



2019 Joint Media Project Report



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 2018 to March 2019.

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.

2018-2019 is the third 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 fourth year of the INPS Group's 'SDGs for All' joint media project with the SGI.

This compilation comprises 23 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 addresses a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection.



Credit: CTBTO.

While the 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.

Meanwhile, three years into the implementation period of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and ahead of the meeting of the 2019 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), to be held from 9 July to 18 July, including the three-day ministerial meeting of the forum from 16 July to 18 July, senior UN officials have expressed serious reservations whether all the SDGs will be achieved by 2030.

The theme of the 2019 HLPF is: “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. The following set of goals will be reviewed in depth:

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

2019 will also be marked by the SDG Summit from 24 September to 27 September at the UN Headquarters in New York.

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 Ramu Damodaran, Chief, United Nations Academic Impact for taking the time to write a Foreword and Nobuyuki Asai, Director for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), for sending his message.

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

FOREWORD

BY RAMU DAMODARAN, CHIEF, UNITED NATIONS ACADEMIC IMPACT, DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS

Tucked away in the rich landscape of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is goal 16.10 and its aspiration to “ensure public access to information .” Nowhere is that need more compelling than in relation to the agenda itself The Joint Media Project’s annual “SDGs for All” publication, under Ramesh Jaura’s thoughtful and far-ranging leadership, offers a rich tapestry of the possibilities and promise of the goals, the perils and pitfalls in the path to their realization and the optimism and opportunity offered us by the resilience and resolve of so many of our fellow human beings.

We learn about innovation and adaptation, of agroecology, a process of innovative and respectful practice, which “offers multiple benefits – including for increasing food security and resilience, boosting livelihoods and local economies, diversifying food production and diets, promoting health and nutrition, safeguarding natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem functions, improving soil fertility and soil health, adapting to and mitigating climate change, and preserving local cultures and traditional knowledge systems,” a validation of the words of Pope Francis quoted elsewhere in this volume, that , “if we are truly concerned about developing an ecology capable of repairing the damage we have done, no branch of science or form of wisdom should be overlooked.”



We learn of the possible perils innovation may command, of how , following the linking of the Godavari and Krishna rivers in India in 2015, a growing number of carnivorous fish belonging to the armoured catfish family, which is not native to the Krishna, have begun to appear in this river, scaring away, and even feeding upon, traditional fish reserves, impacting upon the livelihood of local fishermen.

We learn of how in circumstances of adversity and even emergency, effort can be made to protect and give strength to a fragile environment; in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, where Rohingya refugees have found shelter, denuded forests are being nourished through a three-year programme, led by the Forestry Department, to mitigate risks and ensure that new trees are being planted. Alternative mechanisms to combat fuel intensive

methods of cooking are being put in place; measures started within a year of the influx, “which is remarkable in terms of linking humanitarian needs to development programmes.”

We learn how, after being connected to the grid, 25-year-old Elias Malima, a motorcycle garage owner in Tanzania, was able to extend his working hours. He acquired an electric-powered air compressor for inflating motorbike tyres and since then he has more than doubled the number of customers he serves.

We learn how innovative models of teaching and play communicate the goals. We learn how seventeen-year-old Mathias Bragi Ölvisson’s village school in Iceland integrated lessons in sociology and natural history for a day and looked at the goals through that fresh and unexpected prism. We learn of a game on the SDGs fashioned in Japan; its rules are simple. A player uses money and time with the intent to achieve a goal by the end of the game in a ‘yellow’, ‘blue’ or ‘green’ project. Each project is targeted at people in the real world with different interests and values.

We learn how an NGO in Canada reaches out to 100,000 young people across 50 communities each year, using a series of games and activities to introduce human rights to children and encourage them to think critically about what is happening around them and how they can promote human rights values – equality, respect,

inclusion and exclusion. “One instance is playing musical chairs the traditional way and then play a cooperative version and use that as an entry point to talk about inclusion and exclusion.”

We learn of the power of figures to educate, to discomfort and to warn. We learn that, for the first time in a decade, the overall number of people who are undernourished has increased – from 777 million people in 2015, to 815 million in 2016. We learn of estimates of millions of human beings trafficked every year with an estimated 150 billion dollars in turnover. We learn that there was a loss of a record-high 15.8 million hectares of tropical forest cover in 2017. We learn that every year more than 150 million tons of toxic dust from the bottom of the dried Aral Sea are carried long distances by the wind to the people in Asia, Europe and even the thinly populated Arctic.

But we also learn of the power of figures to cheer, to expand the possible and set example. We learn how, in India, plastic waste is being converted into tar for road construction and around 100,000 kilometers of roads have been constructed with recycled plastic. We learn how, with the help of an NGO, dispossessed individuals are acquiring legal title to their land in Tanzania; since 2003 the NGO has secured more than 200,000 hectares of land for them. We learn how, hosting 5 percent of the world’s biodiversity, Costa Rica has more than half of its territory covered with

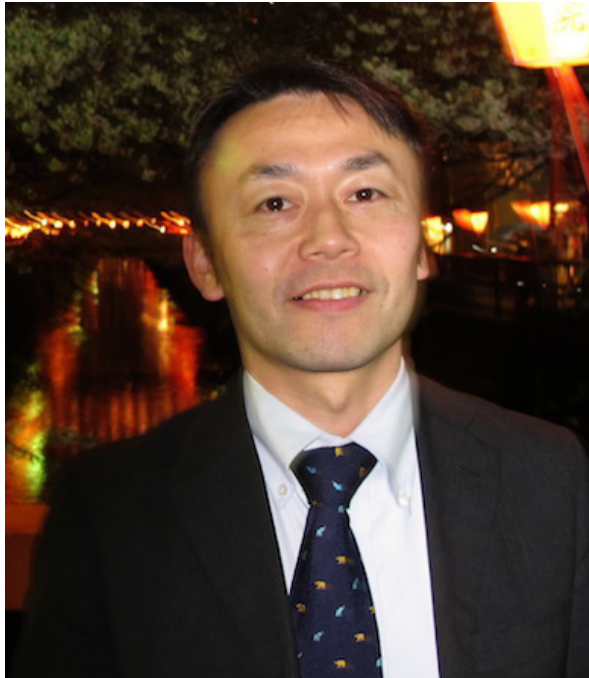
forests and champions 350 days a year powered by renewable sources.

And we learn, through these intuitive examples, how the process of negotiation and decision at the United Nations has so transformed over its 75 year history, of how matters once considered within the exclusive and narrow domain of national governments have acquired the acknowledgment of global responsibility. As Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev is quoted, in this volume, of saying in another context, “This is the gradual process. The first congresses disagreed on many issues. Now they have more understanding. It is a big success that they are talking about peace and cooperation. Earlier it was hard to even imagine how all of them can sit together. Now it is easy.”

And so we learn of how that once thought beyond the pale of imagination can be easy; to share, in Ramesh’s felicitous phrase, the “feeling that beyond our local and national existence, we are citizens of a globalized world, a world that never before was so close to us and yet distant as it is now, a world that constrains us to feel like global citizens. Because even local and national problems have acquired global dimensions and global problems impact individuals in countries around the world, and unless we address these from that perspective, we would never succeed in solving these whether they appear tiny or huge.”

MESSAGE

FROM NOBUYUKI ASAI, DIRECTOR FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS,
SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL (SGI)



This year marks the first time in four years that a review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within countries is to take place, and the SDG Summit will be held at the United Nations Headquarters in September.

Reflecting on recent world affairs, we see that there are numerous causes for concern. First, some countries are beginning to withdraw their support of multilateralism, especially in regard to

SDG 13. Dark clouds are casting a shadow over efforts to achieve goals around climate change measures. Second, we see division around various issues such as race, ethnicity and religion. Massive terrorist incidents triggered by these rifts are occurring all over the world. Although the SDGs do not directly address overcoming such rifts and division, if left unaddressed they could thwart the progress of achieving a number of these SDGs.

These concerning developments are likely caused by various factors such as political ambition and economic profit. It could be said, however, that the fundamental cause is that the human spirit has not caught up with the pace of the globalization of the economy and society.

It is impossible in this day and age to lead lives unaffected by globalization. In developed countries, in particular, in daily life people enjoy cheap products and services which rely heavily on resources and labor from developing countries. Nevertheless, when it comes to issues of immigration resulting from globalization, and issues that require global action such as climate change, discussions on these issues from a global perspective tend to be impeded by national, ethnic and/or smaller collective interests. This topic not only concerns governments but also citizens.

This is why the SDGs are important. They must be achieved in each country; but, ultimately, they must be achieved by humanity as a whole. There may be government officials who claim they are not on board with the SDGs; however, the reality is that the SDGs were unanimously agreed upon at the 2015 UN General Assembly, and a great deal of effort is being made toward the realization of these goals. One could say that believing in these efforts and keeping the momentum going is the fastest route to making the world a better place.

