGI has been engaged in the fields of disarmament, human rights education, ecological integrity and humanitarian relief. In each of these areas, our

youth members have taken the lead. Young people have the inherent capacity to use their creativity to generate new and hopeful visions of the future and to promote their realization with passion and action.

In our world today, there are some 1.8 billion young people aged between 10 and 24. If these younger generations can find ways of working together for nonviolence and for the protection of peace and human rights, their efforts are certain to promote important progress toward the kind of global society envisaged in the SDGs, one in which “no one is left behind.”

Q: Global solidarity involves rising above national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. In what way can young people in your view practice global solidarity?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: I believe that the crucial starting point for coming together across various differences and forging unity is shared awareness, shared concern. By this I mean the sense of anguish we all naturally feel at the plight of refugees, for example, or the strong desire to stop environmental destruction, or to seek a world without war.

These kinds of shared sentiments and aspirations are in fact the foundation for the cooperative relationships that the SGI has been able to develop with other organizations in the course of our own activities in support of the goals of the UN.



In the field of human rights, for example, our collaboration with other groups for adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (December 2011) was inspired and made possible by a shared sense of the urgency of counteracting the growing trends toward discrimination and xenophobia. Two years later, in 2013, we worked with Amnesty International and Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) to form a civil society coalition called Human Rights Education 2020 (HRE 2020). This March, a new exhibition, “Transforming Lives: The Power of Human Rights Education,” developed with HRE 2020 and other organizations, was launched at the UN Headquarters in Geneva.

Likewise, last May, SGI youth and other youth groups launched Amplify, an international network of young people working for nuclear weapons abolition. Its goal is to promote activities to bring the era of nuclear weapons to a close.

The foundation for solidarity is this kind of shared feeling or aspiration, coupled with

the effort to try to think collaboratively about the kinds of actions that will be effective in generating real solutions.

The idea of education for global citizenship is likewise very important for us and this is one of the reasons why we have been working to raise awareness among younger generations through such vehicles as exhibitions, etc., on the themes of various global challenges.

In this context, perhaps the most critically important thing is the individual friendships that develop naturally through working together across differences.

Even if we speak of “global solidarity,” the really important thing is not the scale of the effort, but the depth and strength of individual human connections. This is a measure of the strength of solidarity—the kind of solidarity that can meet difficult challenges and transform reality. Friendship shared among individuals is the essence of global solidarity of youth.

Q: I vividly recall the SGI co-facilitated International Youth Summit in August 2015 in Hiroshima. Are you planning an event focusing on youth this year to commemorate the 60th anniversary of your mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, issuing a declaration calling for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: We are planning to hold a youth summit for the renunciation of war in Kanagawa Prefecture, where second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda issued his declaration calling for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons. This will

bring together youth representatives from many regions, including young people from Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Okinawa in Japan.

On September 8, 1957, Josei Toda stated before a gathering of 50,000 that nuclear weapons were an absolute evil and a fundamental threat to the right of the world’s people to existence. In doing so he was declaring that their use was impermissible—for any reason, under any circumstance.

He further stated that this was to be the foremost of his teachings, and that he was bequeathing to us—the youth of that era—the task of creating a new current of history that would lead to the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons. Since that time, I have embraced this as my mentor’s legacy and have worked tirelessly to forge a path toward a world without nuclear weapons.

In recent years, the SGI is working with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), other NGOs and the representatives of different faith communities in a movement to realize the adoption of a treaty outlawing nuclear weapons. The spiritual wellsprings for the SGI’s efforts can be found in President Toda’s declaration.

Against the backdrop of a heightened awareness of the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons, negotiations on such a treaty have finally been initiated at the UN. The adoption of such a treaty would clearly establish the international norm prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons – without any exception or recognition of mitigating cir-

cumstance. Such a treaty would resolve the lack of an explicit legal prohibition against nuclear weapons that was one of the focal points of the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice.

In order to ensure the success of the treaty negotiations, and also to secure the effectiveness of a treaty once adopted, it is vital to bring together and give concrete form to the voices and concerns of civil society, in particular the young people who strongly desire the end of the era of nuclear weapons.

It is my earnest hope that the youth summit in Kanagawa will contribute to the realization of this goal.

Q: Would you like to share your expectations of the second session (June 15–July 7) of the UN Conference to negotiate “a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination” that will follow the first session, which ended this past March 31?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: The first session of negotiations on a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons was held this past March in New York. It was attended by the representatives of 130 countries, more than two-thirds of the UN member states, as well as many representatives of global civil society. This was a very welcome development, as was the very constructive tone of the debate on the broad outlines of a treaty.

Representatives of the SGI attended the negotiating session, where they were given the opportunity to address the conference and present a working paper. Ours was one

of the many voices from government and civil society representatives expressing the strongly held determination to reach agreement on a treaty. The chair of the conference, Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gómez of Costa Rica, has expressed her hope that a treaty text can be completed and adopted by the last day of the second negotiating session in July.

I think it is crucial that as many countries as possible participate in the next session of the negotiations. This of course includes the nuclear-weapon states and the states that rely on them for extended deterrence – states that were almost entirely absent from the first session. We need to remember that the sharply divergent viewpoints do not make dialogue impossible; they make it necessary.

There are a number of concerns – such as recognition of the catastrophic consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and concern about the risks of an accidental or unintended nuclear detonation – that are fundamentally shared by all states, including the nuclear-weapon states and their nuclear-dependent allies. This is something that was affirmed in the Final Document adopted by the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). With such shared recognition of concerns as the basis, debate should center on the NPT Article VI-stipulated obligation to achieve nuclear disarmament. There should be an effort to clarify the points of convergence between the security concerns of each

state and the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

It is my hope that the second session will, like the first, provide opportunities for open debate with participation of civil society, and that the drafting of a nuclear weapons prohibition treaty will proceed as a shared global undertaking with an eye to adoption by the end of the session.

Q: What role would you wish Japan to take upon itself in the forthcoming negotiations?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: Japan has a profound historical responsibility and mission as the only country to experience the use of nuclear weapons in war. I have strongly encouraged recognition of that fact and urged Japan to participate actively in the negotiating conference. It was thus extremely regrettable that the Japanese government did not participate in the first session. At the same time, however, there were many representatives of Japanese civil society at the conference. They made significant contributions by adding their voices to the call for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons along with concrete proposals regarding the content of the treaty.

Three hibakusha shared with the conference their personal experiences of surviving the atomic bombings. By doing so, I think they helped clarify and reaffirm the fundamental basis and starting point for a nuclear prohibition treaty—the intensely felt desire and determination that the horrors of nuclear weapons use never be visited again on anyone else.

The NPT has long been regarded as the cornerstone of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation negotiations. It was adopted on the basis of an awareness of the devastation that a nuclear war would produce and of the need to “take measures to safeguard the security of peoples.” In light of this fundamental orientation of the NPT, it should be clear that a nuclear weapons prohibition treaty would in no way run counter to the objectives of the NPT, but would instead reinforce movement toward the goals of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation that the NPT seeks.

I think it is important to recall the joint statements that Japan, along with the foreign ministers of nuclear-weapon and nuclear-dependent states, adopted at the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPTDI) Ministerial Meeting held in Hiroshima in April 2014 as well as at G7 foreign ministerial meetings. These have stressed that the ongoing discussion on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons should be “a catalyst for a united global action towards the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons,” and that the representatives of these states “share the deep desire of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that nuclear weapons never be used again.”

Japan has a special mission and responsibility to deepen and enhance debate on the question of what is actually necessary to achieve a world without nuclear weapons and to help forge a path to that goal. So I strongly hope that the Japanese govern-

ment will return to this starting point and will decide to participate in the second session of the negotiations.

Further, Japan should work with The Netherlands, who participated in the March conference as a country under the umbrella of extended nuclear deterrence, in order to bridge the differences between the nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states, in this way making a unique and vital contribution to the success of the negotiations.

Q: You have proposed an earliest possible holding of a U.S.-Russia summit in order to reinvigorate the nuclear disarmament process. What prospects do you see of such a meeting taking place in the near future?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: When Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Donald J. Trump spoke by phone in January soon after the latter’s inauguration, they agreed that there were signs of improvement in US-Russian relations, which had been chilly following their disagreement over the Ukraine situation that arose three years earlier.

The recent U.S. military strike against targets in Syria, however, has greatly strained relations again, casting a pall over future prospects. The confrontation between the two countries has impacted UN Security Council deliberations on Syria, with a negative impact on the international community as a whole. It is crucial that there be a prompt search for some means of easing tensions.

On April 12, five days after the U.S. bombing of Syrian targets, U.S. Secretary of

State Rex Tillerson visited Moscow. There he met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, followed by a meeting with President Putin. Further efforts will be required to ensure that avenues for dialogue between the two countries remain open in order to prevent a further escalation of tensions.

Even when a process of dialogue produces intense exchanges of strongly held and expressed views, it can serve as a step toward improved relations by enabling both sides to understand the concerns of the other. President Trump and President Putin spoke by phone this past May 2. It is important to all such means toward sustaining a process of dialogue.