In his 2019 peace proposal to the United Nations, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda proposes a “people-centered multilateralism” approach to resolving pressing global issues. This was mentioned in the outcome document from The 67th UN DPI/NGO Conference in August 2018. Rather than focusing on the numerical goals of the SDGs, it is important to make people the center of attention and work with countries and various stakeholders to ensure that no one is left behind.

Based on this perspective, this joint media project between INPS and SGI is actively introducing a broad range of efforts toward achieving the SDGs, as well as highlighting local efforts that normally go unseen. We look forward to continuing our work together with INPS.

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AGROECOLOGY KEY ELEMENT TO ZERO HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

BY JAYA RAMACHANDRAN



Photo: ©FAO/Riccardo Gangale

ROME (IDN) – More than enough food is produced in the world to feed everyone, yet 815 million people go hungry, according to FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. How to ensure that a growing global population – projected to rise to around 10 billion by 2050 – will have

enough food to meet their nutritional needs, is therefore one of the greatest challenges the world faces. Experts see in agroecology a solution.

Agroecology, they say, can help transition to sustainable food and agriculture systems that ensure

food security and nutrition for all, provide social and economic equity and conserve biodiversity and the ecosystem services on which agriculture depends.

Family farmers must remain central to bringing agroecology to scale, FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva stressed in his closing remarks to the Second International Agroecology Symposium from April 3-5 at FAO in Rome.

“It’s time to scale up the implementation of agroecology,” Graziano da Silva said. “We have succeeded in moving from talking about what is agroecology, to now having specific program targets to be achieved in the next few years, and strong support from civil society and those governments who have worked hard to make this symposium a success,” he added.

“When we speak of agroecology, we are not speaking of strictly technical matters. I would like to stress the social aspect, so when we say that we are going to strengthen the role of agroecology in FAO’s work, we are saying that we are going to strengthen the role of family and small-scale farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, women and youth,” he said.

The FAO Director-General also highlighted the Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028) and the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) as op-

portunities to raise awareness about the valuable link between family farming, agroecology and sustainable development.

The Symposium underscored the need to recognize that scaling up agroecology is a key element to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed by the international community in September 2015. Goal 2 aims to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.”

The Symposium brought together more than 700 participants with representatives from 72 governments, around 350 civil society and other non-governmental groups, and 6 UN organizations.

The Symposium Chair Braulio Ferreira de Souza Dias emphasized in his summary that “Agroecology offers multiple benefits” – including for increasing food security and resilience, boosting livelihoods and local economies, diversifying food production and diets, promoting health and nutrition, safeguarding natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem functions, improving soil fertility and soil health, adapting to and mitigating climate change, and preserving local cultures and traditional knowledge systems.

“It is critical that legal and regulatory frameworks are implemented in a way that ensures transformative change towards sustainable agriculture and food systems based on agroecology, and re-

spects, protects and fulfills farmers’ rights and access to productive resources such as land, water and seeds.”

The Chair’s Summary also drafts a way forward including a list of “urgently needed” commitments from stakeholders. Governments are called on to develop policy and legal frameworks to promote and support agroecology and sustainable food systems, and to remove “perverse incentives” for unsustainable agriculture.

The Summary calls on FAO to develop a detailed 10-year action plan for agroecology and to begin implementing the Scaling up Agroecology Initiative.

Consumers and citizens are urged to act as agents of change in the food system to promote responsible consumption. Donors are asked to increase long-term funding to agroecology, while academia and research organizations are encouraged to increase research on agroecology.

On the sidelines of the Symposium, the World Future Council (WFC) with FAO and IFOAM – Organics International kicked off a global contest for the visionary policies that create enabling environments for agroecology, the 2018 Future Policy Award. The winners will be recognized in a ceremony at FAO in Rome later in 2018.

The Future Policy Award 2018 is supported by the FAO, the World Future Council, IFOAM-Or-

ganics International with the assistance of Green Cross International, DO-IT - Dutch Organic International Trade and Sekem Group (Egypt).

Every year, the most visionary policies tackling humankind’s most pressing challenges are commended with the Future Policy Award (FPA), the only global award hitherto that recognises policies rather than people. The World Future Council has awarded this annual prize since 2010 in partnership with UN agencies.

“This year’s Future Policy Award will reveal proven solutions that make sustainable agriculture possible. The World Future Council is determined to further cooperate with FAO in order to identify and share the best policies for advancing agroecology in the interest of future generations. It is critical that we learn from the policies that are already making an impact,” says Alexandra Wandel, Director of the World Future Council.

“World Leaders and the UN General Assembly recognise the potential of agroecology to achieve healthy nutrition for all and to address social injustice, climate change and biodiversity loss”, notes Peggy Miars, World Board President of IFOAM – Organics International. “We see it happen in numerous countries where the policy framework gets it right. Let’s showcase and reward these innovative policies!” [IDN-InDepthNews - 06 April 2018]

INDIA DEBATES GOVT. PLAN TO ENSURE EVERYONE ACCESS TO WATER BY INTERLINKING RIVERS

BY SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN



Image: Map of the Ganges (orange), Brahmaputra (violet), and Meghna (green) drainage basins. Credit: CC BY-SA 3.0

BANGALORE (IDN) – As another scorching summer threatened to grip India and rivers began running dry, a hectic debate ensued about

the government’s Interlinking of Rivers (ILR) program to solve the country’s water problems.

Drawing attention to the water shortage and unequal distribution of water in the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a strong champion of the program, recently pointed out that while some rivers are in spate others are running dry. “If there is inter-linking [of rivers], the problem can be solved,” he said.

There are stark differences in the per capita availability of water in India’s river basins. According to a 2015 National Water Mission report, the average per capita availability of water in 2010 in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna system was 20,136 cubic meters compared to just 263 cubic meters in the Sabarmati basin.

Unlike rivers in the north and northeast of the country that are fed by glaciers in the Himalayas, rivers of peninsular India depend on the erratic monsoons. Consequently, while the eastern parts of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin reels under recurrent floods, water is scarce in the river basins in western and southern India. The ILR program is designed to address this inequality of water distribution.

The idea of interlinking rivers is not new; in 1858, a British engineer mooted a plan to interlink India’s rivers to improve inland navigation. Variations of this plan that aimed at addressing the unequal geographic distribution of water were put forward in the 1970s and 1980s but none of these moved beyond the drawing board.

It was only in 2002 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in New Delhi that the idea of interlinking rivers began to be considered seriously. It kick-started the program, but the program was put in cold storage for a decade thereafter as the United Progressive Alliance government didn’t support the idea. With the BJP returning to power in 2014, the ILR program has emerged the government’s flagship scheme.

Broadly, the program comprises of two components: the Himalayan rivers component with 14 links and the Peninsula rivers components with 16 links. It will involve construction of around 15,000 km of new canals, and 3,000 big and small dams and storage structures.

On paper it seems rather simple. However, its implementation is complex given the varying terrains and altitudes through which water will have to be

channeled. Additionally, the central government will need to get different states to agree on interlinking rivers. People are unlikely to part with their land to make room for the canals and storage structures.

The program is estimated to cost India US\$ 87 billion, “a price tag that is worth it,” according to Chetan Pandit, retired Member (Water Planning & Projects), Central Water Commission in India’s Ministry of Water Resources. Since it envisages channeling water away from “surplus” river basins to “deficit” ones, it is likely to improve management of floods and droughts.

Additionally, it is expected to irrigate an additional 35 million hectares of land, boost hydropower generation by around 34,000 megawatts and facilitate inland navigation, according to the Ministry of Water Resources.

However, the ILR program has many critics. Many have challenged the fundamental premise on which it is based i.e. the existence of “surplus” and “deficit” river basins.

According to Shripad Dharmadhikary, founder of Manthan Adhyayan Kendra, an NGO which works on water issues from a sustainable development perspective, the concepts of “surplus” and “deficit” river basins are “completely unscientific and irrational.”

Explaining this to IDN he pointed out that the “quantum and patterns of each river’s natural flows is just what is necessary – neither surplus nor deficit – to maintain and sustain its unique ecosystem.”

“The notions of surplus and deficit used in the ILR context,” Dharmadhikary said, “are indicative of a complete lack of understanding of what ecology and environment mean, and an extreme anthropocentric view of rivers as mere channels carrying water to serve (only) human needs.”

Ashvani Gosain, professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, has drawn attention to the impact that climate change can have on the ILR program. Should glacier masses and water volumes in the Himalayan rivers reduce, “surplus” river basins would cease to be “donor basins.”

In addition to the financial costs, ILR will entail “serious” social and envi-

ronmental costs, warns Dharmadhikary, “as large dams and water diversions would displace hundreds of thousands of people, desiccate rivers downstream, submerge forests and alter the ecology of both, the giving river and the receiving river.”