At present, both Russia and the United States have budgeted enormous sums for nuclear weapons and related matters, and there is real concern that this will only increase. Reducing these outlays would free up resources that could be used for the enhancement of healthcare and other social services in both countries.

When they spoke immediately following President Trump’s election last November, they noted that 2017 would mark the 210th anniversary of diplomatic relations between their nations. They agreed to work for “a return to pragmatic, mutually beneficial cooperation in the interests of both countries.” It is my earnest hope that, as they seek areas of common ground, they will initiate dialogue on nuclear disarmament as a pivotal element in both countries’ actions.

Q: What challenges do you think the new

UN Secretary-General António Guterres is facing and how do you think he could handle these? How can the UN chief ensure sufficient support from the international community for implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Climate Change Agreement?

Dr. Daisaku Ikeda: Since its establishment, the UN has seen the adoption of many foundational international norms and conventions, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, it has made important contributions in establishing the ideals and goals for the shared striving of humanity, including such key concepts as sustainable development and a culture of peace.

These efforts have been part of what the organization's second secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld, referred to as its "creative evolution" based on the spirit of the Charter.

The UN has promoted ever-greater shared awareness of the many global challenges we presently face and has in recent years, for example, played a key role in the adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement to combat global warming.

But as the refugee crisis demonstrates, even when there is a broadly shared recognition of the critical nature of a problem, it is often difficult to muster effective international cooperation for its resolution. I think that the greatest challenge the UN now faces is that of how to strengthen and accelerate the shift from a shared awareness to shared action.

In this sense, I deeply resonate with the stress Secretary-General António Guterres has placed – based on his 10-year tenure as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees – on the importance of a "culture of prevention" and for making gender equality a top priority.

As climate change demonstrates, no country can remain aloof from the impacts of global threats. Thus, realizing a culture of prevention would be of benefit to all countries. Pursuing this goal provides a strong incentive for shared action in support of the UN's efforts.

As I stressed in this year's peace proposal, gender equality is not only indispensable in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, it is pivotal to efforts to advance the SDGs on all fronts.

Secretary-General Guterres has demonstrated leadership in realizing gender equality within the UN's leadership structures, appointing women as Deputy Secretary-General, Under-Secretary-General, Chef de Cabinet and Senior Advisor on Policy. I strongly welcome these actions.

I am confident that the new secretary-general's focus on a culture of prevention and gender equality will drive progress in the UN's undertakings, such as the achievement of the SDGs and the implementation of the Paris Agreement. To this end, it is, as I've already noted, crucial that collaboration between the UN and civil society be strengthened across all sectors. In particular, I think it is absolutely vital that greater efforts be made to create opportunities for the active engagement of youth.

I have strong expectations that, under Secretary-General Guterres' leadership, collaboration with civil society and the engagement of the world's youth will serve as a foundation for strengthening of the United Nations and for its creative evolution into the future. [IDN-InDepthNews – 15 May 2017]

Image: Dr. Daisaku Ikeda | Credit: Seikyo Shimbun

UN Peacekeeping Missions Face Threats of Cuts – and Extinction

By Shanta Rao



NEW YORK (IDN) – The UN’s 16 peacekeeping operations (PKOs), funded by a hefty \$7.9 billion budget for the current 2016-2017 biennium, are in jeopardy facing threats of drastic cuts – and in some cases, even extinction.

The United States, the largest single contributor accounting for about 28% of that budget, has not only threatened to reduce funding, possibly down to 25%, but is also calling for a downgrading – or even the total elimination-- of some of the ongoing missions.

Addressing the Council on Foreign Relations in March, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley gave an advance warning when she challenged the current state of peacekeeping operations.

“We will lay out a comprehensive vision for how peacekeeping missions should be reviewed moving forward. We will go back to first principles and ask the hard questions: what was the original intent of the mission? Is the mission achieving its objective? Are we lifting up the people in the region towards independence? What are the mission countries doing to help themselves? Do we have

an exit plan? And is there accountability?” she asked.

Currently, there are over 98,200 uniformed personnel, including about 85,408 troops and 12,786 police, serving under the UN flag in some of the world’s political hotspots, mostly in Africa.

On the initiative of the Security Council, the United Nations has already decided to close down three of its peacekeeping missions – in Liberia, Cote D’Ivoire and Haiti – which will soon reduce the number of missions to 13. And some others may follow.

The administration of President Donald Trump, which has already eliminated funding for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), after wrongly accusing the agency of promoting abortions, is most likely to enforce further cuts, including reductions in U.S. voluntary funding for development and humanitarian causes. (Read U.S. Reasoning Behind Cutting Funds to UNFPA Challenged.)

At present, the U.S. is also the largest single contributor to the UN’s regular budget contributing 22 percent of the \$5.4 billion budget for the current biennium. The balance is paid by the remaining 192 member states.

The Trump administration has also cut about 28 percent of the State Department budget for 2018 which will have a spill over negative impact on the United Nations because some of the payments to the UN are drawn from sections of that budget.

But the axe is not likely to fall immediately – largely for administrative reasons.

George A. Lopez, the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh Professor Emeritus of Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, told IDN peacekeeping rates and discounts may be re-calculated and changed only every three years by the General Assembly, based on advice from the UN Committee on Contributions.

The next major review, he said, takes place in December 2018. Until then, annual “technical” reviews are held. The 2017 session for this year’s review is in June.

“The U.S. government will have to adhere to these timetables

and work with the UN in New York throughout the coming months. But as the rules stand now, no major changes can be made on rates until the next three-year review,” said Lopez, who served on the UN Panel of Experts for monitoring and implementing UN Sanctions on North Korea.

Asked at a press conference April 24 whether UN Secretary-General António Guterres had discussed proposed budget cuts when he briefly met with Trump at the White House on April 21, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters: “I think the funding and the budgetary process of the U.S. is still ongoing. As we know, there are negotiations and discussions going on in the U.S. Congress according to the constitutional issues in this country.”

Dujarric also said Guterres was “very pleased” with the brief 20-minute discussion he had with Trump. And, he very much looks forward to seeing him again in the near future.

Meanwhile, UN peacekeeping missions have also come under heavy fire following reports of large-scale sexual abuses, including of minors, by peacekeeping troops, at least involving eight incidents under investigation.

Asked about these charges, including statutory rape by some troops, Dujarric told reporters April 21 that out of the eight cases, one is closed, where paternity has been established and an ex gratia payment has been made for child support to the mother by the Member State.

“We are following up the other seven cases with the concerned Member States,” he added.

In some cases, he said, “paternity has been established through DNA testing that the mission has facilitated between the victim and the Member State and in others, we are in touch with the Member State to facilitate the DNA testing and process the claim.”

“We have requested the ministry to encourage the lawyer to provide credentials of one of the victims whose name does not appear in our records. So as far as I understand, the cases are being followed up on, and it’s clear that the Member States of the peacekeepers who are being accused have a responsibility to cooperate and to pay ex gratia, to pay the mothers of the victims and if there was a crime that those people be prosecuted,” he noted

After more than six years of denials, the UN was also forced to admit last year that UN peacekeepers were responsible for the spread of cholera in Haiti which killed over 10,000, and sickened thousands more.

At the political level, Lopez told IDN that many senior U.S. senators are quite upset about Trump’s slashing of the State Department budget and a number of other items that portray the U.S. as isolating itself from the world and U.S. leadership in it.

So, quite ironically, although Republican conservative presidents and even more conservative members of the House and Senate traditionally badmouth the United Nations and have, in fact, cut its funding at various levels in the past, “we might see under Mr. Trump a backlash against this cut in order for those senators to be politically consistent rejecting his approach”.

But as they say “a lot of water must go under the bridge” before we know what will remain in Trump’s budget.

“That being said, I believe the more relevant question is what’s happening at the UN regarding peacekeeping that either might position it to absorb the 3% loss without compromising peacekeeping, and/or what reforms are already underway in UN peacekeeping that might actually please a large and broad group of American leaders because the UN is showing it is trying to be more efficient and accountable”.

These latter concerns are the mantra of U.S. politicians who traditionally attack the UN and talk about budget cutbacks or withdrawal, said Lopez, who once served as the Vice President of the Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, as part of the Secretariat’s ongoing review of costs and the use of resources provided by the Member States, on April 20, Guterres launched an initiative to reduce costs by increasing the efficiency in the use of air assets in peacekeeping missions.

The UN currently deploys 58 fixed-wing and 157 rotary-wing aircraft in 12 of the 16 peacekeeping missions and 6 special political missions. The annual cost of these aircraft was close to \$750 million in 2015-2016.

While these assets provide essential logistics and military-enabling capabilities, given their significant cost implications, the Secretary-General has asked the heads of field missions to systematically analyse and adjust the composition and utilisation of their air fleet and to seek alternative solutions that may be more cost-effective. This is also an opportunity for missions to innovate, said Dujarric.

According to the United Nations, the first peacekeeping mission was set up in 1948 to monitor the Armistice Agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours – an operation which became known as the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).

Since then, 69 peacekeeping missions have been deployed, and more than 3,326 UN peacekeepers from some 120 countries have died while serving under the UN flag. In 1988, peacekeeping operations received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Lopez said that looking exclusively at the situation from a UN vantage point, there could be not a better time for the UN to show it's cleaning up its act on inefficiencies, errors and lack of accountability in UN peacekeeping.