Water conservationist Rajendra Singh points to the “unique flora and fauna” of a river and warns that these will be destroyed “when the rivers are linked and the waters get mixed.”

Early signs of such destruction are evident in the River Krishna. Following the linking of the Godavari and Krishna rivers in 2015, a growing number of carnivorous fish belonging to the armoured catfish family, which is not native to the Krishna, are appearing in this river. It scares away other fish, even feeding on them. This is impacting the livelihood of local fishermen.

Since ILR is likely to displace people and undermine their livelihoods it will lead to unrest and fuel more conflicts. It can be expected to trigger interstate conflicts, as well.

A “surplus” state may not want to link its rivers to those in other states. The Odisha government, for instance, is opposed to the Mahanadi-Godavari link as it apprehends a serious shortage of water in the Mahanadi in the coming decades. It is concerned too over the extent of land submergence by the Manibhadra Dam. The Mahanadi-Godavari link being “a mother link” to nine other links, Odisha’s refusal to participate in the ILR could doom the peninsular component of the ILR.

Even more worrying are the implications of diversion of international rivers for India’s neighbors. The proposed diversion of water from the “surplus” Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin will reduce the water flow to Bangladesh, the lower riparian country.

Already India’s damming of the Ganga and Brahmaputra, especially the construction of the Farakka Barrage just before it enters Bangladesh has caused not only reduce water flow into that country but also, contributed to salinity of the soil, making agriculture almost impossible.

Relations between India and Bangladesh, already strained over the river water issue, can be expected to deteriorate seriously with the ILR program’s implementation.

Proponents of ILR maintain that its challenges notwithstanding, the program must be implemented. “There is no alternative. We have to do it,” says Pandit. Although “there is no such thing as ‘solve our water problems’, every link of the ILR program will reduce the severity of problem in its area,” he adds.

Environmental activist and water expert Himanshu Thakkar says that since “groundwater is India’s lifeline,” its “water policy, programmes and projects need to focus and prioritise how to sustain the groundwater lifeline.”

The ILR will not help achieve that, he points out. According to Thakkar, India should “prioritise optimisation of use of our existing water infrastructure and make “rainwater harvesting the central focus as that can help sustain groundwater.”

India needs to “evolve its agriculture and other livelihood systems, as well as cropping patterns to match the agro-eco-climatic characteristics of each region.” Other economic activities like industries must be located keeping in mind water endowment of the regions, Dharmadhikary says.

Pitted against the powerful infrastructure lobby are an array of scientists, engineers, social scientists, water experts and social activists. Whether the government will heed the concerns raised by experts remains to be seen. [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 April 2018]

YOUNG PEOPLE HEAD SDG PUBLICITY IN ICELAND

BY LOWANA VEAL



Photo: Seventeen-year-old Mathias Bragi Ölvisson lives in the agricultural village of Fludir, South Iceland, where his family have a large farm. He has known about the SDGs since these were agreed in 2015. Credit: Elin Hannibalsdottir.

REYKJAVIK (IDN) – Iceland has decided to spearhead publicity for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by setting up a 12-person council of young people aged between 13 and 18, under the auspices of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

Over 140 young people applied for the 12 places and, according to Nilsina Larsen Einarsdottir, co-ordinator of the project, “all of them had many brilliant ideas, so the choice was extremely difficult.”

Einarsdottir, who works with UNICEF in Iceland as a specialist in child and youth participation, has teamed up with the PMO for the project.

Another set of young people will be recruited next year for the same purpose.

Heidur Ivarsdottir, who lives in a municipality neighbouring Reykjavik, had not heard of SDGs before applying to the Youth Council (YC). She says she has always been interested in environmental matters and human rights, and had set up an environment club at her school.

A classmate who was also applying told her about the YC and the SDGs 15 minutes before the application deadline and suggested she might be interested. She applied and was accepted (her friend was not so lucky).

“When I glanced at the descriptions of the SDGs that accompanied the application, I became passionate about changing the world – I saw an opportunity to bring my thoughts into fruition, and on a larger scale than I could have dreamt of do-

ing as a 16-year-old individual,” says Ivarsdottir when asked why she applied to be part of the YC for publicising the UN SDGs in Iceland.

“Words cannot describe how excited I was about this demanding project, as I think it is incredibly important to discuss the goals and also unbelievably precious that young people are allowed to take a stance, and that our voices are heard in relation to the most important issue in the world.”

Seventeen-year-old Mathias Bragi Ölvisson lives in the agricultural village of Fludir, South Iceland, where his family have a large farm. Unlike Ivarsdottir, he has known about the SDGs for a long time because, a few days after the SDGs were agreed in 2015, lessons in sociology and natural history at the local village school he attended were combined for a day and the teachers let students work on a project connected with the SDGs.

“We were supposed to learn about the SDGs in this project work and choose one goal that we considered the most important. I chose education, because change starts by knowing what is wrong in the world and knowing how to change this wrong to right,” he says.

However, he notes that he has not had any more lessons on the subject since then, and says he is

not aware of people talking about the SDGs in daily life – which has to change, in his opinion. “But I was reminded of their existence when I saw the advertisement for young people in the council,” he continues.

Asked why he decided to apply, he said: “I’m continually battling for a fairer world and sustainability... And I want to be part of making Iceland one of the leading nations in terms of education, the environment and new developments.”

Like Ivarsdottir, he says it is important to let the voices of young people be heard and that their ideas be implemented. “More often than not, we young people have no voice in important issues,” he points out.

The YC is scheduled to meet six times over the year, and has already met once, in April. Under the guidance of Einarsdottir, the group will learn about the 17 goals and then disseminate this information to their peers as well as meet with government ministers to discuss how best to achieve the goals.

Social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, will be used extensively. “The role of the YC includes informing peers about the SDGs and ways of working towards them. Of course, we will also use all sorts of methods to educate people about the SDGs, with presentations at particular places as well as other ways, such as multimedia technology,” explains Ölvisson.

“Thus the intention of the Council is introduce the SDGs to society as a whole, including rural

areas, as the first step to achieving the SDGs is to know them,” he adds.

Ivarsdottir says the emphasis will initially be on environmental issues.

The United Nations Association of Iceland (UNA Iceland) has been the government’s primary partner in promoting the SDGs. Recently, the government working group on SDG implementation also launched an official campaign on SDGs in television, newspapers and on social media”, says Maria Mjöll Jonsdottir, Director of Communications and Public Diplomacy at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

“The working group’s baseline report will be published this year. It is often complicated to gauge the state of individual goals and sometimes additional data and information are needed,” Jonsdottir adds.

The working group is mainly made up of delegates from the PMO, the Foreign Affairs, Environment, Welfare and Finance ministries, and Statistics Iceland. Other ministries also have members in the group, and the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities sends an observer.

The YC will act as advisor for the working group, which has already produced an advertisement containing news dated March 2030 in which various issues concerning the SDGs are reported.

In 2030, singer Salka Sol Eyfeld has become the Minister of Welfare and reports that gender equality has been achieved; weapons manufac-

turers are fighting for their lives because arms expenditure has dropped so much; Iceland is likely to be carbon-neutral within five years, before the end of 2030; and development aid will probably be stopped in the near future because incredible advances have been made in developing countries.

Along the same lines, a series of short YouTube videos have been produced on the theme of SDG news in 2030. The YC intends to work on these. “We want to make the videos currently being used more child-friendly, as we think the vocabulary is too difficult for a 10-year-old child to understand,” explains Ivarsdottir.

Vera Knutsdottir, Secretary General of UNA Iceland, says that the association’s collaboration with the government working group is continually developing. It has regularly visited groups to introduce the SDGs. “We have become specialists in the SDGs and are always looking to find new ways of bringing the information to the public,” she says.

In 2015, UNA Iceland, UNICEF and the Ministry for Education worked together to make the World’s Largest Lesson accessible in Iceland, which partly involved translation of educational materials on the SDGs. Knutsdottir says that Ölvisson probably received his lessons on the SDG as part of this initiative.

“We intend to increase our selection of educational materials on the SDGs and take part in the World’s Largest Lesson again this coming September,” she adds. [IDN-InDepthNews – 03 May 2018]

ACCESS TO END-USE TECHNOLOGIES KEY TO CATALYSING DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

BY JOSHUA MASINDE



Photo credit: Energy 4 Impact

NAIROBI (IDN) – Productive use of energy holds the key to livelihood transformation in Africa’s rural areas. Small industries could

improve their production processes and efficiency if they had better access to electricity and technologies.

Without electricity, rural micro-enterprises make do with labour intensive and time-consuming manual tools, and often pass up many opportunities for value addition or product diversification.