He said there are still a number of reforms yet to be implemented from the high-level review panel's recommendations for peacekeeping that reported in the final days of former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Many of these will result in serious improvements in both efficiency and budget. Moreover, the new Secretary-General has shown a smart approach to UN reform in ways that clearly will revamp and make cost-efficient changes to UN peacekeeping.

“So in some respects, the UN is already cleaning its house without being intimidated or bankrupted to do so. If this proceeds, then both the UN and the U.S. can declare a kind of victory and live with the three-year allocation that comes out somewhere between 25 and 28%”, said Lopez, who was a onetime senior research associate at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs in New York City.

Referring to the closing down of three peacekeeping missions, he said: “A number of us would believe that Ivory Coast and Liberia

are long overdue, as UN sanctions and other big programs have come to a close there as well. Each nation's stability is a triumph of UN work.”

Meanwhile, “the public relations nightmare and humanitarian tragedy related to the Haiti mission means we probably need a greater multilateral focus on how to improve human security in Haiti, but it certainly cannot flow from multilateral peacekeepers under UN auspices.”

These three cases of changes might provide the impression of increased efficiencies and accountability, Lopez declared. [IDN-In-DepthNews – 28 April 2017]

Image: UN Secretary-General António Guterres (left) swears in Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, 12 April 2017, United Nations, New York | Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Why Spending 30 Dollars a Year on Each Adolescent Is Essential

By J Nastranis

NEW YORK (IDN) - Less than 30 dollars spent per person per year can work wonders for adolescent health and education, finds a new study commissioned by UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

The report has been published in *The Lancet* on the eve of the World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington D.C. from April 21 to April 23, 2017, where finance and development leaders from 188 countries were slated to discuss the critical need to invest in adolescents.

The *Lancet* is an independent, international general medical journal purported to make science widely available so that medicine can serve, and transform society, and positively impact the lives of people.

The study was made public within days of the U.S. decision to cut financial contributions to the UN Population Agency. This is the first of the cuts in U.S. financial contributions to the UN announced by President Donald Trump. The memo, citing the Kemp-Kasten amendment – first enacted in 1985 and previously used by other Republican presidents – alleges that the UNFPA “supports, or participates in the management of, a programme of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilisation” in China.

The amendment prohibits foreign aid to an organisation that is involved in coercive abortion or involuntary sterilisation. Presidents Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush and George W Bush refused to fund UNFPA for the same reason. (Read U.S. Reasoning Behind Cutting Funds to UNFPA Challenged)

Improving the physical, sexual and mental health of adolescents aged between 10 and 19 years, can avert more than 12 million adolescent deaths and more than 30 million unwanted pregnancies in adolescents, according to the study.

Similarly, programmes to reduce child marriage, at about 3.80 dollars per person, can bring an almost six-fold return on investment and cut child marriage by around a third.

“Investing in young people is in everyone’s long-term and stra-

tegic interest,” said UNFPA Executive Director Dr Babatunde Osotimehin. “Small investments in empowering and protecting the world’s over a billion adolescents can bring a tenfold return, or sometimes even more. Our pioneering research must now be seen by policymakers, and used to chart the world’s way forward.”

Authors from Australia’s Victoria University, the University of Melbourne, and UNFPA led the study. The authors calculate the economic and social impact of health interventions on improving adolescent health services and expanding HPV (human papilloma virus) vaccinations, amongst others. They also calculate the impact of programmes to reduce child marriage and intimate-partner violence, improve school attendance and educational quality.

“Some of the best investments in adolescent health and well-being lie outside the health sector – tackling child marriage, reducing road injuries and improving education,” said lead author Peter Sheehan, Victoria University.

“There is little doubt that the actions outlined in our study could be delivered on a large scale in countries, transforming the lives of boys and girls around the world. The economic and social impacts of investments in adolescent health and well-being are high by any standards, and are among the best investments that the global community can make to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.”

The report estimates the total cost till 2030 of all of the interventions studied, except for education, at 524 billion dollars, equivalent to about 6.70 per dollars person per year. For education, the overall total is estimated at 1.77 trillion dollars or about 22.60 dollars per person per year.

Taken together, the costs would amount to less than 30 dollars a year for each person. Overall, the total annual investment in all programmes will amount to a sheer 0.20 percent of the global gross domestic product. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 April 2017]



Image: Girls from the Safeguard Young People programme in Malawi, which provides sexual and reproductive health information, helps young people access health services, and offers leadership training | Credit: UNFPA Malawi/Hope Ngwira

Sport as a Tool for Achieving SDGs

By Desmond Brown

GEORGETOWN, Guyana (IDN) – Investing in sport can help reduce spiralling health costs and promote education, social cohesion and gender equality, says a new guidebook published by The Commonwealth.