Satisfying the need for power of commercial enterprises presents an opportunity for private sector players such as JUMEME, a Tanzanian company that develops solar-powered mini-grids to connect businesses and households in remote areas.

Energy 4 Impact – a non-profit organisation working with local businesses to extend access to energy in Africa – has partnered with JUMEME in an advisory role to help it stimulate demand for electricity among potential customers and develop micro entrepreneurs’ business capacity to use energy for economic transformation, resulting in greater productivity and power consumption.

Compared with households, commercial enterprises take up larger loads of power and provide the developer with a stable source of cash-flow with better profit margins. Building the capacity and the environment for businesses to acquire electric appliances can both improve their pro-

cesses and productivity and contribute to mini-grid sustainability.

In April 2016, JUMEME launched a solar mini-grid in Bwisya, the largest of eight villages on Ukara Island, on Lake Victoria in Tanzania. Since the mini-grid became operational, there has been substantial increase in commercial activities.

Just under 50 pre-existing and new businesses are now connected to power. Some of the businesses that relied on manual labour or diesel generators for grain milling, carpentry, bicycle and motorcycle repair have been able to automate and expand. New businesses dealing in egg incubation, laundry, bread baking, juice processing, ice block production, hair dressing, pop-corn production, and metal welding have emerged.

Data collected by JUMEME show a direct correlation between increased uptake of appliances and power usage. “We have noticed improved efficiency and productivity in mills, woodworks, metal works and baking businesses that have connected to the mini-grid,” says Robert Wang’oe, Head of Marketing at JUMEME. “We expect new businesses to come on stream, for example those purifying drinking water.”

However, although power is now available, many micro-businesses cannot afford to buy appliances.

This is because they are unable to access credit to buy them, as they are considered high risk borrowers, says Diana Kollanyi, Energy 4 Impact Programme Manager.

“One of our strategies to advance financial inclusion to micro-enterprises for productive use was to offer non-cash credit guarantees to financial providers. However, there was limited interest by the providers due to the intricate administrative processes involved in the scheme. Another strategy was to invite financial providers to the villages on the island to map out the business potential and build the case for credit provision. Yet, due to the low loan amounts requested, the limited number of businesses and the projected high administrative and transaction costs, this approach did not work either,” she explains.

As a result, JUMEME decided to adopt an in-house financing approach, which enables micro-entrepreneurs to acquire productive use appliances on credit directly from it. The company leverages its financial means to help customers acquire the equipment. Through this scheme customers can order appliances that are procured by JUMEME and pay for them over an agreed period, typically six months.

On behalf of JUMEME, Energy 4 Impact has conducted a number of demand assessment and stimulation activities, as well as productive use awareness raising campaigns.

“We held several discussions with JUMEME on how best to support businesses that wanted to acquire new equipment,” says Diana. “We conducted an analysis to establish the viability of these busi-

nesses before obtaining the appliances and then worked with business owners to strengthen their business plan and skills. JUMEME wanted assurances that the entrepreneurs would be in a position to pay for the equipment over an agreed period, pay the electricity bills and still make a profit.”

So far, 12 businesses have been financed to acquire maize mills, rice huskers, cassava mills, welding and carpentry machines, a chicken incubator and ice block makers. All businesses have repaid or are about to finish repaying their loans.

Ten other entrepreneurs have taken additional equipment to expand or diversify their businesses, creating at least 82 employment opportunities as a result.

After being connected to the grid, 25-year-old Elias Malima, a motorcycle garage owner, was able to extend his working hours. He acquired an electric-powered air compressor for inflating motorbike tyres and since then he has more than doubled the number of customers he serves from 15 or fewer to around 35 a day and his income has increased by 50 percent. He has employed three workers and plans to open another motorcycle garage in a nearby village once JUMEME launches another mini-grid later in the year.

“As I was inflating motorcycle tyres manually, Energy 4 Impact’s mentors suggested I could get an electric-powered air compressor. They helped me write a business plan, which demonstrated the potential cash flow and the repayment plan. That is how I acquired the appliance from JUMEME on credit,” says Elias, who has fully repaid his air compressor.

Constantine Mulangi, a 67-year-old specialist in making window and door frames, repairing motorcycles and assorted kitchen accessories such as pots, pans and knives, received support to prepare a business plan for acquiring a welding machine and two metal grinders from JUMEME on credit.

“We also helped Constantine to develop a pay-back plan,” says Jesse Kyenkungu, Productive Use Field Officer at Energy 4 Impact in Tanzania. “This guided him on aspects such as the initial costs of the equipment acquired, the deposit made to obtain the appliances, the interest he would pay and the monthly deposits required to complete repayments within the agreed period.”

Like most mini-grids operating in rural contexts, JUMEME is faced with the challenge of keeping tariff costs low to create enough demand, while remaining profitable. Energy 4 Impact has helped JUMEME develop a tariff structure tailored to different users’ needs, which includes a domestic and a business tariff. It is also helping the company understand the customers’ pricing perception and sensitising customers on the need for varying tariff structures.

As a way of diversifying their income streams and enhancing its sustainability, JUMEME has started using the energy they produce to run their own fish freezing/chilling and delivery chain business to serve local markets. This provides the company with an additional cash flow, while offering vital services to the community, creating local jobs and contributing to village economic development. [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 May 2018]

AFRICA COMMITTED TO GENDER EQUALITY, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

BY JEFFREY MOYO



Photo: UNICEF's youngest Goodwill Ambassador Muzoon Almellehan in Chad. Credit: UNICEF UK.

JOHANNESBURG (IDN) – Twenty-nine year old Ruramai Gwata had no reason to celebrate the International Women's Day observed on March 8 every year. She lay in hospital nursing her wounds following a severe assault by her husband over a domestic dispute.

While licking her wounds two months later, as the world commemorated Mother's Day, Gwata was plagued by agonising memories of how her two children witnessed her abuse by her husband.

Jobless Gwata, though a qualified jobless teacher, is by no means a rare exception in Africa. Because of the fate of women like Gwata the continent's bid to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 by accomplishing gender equality and empowering all women and girls by the year 2030, threatens to remain a pipe dream.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violations in today's world. It is a major

obstacle to the fulfilment of women's and girls' human rights and to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

With this in view, the European Union (EU) and the UN are embarking on a new, global, multi-year initiative focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

The Spotlight Initiative will respond to all forms of VAWG, with a particular focus on domestic and family violence, sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, femicide, trafficking in human beings and sexual and economic (labour) exploitation.

Notwithstanding the perturbing reality on the ground, African countries have pledged to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. Almost all countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; more than half have ratified the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. Other milestones include the African Union's declaration of 2010–2020 as the African Women's Decade.

According to UN Women, although Africa includes both low- and middle-income countries, poverty rates are still high. The majority of women work in insecure, poorly paid jobs, with few opportunities for advancement. Democratic elections are increasing, and a record number of women have successfully contested for seats. But electoral-related violence is of growing concern.

Independent development expert Mabel Chiluba, based in Zambia's capital Lusaka, says the crisis faced by Africa's women and girls who are downtrodden, calls for urgent attention from the continent's leaders.

"Gender equality by 2030 needs serious action to eradicate the many core causes of discrimination that still inhibit women's rights in private and public spheres. For example, discriminatory laws need to change," Chiluba told IDN.

True to Chiluba's observation, countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria and Mozambique continue to lag behind the rest of the world on women's participation in development efforts.

"We remain imprisoned in the mediaeval era, where women are still oppressed, all this due to deeply entrenched, discriminatory views about the role and position of women and girls across African societies. As women, we have been relegated to inferior positions resulting in unequal power relations between us and men," a Zimbabwean feminist and director of the Youth Dialogue Action Network, a democracy lobby group, Catherine Mkwapati, told IDN.

According to Mkwapati, "Even in workplaces, Africa's traditional practises which undermine women are still pervasive, subsequently perpetuating various forms of violence against women," says Mkwapati.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Education for All Global Monitoring Report, covering the period 2000-2015, underlines the veracity of her view. Fewer than half of the world's countries had achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education when the report was released in 2015.

The report also found that the gender equality gap in secondary school had been reduced but remained wide, with the highest numbers of gender disparity occurring in the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa, where no country had met the gender equality goal.

But there are exceptions such as Rwanda, which is reported to beat France and the United States in gender equality. According to the Global Gender Report 2017, in terms of closing the gap between men and women, at 86 percent Rwanda has one of the highest rates of female labour force participation in the world while in the U.S., for example, that figure stands at 56 percent.

However, the Global Gender Report attributes Rwanda's high rate of female workforce participation to the country's devastating genocide of 1994. Subsequently, over two decades ago, around 800,000 Rwandese were slaughtered in the space of just three months. In the wake of these horrendous events, women made up between 60 percent and 70 percent of the surviving population. They (Rwandese women) had little choice, but to inherit the roles once played by men, according to the Report.