The recommendations of the guidebook, titled ‘Enhancing the Contribution of Sport to the Sustainable Development Goals’, are important to the Caribbean, where chronic and communicable diseases are devastating to individuals and community, threatening the quality of life and becoming an increasingly negative factor in the region’s development.

Guyana, for example, spends on average 4.6 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on healthcare every year, equivalent to 200 dollars per capita.

The guidebook, which recognises the potential contribution of sport to achieving important development objectives, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, was published to coincide with International Day of Sport for Development and Peace on April 6, and lists a set of policy prescriptions designed to help countries achieve global targets in health, education, social inclusivity and gender equality by using sport as a tool.

One of the areas identified where sport can make an enormous impact is in improving public health.

In the Western hemisphere, the epidemic of chronic disease has most affected the Caribbean region. The Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) has noted that “the Caribbean has the highest death rates from heart disease and the top five countries for diabetes in the Americas.” Among the countries in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), heart disease ranks as the leading cause of death. Other conditions such as cancer, stroke, diabetes and HIV are major causes of death.

The Commonwealth guidebook notes that physical inactivity causes more than three million deaths per year globally, and accounts for 1-4 percent of all healthcare costs.

Despite the benefits of adopting an active lifestyle, one-fifth of men and one-quarter of women do not meet World Health Organisation (WHO) minimum guidelines for physical activity, according to which adults should practise 75 to 150 minutes of exercise a week.

The guidebook’s recommendations include ring-fencing education budgets for school sports and physical education; regulating to preserve green spaces in towns and cities for sports and physical activity; funding new sports facilities through private and civil society partnerships; and creating small ‘pocket parks’ for dance and informal exercise.

It also recommends ensuring that sport facilities are safe and accessible for women and girls; training the sport workforce, including coaches and volunteers, to help people from diverse backgrounds become physically active; developing initiatives to boost sport-based entrepreneurship and enterprise; and implementing measures to safeguard all children participating in sport.

The guidebook carries a stark warning that the benefits of investing in sport will be eroded if corruption and exploitation in sport is allowed to persist, and calls for the obligation of sports organisations to meet international standards on good governance and child safeguarding as a condition for receiving any public funds.

The Commonwealth guidebook was developed with researchers from Durham University in the UK, Dr Iain Lindsey and Professor Tony Chapman, along with sports experts and organisations, and policy-makers from government ministries in Australia, Botswana, Sierra Leone and Zambia.

It follows the historic commitment made by more than 30 governments at the Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting in August 2016 to ensure that national sports policies are aligned to deliver the SDGs.

“By increasing access to and participation in quality and inclusive sport we can improve people’s health and education, break down



social barriers and ultimately save public money,” said Head of Sport for Development and Peace at the Commonwealth Secretariat, Oliver Dudfield.

“This guidebook presents wide-ranging policy options for governments where there is evidence that sport and physical activity can help to deliver sustainable development. The recommendations we are putting forward aim to deliver on the promise of sport as a potential development tool.”

Meanwhile, at a meeting on April 11 at the Georgetown headquarters of the CARICOM Secretariat, the Secretary-General of CARICOM, Ambassador Irwin LaRocque, and the president of the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), Giovanni Infantino, agreed on the importance of sport to youth development

and to society as a whole.

Stressing that sport is valuable as a social investment which could assist in channelling youth towards positive endeavours, LaRocque noted that the Caribbean Community was preparing a Human Resource development Strategy in which sport was an important element given the holistic nature of the development process. [IDN-InDepthNews – 15 April 2017]

Image credit: The Commonwealth

Drought Forcing Sri Lanka's Tea Producers to Seek Greener Pastures

By Stella Paul

RATNAPURA, Sri Lanka (IDN) – The deafening sound of half a dozen rolling machines in the Rilhena tea factory feels like a hard punch on the head, but for factory workers Bihita Madura and Rajakxmi Chandrakumar this is sweet music.

Their noise-belching, black dust-spewing machine symbolises what matters most: another day at work. “It’s a normal day for us,” says Madura, watching Chandrakumar feed a shovel of black tea leaves into the giant rolling machine. Both in their forties, Madura and Chandrakumar have good reason to be relieved: the Rilhena factory, owned by Khawatte Plantations of tea major Dilmah, is one of the country’s best performing tea producers.

But elsewhere in the country, the industry has been battling a series of problems: drought, dry spells, erratic rain, degrading land, eroding soil, crashing tea prices, low yield, labour migration and closure of factories.