In populous Nigeria, gender inequality is still influenced by different cultures and beliefs and in most parts of that country, women are considered subordinate to their male counterparts, especially to the North of the West

African nation. And, Nigeria's huge male population still firmly believes in the country's customs which despises women.

"In Nigeria, we generally believe that women are best suited as home keepers, working in the kitchen and nothing else or more than that," Nwoye, Ikemefuna, a Nigerian businessman told IDN.

Apparently with an eye on practices that have left African women subjugated, the then Acting Head of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri, said during the ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels in June 2013: "When it comes to protecting rights, Governments are called on to review national legislation, practices and customs and abolish those that discriminate against women. Laws, policies and programmes that explicitly prohibit and punish violence must be put into place, in line with international agreements."

But despite pro-gender calls from organisations such, African countries such as Mozambique seem to be hit hard with gender disparities, with statistics showing that six out of every 10 Mozambican women are ill-treated both

physically and emotionally. The Mozambican Association for Women, Law and Development (MULEID) is also worried about the increased rate of violence against women, which is contrary to the previous strategies that have been taken to stop all violence against women.

In fact, Mozambique could just be a tip of the iceberg. According to USAID, Tanzanian women and girls remain among the most marginalized and underutilized citizens in sub-Saharan Africa. Tanzanian women and girls must have greater access to and control over resources, opportunities, and decision-making power in order to sustainably reduce extreme poverty, build healthy communities, and promote inclusive growth, says USAID.

Tanzania is one of two initial priority countries under Let Girls Learn, a whole-of-government initiative to improve enrolment and retention in educational programs for female adolescents. While primary school enrolment among girls and boys is nearly equivalent in Tanzania, less than 20 percent of women age 20-24 have completed secondary school and 20 percent have had no education at all. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 May 2018]



GRASSROOTS INDIA BEGINNING TO BEAT PLASTIC POLLUTION

BY SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN



Photo: India's top beach destination Goa commits to #BeatPlasticPollution. Credit: World Environment Day.

BANGALORE (IDN) – A 32-year-old Rajeswari Singh launched on a six-week marathon mission on World Earth Day setting out to walk some 1,100 kilometres from Vadodara in western India to reach New Delhi on World Environment Day on June 5, spreading a simple message ‘Stop using plastic’, and accentuating it by forgoing all the way any kind of plastic packaged drinks or food.

In fact, she hasn't used any kind of plastic over the past decade. Besides, her message echoes the

theme of this year's World Environment Day – ‘Beat plastic pollution’ – with India, among the world's top ten consumers of plastic, playing global host.

India generates around 5.6 metric tones (Mt) of plastic waste each year, with its capital New Delhi alone producing some 9,600 tons per day. Of the ten rivers that are responsible for nearly 90% of the world's plastic debris that ends up in the oceans, three flow through India: the Indus, the Ganga and Brahmaputra.

Plastic pollution has assumed crisis proportions worldwide. Since plastic invaded the consumer goods industry in the 1950s, mountains of plastic waste have accumulated in landfills and oceans.

According to an article in Science Advances, of the roughly 8,300 Mt of virgin plastics produced so far, 6,300 Mt of plastic waste has been generated, 9% of which was recycled and 12% incinerated as of 2015. The rest (79%) is accumulating in landfills or the natural environment, with much of it going into rivers and then draining into the oceans. If production of plastic and its waste management continue as per current trends, the world will have around 12,000 Mt of plastic waste lying in landfills and the natural environment by 2050.

At current pollution rates there will be more plastic in the sea than fish by 2050, warns the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Plastic pollution is reason for serious concern. Plastic contains toxic material which has implications for our health. It is also not biodegradable.

When exposed to salt water and ultraviolet light, plastic fragments into ‘microplastics’, which are ingested unintentionally by a variety of organisms and creatures in the ocean. “In India, micro and macro plastics have been observed at

all trophic levels starting from sardines to tunas and sea birds,” V Kripa, principal scientist at the Chennai-based Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute said.

Plastic waste in the form of Styrofoam cups, packing material or polythene bags, which lies in rubbish heaps on India’s streets is no less deadly. It is not uncommon to see cows and dogs eating out of rubbish heaps on roads. They unintentionally swallow polythene bags. In February, the impact of such ingestion by animals was underscored by a case in Patna in eastern India where veterinarians removed 80kg of polythene waste from the stomach of a 6-year-old cow.

India recycles around 60% of its plastic waste, which is way above the world average of 22%. “It is working on conversion of plastic to fuel for domestic and industrial use and while it is yet to adopt plastic-to-fuel business models, large plastic conversion plants are being set up in the country,” an official in India’s Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Climate Change told IDN.

Besides, it is also converting plastic waste into tar for road construction. It has laid around 100,000 kilometers of roads constructed with recycled plastic.

However, recycling plastic only partially addresses the plastics problem. Use of plastic goods should be reduced or as Singh has done things made of plastic need to be eliminated from our lives.

It was to reduce the manufacture of plastic goods that the Indian government put in place Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016. These rules envisaged phasing out non-recyclable multi-layered

plastics (MLP) by March 2018. The onus of responsibility was put on manufacturers of plastic to manage the waste system as well as buy back the plastic waste generated.

However, under pressure from industry, the government backtracked. The Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2018 favor businesses manufacturing or using plastic. While the 2016 rules allowed the use of only recyclable MLP, the 2018 rules allows MLP that is ‘energy recoverable’ and those that can be put to ‘alternate use’. The new rules allow plastic producers to continue manufacturing plastic by claiming that “their products can be put to some other use, if not recycled.” In effect the 2018 rules revoke “a complete ban” which the 2016 rules implied.

Environmental activists argue that the Pollution Control Boards in India’s 33 states and union territories are not serious about curbing plastic use. In the southern state of Karnataka, the government made it compulsory for plastic to be mixed with bitumen to construct roads. Yet large amounts of plastic continue to be dumped in landfills.

There are varying levels of restrictions on the use of plastic bags in most Indian states. Yet, plastic covers litter streets and choke India’s rivers. Manufacture of plastic bags must be stopped and cheap alternatives provided to customers.

Seema Sharma, a Bengaluru-based activist who works with the Bangalore Eco Team on solid waste management issues, argues that the rules banning plastic bags are “fine” but poorly implemented. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board itself uses plastic in its office, she points out.

Indian officials may be apathetic but slowly people at the grassroots are beginning to act on plastic pollution. The impact of plastic pollution on their livelihood is driving India’s fishermen to participate in initiatives to rid coastal waters of plastic debris. As part of the ‘Suchitva Sagaram’ (clean ocean) project initiated by the government of the southern state of Kerala, fishermen bring the plastic debris they net along with the fish to collection centres where the debris is retrieved and later recycled. The project’s success at the twin fishing harbors of Shakhikulangara and Neendakara near Kollam has prompted the government to extend it to other fishing villages along Kerala’s coast.

Over the past fortnight, civil society groups across in India have carried out audits on the role of business corporations in the manufacturing, distribution, and proliferation of non-recyclable and single-use plastic packaging that is adding dangerously to the already large amount of plastic accumulating in landfills and rivers. This is aimed at gathering data to call for innovations to ensure that plastic waste is “drastically reduced”, said Pratibha Sharma, India Coordinator of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) Asia Pacific.

Public awareness about the hazardous impact of plastic use on human health and the environment is low in India. Hopefully, Singh’s campaign to raise awareness about plastic pollution and the efforts of the government and countless civil society groups in the run up to World Environment Day will change the situation in India and other countries grappling with this crisis. [IDN-InDepthNews – 1 June 2018]

FORESTS COMPRISE LARGE PART OF CLIMATE SOLUTION BUT RECEIVE MEAGRE INVESTMENT

BY FABIOLA ORTIZ



Image: Amazon forest landscape. Credit: Ecuador Government

OSLO (IDN) – It has been a decade now that the mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation – known as REDD+ – has been included in climate negotiations, however investments have not been sufficient for bringing them down.

“Even though science tells us that forests represent thirty percent of the solution to climate change in terms of the mitigation potential of greenhouse gas emission, we are only spending less than two percent of climate finance on forest,” according to senior fellow Frances Seymour of the World Resources Institute (WRI).

Seymour was among the 500 participants that gathered in Norway at the Oslo Tropical Forest Forum (June 27-28) to debate the role forests play in achieving Paris Agreement goals to keep global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius.

Hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), the conference brought together representatives from science, politics, the private sector and civil society to discuss the need to protect, restore and manage standing forests as they account for an estimated 11 percent of annual CO2 emissions and have been increasingly under threat from the expansion of soy production, cattle ranching, palm oil plantation and wood products across the world.

“The only safe natural proven cost-effective technology we have for carbon capture and storage is forests. However, the disparity between the 30 percent of the forests being a solution and only two percent of the finance is a big problem,” warned Seymour.