The tea industry in Sri Lanka annually produces over 388 million kg of tea and earns 1.6 billion dollars in foreign currency alone. But for past four years, there has been a steady decline, says a report published by the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB). The major reasons are dry spells, below normal rainfall and drought.

According to a joint report by the local government and the World Food Programme (WFP), rainfall in 2016 was 23 percent less than the 30-year average. As a result, the country is now witnessing its worst drought in 30 years.

Another joint report by the government and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations (OCHA) says that over one million people are currently affected by prolonged drought in 17 out of 25 districts of Sri Lanka.

The drought – described as ‘severe’ by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – started early in 2016 with recurring dry spells that were intensified because of the El Niño phenomenon, according to Sri Lanka’s Department of Meteorology. The temperature shot up across the



country and Ratnapura – Sri Lanka’s prime tea growing region – recorded more than 33 degrees centigrade – an increase of over 6 degrees compared with its usual 27 degrees, the department said.

The result of this has been extensively damaging for the entire agriculture sector, reducing the harvest of major crops, reports the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Cropping fields have also shrunk to 300,000 acres, from the usual 800,000 acres, due to lack of water, according to FAO statistics.

In the tea sector, production output which saw a drop of 11 percent in 2016 was the lowest in seven years, according to the Tea Development Board. In January this year, the output fell by a further 15.3 percent.

On the tea estates, besides depleting the water level, the effect of the drought has worsened land degradation and soil erosion. This reflects in the country’s Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) which promise to “introduce suitable land and water management practices for central highlands and other marginal areas to minimise land degradation and to improve land and water productivity.”



Mahendra Peiris, a tea planter turned sustainable land management trainer in Maskeliya in Central Province, explains that “tea farming has been very exploitative here – such as a rampant use of synthetic weed killers and pesticides. Nobody bothered to pay attention to the quality of soil or the surrounding ecology. Soil erosion and land degradation are by-products of that.”

Peiris, formerly manager of the Maskelya tea estate, says that “the drought has now intensified soil erosion, stressing tea bushes and depleting nutrients in the soil, increasing the likelihood of reduced yields and incomes.”

Shashi Kala, 37, works on the Bearwell tea estate in Nuwara Eliya district. The daily wages paid here are 750 rupees for plucking 19 kg of tea leaf a day. But this season the average volume of tea plucked by the labourers is often below 15 kg, she says. “Some of us have plucked as many as 50 kg a day, but now we are working hard to meet the daily quota,” adds Kala.

“This means the estate has to pay the labourers the same wages for a reduced amount of produce which eats into its overall profits,” says Giri Kadurugamuwa, a conservationist in Ratnapura.

To prevent losses, some plantations have tried lowering the wages, triggering mass protests and mass migration by the workers. This led to the closure of about 2 dozen tea factories in the past two years. “Migration has been a constant worry for many,” admits

Dilshanka Jayatilake, manager of the Bearwell tea estate.

As the crisis grows, many tea farms are applying for Rainforest Alliance certification which symbolises sustainability maintained on an agricultural farm’s production and supply chain.

“So far, 78 plantations in Sri Lanka, including major producers like Bearwell, Kahawatte and Watawalla, have received the certification,” says Kadurugamuwa, head of the Rainforest Alliance in Sri Lanka.

The Alliance is currently partnering with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), Global Environment Facility and the local government on a sustainable land management project that aims to reduce land degradation.

Mahendra Peiris, one of the project’s lead trainers, says that the certification is given on meeting the global standard of the Sustainable Agriculture Network, which includes improving the well-being of an estate’s workforce and the environment.

The environmental measures must include little or no use of synthetic herbicides and pesticides, conserving water sources, recycling waste at plantations and factories, minimal use of non-renewable power and improving the carbon sink by increasing tree cover within plantations.

The certification helps earn the trust of buyers who are now “more aware of climate change and ecological standards” of a tea estate, says Janaka Gunawardene, manager of Kahawatte plantations: “Since the certification, our produce has fetched higher prices at the Colombo Tea Auctions. In fact, at last week’s auction, our tea fetched 680 rupees - the highest price in the country,” he says. [IDN-InDepthNews – 07 April 2017]

Image (Top): Giri Kadurugamuwa – a conservationist, shows how land degradation is damaging a tea plant, making it hollow and fragile: “If you claw at the trunk, it will start to peel off.”