Stopping deforestation and restoring forests could remove seven billion metric tons of carbon annually. It would be equal to eliminating 1.5 billion cars, more than all cars in the world today.

The recent report from Global Forest Watch released at the event indicates that there was a loss of a record-high 15.8 million hectares of tropical forest cover in 2017.

Noting that the clearing of forests has risen at a “catastrophic pace”, Norwegian Minister of Environment Ola Elvestuen called for more international cooperation and financing.

“No one questions the benefits of holding and reversing deforestation for sustainable development,” he stressed. “Stopping deforestation is about regulation, enforcement and incentives. If we have results based payments then the numbers will be completely different. We will continue to reward ambitious forest countries showing political will and results.”

The Paris Agreement placed REDD+ at the core of the commitments aimed at pursuing efforts to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees

Celsius. Nevertheless, the efforts are “far from enough,” said the Norwegian minister.

“Ten years ago, REDD+ was thought to mobilise tens of billions through carbon markets. That did not happen; the original idea of REDD+ has flaws,” Elvestuen complained.

AMAZON FUND

The Amazon Fund, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, is considered a successful experience among the initiatives for curbing the clearing of forests. Being the largest tropical rainforest, the 6-8 million square kilometres Amazon forest houses one-tenth of the world’s biodiversity and 15 percent of its freshwater. Every year, the forest removes two billion tons of carbon from the atmosphere.

Launched in 2008 in Brazil, the Fund is a REDD+ mechanism created to raise donations for non-reimbursable investments in efforts to prevent, monitor and combat deforestation, as well as to promote the preservation and sustainable use of forest in the Brazilian Amazon. Brazil alone is home to approximately 65 percent of the Amazon basin.

Since it was created, Norway has become the Fund’s major donor with 1.1 billion dollars. Between 2004 and 2017, Brazil was able to cut loss of this biome by 75 percent.

The South American country has pledged to eliminate its illegal forest loss by 2030 and restore 12 million hectares of forests.

However, since 2015, the deforestation rate in Brazil’s Amazon has increased to 27 percent and a recent report released by the Amazon Institute of People and the Environment (Imazon) warned that there has again been an increase in the figures from the previous year.

Elvestuen considers the Amazon Fund a “great success” but did not avoid pointing the finger at the recent rise in forest loss.

“If we look at the numbers of how deforestation has slowed in Brazil in those ten years, it has been definitely a success. Our payments have supported

96 indigenous territories with an area larger than Germany, they have protected a hundred national parks, and strengthened Brazil's environmental police. We will continue to partner with countries with strong ambitions and willingness to help them go further," said the Norwegian minister.

Climate scientist Carlos Nobre, one of the lead authors of the fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, warned that the Amazon is approaching to a turning point where irreversible changes in the biome might turn the exuberant tropical into a savannah.

"The fantastic role of tropical forests may not be guaranteed in the future," said Nobre who has been researching the Amazon for over forty years. "We have few years left, less than a decade to turn deforestation rates down. We have to commit to major restoration of the global tropical forests. Science is telling us that we have to come up with a new sustainable development pathway for the global tropics."

The Brazilian scientist warns that in order to keep the increase of temperature no higher than 1.5 degrees Celsius, it is necessary to restore around three million square km of tropical forests that would remove six to eight billion tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere a year.

"It is doable if we act collectively. We have to think of a third way of development: Innovation, science technology, and traditional knowledge tapping into the biodiversity. We have to develop a standing forest bio-economy, a biodiversity driven economy," he explained.

During the Oslo Forum, Norway with Germany signed a 50 million dollar results-based REDD+ partnership with Ecuador to protect 13.6 million hectares of its rainforest.

In addition, the Norwegian Government announced a pledge of up to 15 million euros (17.5 million dollars) for a collaborative initiative of INTERPOL,

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Norwegian Centre for Global Analyses to combat illegal deforestation.

Organised criminals make 50-152 billion dollars a year illegally cutting down tropical forests. The plundering of natural resources such as timber, charcoal and gold is worth 770 million dollars annually in some of the world's poorest countries.

INDIGENOUS CONTRIBUTION

New findings also released in Oslo suggest that indigenous peoples and local communities protect climate resources for one-quarter the cost of public and private investments to conserve protected areas.

Indigenous peoples and local communities have customary rights to at least half of the world's land, but legal ownership over just ten percent. Research has shown that legally recognised community forests store more carbon and experience lower rates of deforestation than forests under other tenure regimes.

Despite legal insecurity, local indigenous communities worldwide invest up to 4.5 billion dollars per year in conservation, as much as 23 percent of the amount spent on land and forest conservation by the formal environmental community, said the report.

The situation has become "very much more severe" for indigenous leaders and environmental defenders, complained Vitoria Tauli-Corpuz, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

"Human rights have become low on the agenda of the countries," said Tauli-Corpuz. "Having visited a lot of countries where there are economic interests over the extraction of resources, the indigenous people are the ones suffering the most from impunity and criminalisation. It is a systemic problem." [IDN-InDepthNews – 02 July 2018]

THE TRAFFICKING OF HUMAN BEINGS

VIEWPOINT BY FRED KUWORNU*



Photo: Fred Kuwornu. Credit: facebook.com/fred.kuwornu

According to UN estimates, millions of human beings are trafficked every year with an estimated 150 billion dollars in turnover ... I repeat 150 BILLION. I do not know if you have ever lived or worked in the real Africa and which Africans you know in Italy, or if you are a journalist gaining informing from non-Italian newspapers, but the trafficking of human beings with various accessories (children, organs, prostitution) is not a phenomenon that concerns only the “little Italy” of ports or no ports, but a global phenomenon that earns the African, Asian and Mexican mafias 150 billion – and I repeat 150 billion – dollars a year.

This money is not then redistributed to the poor population of these countries but used to subjugate them even more with harassment of all kinds, destabilising the already precarious political balance, by reinvesting it in drugs and weapons.

Have you ever wondered why, on equal terms of poverty and belief that Europe is a land of plenty, those coming from Mozambique, Angola, Kenya are very few, or those arriving from Ghana (my country of origin which has a GDP of seven percent and the absence of war and persecution) try to come?

Because there is something called the Nigerian Mafia that advertises in villages telling people that for 300 euro in 4 weeks it is possible to come to Italy and from there, if they want, move on to other European countries. Except then ripping them off as soon as they get into a van, suddenly raising the fee by 1,000 dollars, which increases again when they arrive in Libya, where they are asked for another 1,000 dollars for the final crossing. All this, not in 4 weeks as they promise, but with an average waiting time of one year.

To this should be added minors who are entrusted to women who are not their real mothers and who will then disappear once they have settled in Europe, and hundreds of women who will instead be channelled into prostitution, each of them worth 60,000 euro in takings for the mafia itself. Just by trafficking 10,000 towards Italy, the Nigerian mafia has a turnover of 600 million euro a year.

To this is further added what Africa loses: young resources. I have met Ghanaians who sold their taxi or their own small herds to come to Europe and find themselves on a street begging or earning three euro an hour if all goes well, treated like beasts, and who obviously cannot even put aside money as it was in their plans.

Even if they want to go back they will never do so through shame because they would not know what to say to the village, they would not know how to justify the money spent to get to Europe; rather, they foment other departures by posting selfies on Facebook showing that all is well, not tell-

ing the truth out of shame, and so other young people (eighteen-year-olds, unschooled) try to come to Europe because they think it is easy to get rich.

What is the point of maintaining that this slave trade and this criminal scam of the Nigerian mafia, like their counterparts in Asia, should continue?

Who is it good for? It is not good for the African continent. It is not good for the single African who reaches Europe because 90 percent go underground and in any case will never find decent work. It is not good for Italy, which does not have the economic and cultural resources to manage and substantially keep so many people who cannot contribute, especially in a country where 40 percent of the peers of these young Africans are already without a job. And it is not even good for the image that the European has of the African because he or she is always seen as a victim, a poor person, a weak person.

This as an African, but also a human being, is the most racist – besides colonialist – attitude that can exist, because it does not help anyone except the mafia and those who work in good or bad faith in all this industry linked to providing immediate assistance.

With 5,000 dollars it is easier to open a small business in many African countries than come to Italy to beg, and if only this concept was clear and popular, 90 percent of people would probably never leave for Italy.

Especially those who have completed sixth year and are aged 20. It is not the same type of immigration as 30 years ago where many were also 30-year-olds, some graduates, but many with higher education and they still found jobs in factories and lived in dignified conditions.

I do not know the situation of NGOs dealing with assistance at sea, but I know very well those operating in Africa and most are just part of a parasitic system. For the greatest African thinkers and real political leaders, one of the first things to do is to drive out all NGOs from Africa because, even if the staff who work there – the young volunteers – are in good faith, the NGO system has always served to control and destabilise Africa, as well as create subjection to assistance, not counting the financial business of dona-

tions and waste run up by NGOs to maintain leaders by exploiting the image of the poor African child.

Enough of this counterproductive, racist and ignorant way of thinking. It would be interesting to see some of these NGOs take initiatives in Scampia (a suburb of Naples with a high crime rate - ed.) by putting photos of some Neapolitan children in advertisements.

We are tired of your exploitation of this theme for your ideological motives or your fascist or anti-fascist battles on the skin of a continent about which you know little or that you have romanticised and idealised, and that you use to clear your conscience or soothe the guilt of your privileged status. It is time to do serious analysis and field concrete winning solutions, not poison the wells of one party or the other, because whoever wins loses Africa.

It would be useful to have a report from some village in Edo State (Nigeria) to understand the level of cunning, malice and criminal fantasy that has been reached and you will discover that perhaps just transporting and deluding a young illiterate twenty-year-old and his family is the minimum that this powerful and underestimated criminal organisation perpetrates every day, exploiting the desperation and ignorance of people, some of whom are willing to do anything ... even sell a newborn child for 100 dollars.

If this is still tolerated, the risks will not be only for Italy, but also for African countries where the problem of dictators is compounded by the presence of narco-traffickers at the level of Escobar's Colombia or the Mexico of El Chapo, with yet more deaths and underdevelopment of what is already there.

* Filmmaker Fred Kuwornu was born in Bologna in 1971 to a Ghanaian father and an Italian mother. After a degree in Political Science, he worked as a radio and television author, collaborating with the RAI, the Italian national public broadcasting company, and various production companies. In 2010, he produced and directed 'Inside Buffalo', a historic account of the 92nd Infantry Division, the African-American segregated combat unit which fought in the Second World War. Translated by Phil Harris. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 July 2018]

UN CONFERENCE WARNS OF HUGE BACKLOGS BEFORE ACHIEVING GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS

BY RAMESH JAURA



Photo: The 2018 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development concluded on 16 July, following a full day of Voluntary National Reviews, and the continuation of the High-Level General Debate in the afternoon. A Ministerial Declaration was adopted during the closing session on the theme ‘Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.’ Photo by IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) – Three years since the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the UN, at first glimpse progress seems to have been made in “transforming our world” by implementing “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.”

But senior UN officials admit that a closer look at what little has been achieved and the gargantuan tasks ahead to fulfil the “pledge that no one will be left behind” leave no room for complacency.

The Group of 77 (G-77), the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the UN – meanwhile encompassing 134 countries – also shares such reservations.

As the 2018 HLPF drew to a close, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that while much progress has been made, the world has also backtracked in areas that are fundamental to the shared pledge to leave no one behind.

For the first time in a decade, Guterres said, the number of people who are undernourished has increased, gender inequality continues to deprive women of basic rights, and investment in sustainable infrastructure remains “entirely inadequate” – all amid runaway climate change, eroding human rights and persistent pockets of poverty. Greenhouse gas emissions must be brought under control, countries must do everything to mobilize internal resources, and drivers of conflict must be addressed.

Guterres pointed to the pressing challenges of expanding conflicts and inequality; the erosion of human rights; an “unprecedented” global humanitarian crisis; and “persistent pockets” of poverty and hunger – while laying out pathways to move forward.

The UN Chief called on everyone to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for “prosperity and peace on a healthy planet.” In a clarion call, he said: “We need to embed the essence of the 2030 Agenda into everything that we do . . . Let us leave this Forum with a fresh commitment to work together, to share innovative solutions and live up to the Agenda we set for ourselves.”

Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed also highlighted progress in some areas, including maternal and child mortality; tackling childhood marriage; addressing global unemployment; and cutting the rate of forest-loss around the globe.

But she stressed that we are either moving too slowly, or losing momentum, mentioning that for the first time in a decade, the overall number of people who are undernourished has increased – from 777 million people in 2015, to 815 million in 2016 – fundamentally undermining the international community’s commitment to leaving no one behind.

“There is progress, but generally not at a sufficient speed to realize the SDGs by 2030,” says Marie Chatardová, President of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Speaking at the opening of the major ministerial meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) on July 16, 2018 as well as the high-level segment of the ECOSOC, Chatardová cited progress that, at first glimpse, looked positive.

She pointed to extreme poverty, saying that even at one-third of the 1990 value, it was still imprisoning 10.9 per cent of world’s population. Moreover, while 71 per cent have access to electricity – a 10 per cent jump – one billion people still remain in the dark.

Chatardová stressed that a high level of engagement must be maintained in the years ahead, urging the world’s leaders to reaffirm their political com-

mitment to the Agenda in 2019, when the high-level forum will also meet in September during the UN General Assembly.

“We do not have any time to waste,” outgoing General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák told the meeting, focussing on four main points where progress had been made: “We have taken a sledgehammer to extreme poverty,” he began. “Innovations in healthcare are allowing people to live longer and healthier lives. Fewer children are forced to work – and more are where they belong: in school.”

Speaking of “huge challenges ahead,” he accentuated that gains made to reduce extreme poverty, have not benefitted everyone, with many are still dying from curable diseases. One-in-six people still lack safe drinking water; women and girls globally remain excluded or oppressed; and “the planet is, quite literally, melting,” he said.

“Moreover, we know that our demands for water, food, energy and housing are already unsustainable,” he added.

Going a step further, he painted a grim picture of how “the world would be a very scary place” without the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Without the 17 Goals “unilateralism, protectionism and extremism would have even larger draws.”

He concluded by saying that better financing was as urgent priority as we “do not have enough money to meet our goals . . . But it is out there,” adding: “We just need to go beyond our traditional models to get it.”

Speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, Egypt’s Minister of Investment and International Cooperation, Dr. Sahar Nasr, pointed out that three years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda “we are not yet fully on track to implement it.”

He expressed the G77’s concerns that 783 million people still live below the international poverty line and the number of undernourished people has been on the rise since 2014 reaching an estimated 815 million in 2016.

The scale and level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda requires strengthening the means of implementation, particularly for the developing countries, as well as creating the enabling global environment for development, he added.

There was the need to address the diverse needs and the challenges faced by countries in special situations, in particular, African countries, Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Land-locked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), conflict and post-conflict countries and countries and peoples living under foreign occupation, as well as the specific challenges faced by Middle Income Countries (MICs).

The G77 emphasized that water is critical for sustainable development, and expressed concern that 844 million people around the world still lack basic managed drinking water services, and 2.3 billion people still lack a basic level of sanitation services.

Besides, actual number of people living in slums had increased from 689 million to 881 million, Egypt's Minister of Investment and International Cooperation, Dr. Nasr said.

He said the G77 and China were of the view that it was necessary to reaffirm the principles of international law and of the UN Charter. "We stress the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, respect for the territorial integrity and political independence of states, and urge states to refrain from promulgating and applying any unilateral economic, financial or trade measures not in accordance with international law and the UN Charter."

Marking the end of the high-level ministerial segment July 18, a detailed draft Ministerial Declaration was adopted, with 164 countries in favour, two against, (Israel, United States), with no abstentions,

The declaration reaffirmed the support of countries which are working towards making the SDGs a reality. Last-minute debate on the declaration

forced revisions and representatives from several national blocs and member states, voiced concerns over changes to the draft text, and specific paragraphs which proved controversial.

Ministers and high representatives also reaffirmed their commitment to eradicating poverty, expressing concern that poverty remains a principle cause of hunger, and stressed the importance of taking collective measures to make an impact, among other goals. They further reaffirmed their commitment to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, stressing that much work remains to achieve the ambitious 2030 Agenda three years into its implementation. They also commended the 46 countries that delivered voluntary national reviews.

The Forum recognized that sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security and that peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development. "We call for further effective measures and actions to be taken, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right to self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation," the Declaration reads.

It also reaffirms the Forum's commitment to gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls and full realization of the human rights of all women and girls. "To achieve inclusive, sustainable and resilient societies, we call for the leadership and full, effective and equal participation of women in decision-making in the design, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes that affect their livelihoods, well-being and resilience," the document reads. "We reiterate the urgency to ensure women's equal access to, and control over, land and nature resources," it adds. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 July 2018]

TANZANIA'S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES RACING TO SECURE LAND EYED BY INVESTORS

BY KIZITO MAKOYE



Photo: Members of the Hadzabe community in Manyara region making bows for hunting. The group is among beneficiaries of the mapping project run by the Ujamaa Community Resources Team. Credit: Kizito Makoye | IDN-INPS

DAR ES SALAAM (IDN) – Helena Magafu smiled as she held a piece of paper that recognizes her as the sole owner of a disputed farmland in her village was handed over to her, thus resolving a raging dispute with her neighbours.

“I am very happy, I don’t think anyone with ever again claim this is their land,” she said

For the past eight years the 53 year-old widow, who lives in Sanje village in the rural district of

Kilombero – in Morogoro Region, south-western Tanzania – has been embroiled in a dispute with her neighbours who attempted to take 30 hectares of her family land when her husband died.

However, under the new government initiative aimed at increasing transparency and efficiency in the land sector, Magafu was recently confirmed as the right owner of the land.

Magafu, who grows maize, rice, sunflower and vegetables in her farm, has been issued with a document known as a Certificate of Customary Right of Occupancy (CCRO).

For her, getting the land title is an important milestone, providing a sense of security and harmony to spend more time working in the field.

“I have my piece of mind and the zeal to work hard and support my children,” said Magafu who earns around Tanzanian shillings 4,500,000 million (approximately \$2000) a year.

Tanzania has attracted huge interest as a destination for large-scale agricultural investment due to sufficient land and cheap labour. While farmers use swathes of land for growing crops, fishing and animal keeping, they rarely have documented evidence to prove ownership.

For the communities, upholding land rights means possessing documented evidence which secures tenure and can also be used as collateral for securing bank loans.

As traditional laws that once protected village land weaken, indigenous communities and farmers have repeatedly lost chunks of land in what analysts say is a huge land grabbing facilitated by foreign investors.

Without adequate tenure or security the community land often becomes susceptible to grabbing

by foreign companies colluding with corrupt village leaders.

Although Tanzania's laws on land acquisition direct companies to obtain land through the Tanzanian Investment Centre – the state investment watchdog, some investors directly negotiate land deals with local villages.

This situation not only triggers conflicts but also erodes trust and had also undermined the potential for investors to receive government protection.

However, communities are not idly standing by adopting innovative strategies that are helping them to regain parcel of lost land as well as protecting their collectively-held land by staging protests, turning to courts and engage in mapping and monitoring of the land.

With the help from local charities, local village councils and district authorities, communities across the country are mapping and documenting their communal land to get strong legal protection.

In 2015 Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania's northern Loliondo village sued the government at a regional court accusing it of intimidating witnesses supporting their legal claim for chunk of the village land seized during the 2014 eviction to make way for a wildlife corridor.

Land registration in Tanzania is a complex process often riddled by corruption and inefficiency, according to Transparency International's 2014 Global Corruption Barometer.

In an effort to boost local understanding of the land rights in rural areas the United States

Agency for International Development (USAID) has since 2014 been implementing a US\$5.9 million Tanzania Land Tenure Assistance project to improve tenure security of local farmers in Tanzania's southern highlands regions while issuing them with CCRO.

Under the initiative, district land planners were trained on land valuation, record keeping and were also equipped with conflict resolution skills.

Doug Hertzler, a Senior Policy Analyst for ActionAid said the move to strengthen land rights and protection of poor communities is important for fighting poverty. “It's crucial that these land tenure programs protect long term rights of communities and do not facilitate land grabbing by investors,” he said

Agriculture is the backbone of Tanzania's economy and more than 80 percent of the population depends on it for livelihood, but while the country has a total of 44 million hectares of land suitable for agricultural production, only 10.8 million hectares are currently being cultivated, according to Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics data.

Globally indigenous people and rural communities collectively hold more than half of world land, but they legally own just 10 percent, and even less of it is registered and titled, a new study finds.

A 2018 World Resources Institute study finds that globally rural communities and indigenous people face an uphill struggle to register their land claims as community land is increasingly targeted by powerful commercial interests.

While they toil for years to get their legal titles, wealthy companies with strong political connections are proving adept to navigate through government bureaucracy and acquire land in as little as 30 days, the study finds.

“In Tanzania, companies are supposed to consult with communities when obtaining village land... but companies may obtain right to land classified as ‘general land’...no consultations are required,” said Laura Notess Research Analyst, with World Resources institute.

As customary tenure arrangements for collectively held land continue to weaken, communities are facing obstacles to register and document their land rights, often forced to unwieldy navigate through complex procedures that drag on for years.

“A substantial burden is imposed on poor villages and individuals in obtaining various documents

and approvals... this process often stretches the limited resources of districts which have large backlogs,” Emmanuel Sullen, a Tanzanian researcher at the Institute for poverty land and Agrarian Studies in South Africa.

While governments and companies are keen to acquire land to extract natural resources, grow biofuels; or simply hold it for speculative purposes, indigenous communities often lose ancestral lands – their primary source of livelihood, income and social identity.

“The determination of village boundaries...is often a recipe for disputes likely to challenge the resolve of the village since they require significant time and monetary investments,” Sulle said.

While national laws in many countries recognize customary rights, the legal protections are often weak and poorly enforced making community land especially vulnerable to being taken by more powerful actors.

After decades of enduring displacements, pastoralists and hunter-gatherer indigenous communities including the Maasai and the Hadzabe are being couched to take action against policies that prioritize foreign investors against traditional land use practices.

With the help of a local NGO Ujamaa Community Resources Team, the groups which constantly face the threat of losing their land, and with it their ways of life are fighting to secure their land.

Since 2003 the NGO has secured more than 200,000 hectares of land for the indigenous groups. The target is to get more than 970,000 hectares of land in northern Tanzania protected against invasion.

“We are confident to reach our target as we have planned, land is very important for indigenous communities,” said Edward Loure, the pioneer of the initiative. [IDN-InDepthNews – 05 August 2018]

KUDOS AND CRITICISM FOR NEW UN HUMAN RIGHTS CHIEF

BY J. NASTRANIS



Photo: Michelle Bachelet of Chile, newly-appointed as the next UN High Commissioner for Human Rights by Secretary-General António Guterres. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferre.

NEW YORK (IDN) – Moments after the UN General Assembly unanimously agreed on August 10 to appoint Chile’s former President Michelle Bachelet as the seventh UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Secretary-General António Guterres tweeted: “Ms. Bachelet is a pioneer, a visionary, a woman of principle, and a great human rights leader for these troubled times.” He had had put forward her candidacy to the General Assembly on August 8.

The United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) Executive Director, Natalie Samarasinghe, agreed: she is “certainly a strong choice”, and added: “She has experience at the highest level of government in Chile, at the highest level of administration within the UN system as the first head of UN Women, and of working with civil society under the shadow of oppression.”

Before Guterres’ announcement, Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said: “If selected, Bachelet will be taking on one of the world’s most difficult jobs at a moment when human rights are under widespread attack.”

He added: “As a victim herself, she brings a unique perspective to the role on the importance of a vigorous defense of human rights. People worldwide will depend on her to be a public and forceful champion, especially where offenders are powerful.”

Guterres told reporters he was “delighted” by the news of her official appointment as Michelle Bachelet “has been as formidable a figure in her native Chile, as she has at the United Nations”.

Highlighting her role as the first leader of UN Women, between 2010 and 2013, he said she gave “that new entity a dynamic and inspiring start”. He also pointed to her remarkable career as “the first woman to serve as the country’s President, but also as a survivor of brutality by the authorities targeting her and her family, many decades ago”.

“She has lived under the darkness of dictatorship,” he continued. “As a physician, she knows the trials of people thirsting for health and yearning to enjoy other vital economic and social rights. And she knows the responsibilities of both national and global leadership.”

Following the announcement, Bachelet said she was “deeply humbled and honored” to have been entrusted with “this important task.”

As this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, and at a time when “hatred and inequality are on the rise,” the Secretary-General said it was vital to have a “strong advocate for all human rights” and he “could not think of a better choice”.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was created in 1993. The High Commissioner is the principal official who speaks out for human rights across the whole UN system, strengthening human rights mechanisms; enhancing equality; fighting discrimination in all its forms; strengthening accountability and the rule of law; widening the democratic space and protecting the most vulnerable from all forms of human rights abuse.

“Michelle Bachelet brings unique experience to the United Nations and to all of us, and is strongly committed to keeping human rights at the forefront of the work of the United Nations,” Guterres concluded. “She has my full confidence and support, and I ask all Member States and our partners to extend to her their support.”

Bachelet replaces Jordan’s outspoken Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, who is stepping down on August 31 after a four-year term on the plea, as he told UN correspondents early August in New York, he did not believe he would have the support of key world powers, including the United States, China and Russia.

He has been strongly critical of some of U.S. President Donald Trump’s policies and his attacks on the media. “Someone said to me ‘just come out swinging’ and that’s what I did,” Zeid said of advice he was given when he started the job in 2014. “Silence does not earn you any respect.” He added: “We do not bring shame on governments, they shame themselves.”

Zeid bin Ra’ad Zeid al-Hussein is heir to the abolished throne of the former Kingdom of Iraq and a junior member of the Jordanian royal family. The UN does not recognise royal titles in its officials, but when not serving with the UN he is therefore known as “Prince