Image (Bottom): Shashi Kala – a tea worker at the Bearwell tea estate in western Sri Lanka’s Sabaragamuwa province – one of the plantations that has adopted sustainable land management measures to plug draining of its profits | Credit: Stella Paul

U.S. Reasoning Behind Cutting Funds to UNFPA Challenged

By J Nastranis



NEW YORK (IDN) – Voicing “deep regret” at the United States decision to cut financial support to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has appealed to donors to increase their support for the UN Population Agency to allow it to continue its critical work.

Strongly criticising the U.S. decision, Catholics for Choice said the announcement of the decision in the same week as the 50th session of the Commission on Population and Development (April 3-7) is “a deliberate slap in the face of women as the UN considers the importance of family planning for sustainable development.”

“From a Catholic social justice perspective, we think this decision is especially cruel at a time when women bear the heaviest brunt in an unprecedented number of global crises, from famine in the Horn to the crisis in Syria,” said Catholics for Choice president Jon O’Brien.

“President Trump seems less driven by an understanding of UNFPA’s impact and more by a desire to pay back the far-right Chris-

tian constituency that voted him into office.”

This is the first of the cuts in U.S. financial contributions to the UN announced by President Donald Trump. The memo, citing the Kemp-Kasten amendment – first enacted in 1985 and previously used by other Republican presidents – alleges that the UNFPA “supports, or participates in the management of, a programme of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization” in China.

The amendment prohibits foreign aid to an organization that is involved in coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization. Presidents Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush and George W Bush refused funding to UNFPA for the same reason.

Catholics for Choice said, the State Department’s announcement of the decision “incorrectly states that UNFPA has supported coercive abortion and involuntary sterilization in China.”

“This claim could not be further from the truth,” the statement said. More than 14 years ago, Catholics for Choice led an independent delegation by faith leaders to China to assess the impact of UNFPA in the country. “Our report found that UNFPA has been a major catalyst in helping China to transition to a fully voluntary and non-coercive family planning program.”

Catholics for Choice also urged all donors to support “UNFPA’s efforts to empower women to make family planning decisions that allow them and their families to get and stay on a path to development.”

UK Overseas Development Institute (ODI) said: “Among UN agencies, UNFPA has . . . played a key role in supporting programmes to tackle sexual and gender-based violence, a problem that affects an estimated one in three women worldwide.”

UNFPA in a statement refuted the claim, calling it “erroneous”, assuring that all of its work “promotes the human rights of individuals and couples to make their own decisions, free of coercion or discrimination,” the agency said in a statement on April 4, 2017.

UNFPA called the U.S. “a trusted partner” and said that support received from the country over the years “have saved tens of thou-

sands of mothers from preventable death and disabilities.”

In the previous year, UNFPA saved the lives of more than 2,340 women from dying during pregnancy and childbirth, and helped to ensure more than 1,250 fistula surgeries, for example.

Supporting the UNFPA, UN Secretary-General said “the U.S. decision is based on an inaccurate perception of the nature and importance of the work of UNFPA.” In a statement from his spokesperson, Guterres said that the cuts “could have devastating effects” on the health of vulnerable women and girls and their families.

Guterres, who was previously the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said that he saw first-hand the life-saving character of UNFPA, which is active in more than 150 countries and territories.

Catholics for Choice said the Trump administration’s decision to deny funding for the UNFPA will hurt millions of vulnerable women around the world. The agency is an important provider of contraception in more than 150 countries, which has helped to significantly reduce maternal mortality worldwide, the statement said.

Nicola Jones, Principal Research Fellow at the ODI, said: “It is extremely concerning that the U.S. government has decided to defund the UNFPA given the agency’s critical role in supporting vital maternal health and family planning services globally, including women and girls in difficult to reach fragile settings.

‘This withdrawal of funding will place at risk the UNFPA’s essential role as a champion for ending early and forced child marriage and female genital mutilation, two practices that jeopardise the health and futures of millions of girls annually.

Like other UN agencies, UNFPA is funded by governments voluntarily. In 2015, it received \$979m in donations, with the U.S. being its fourth-largest donor. According to Devex, the U.S. contributed upwards of \$69 million to the UNFPA each year, considering a combination of “core” and “non-core” resources.

Quoting the U.S. State Department, BBC said the money that had been allocated to the UNFPA for the fiscal year 2017 will be “transferred and reprogrammed to the Global Health Programs account.” The account will be used by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to support family planning, mater-

nal and reproductive health activities in developing countries, the State Department added. [IDN-InDepthNews – 04 April 2017]

Image: A UNFPA-supported health centre 400 kilometers southwest of Uganda’s capital Kampala, includes a ward where women in their final stages of pregnancy can remain comfortably and avoid arduous travel once labour begins | Credit: UNFPA/Omar Gharzeddine



Image: Solar engineering trainer, Barefoot College, India | Credit: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh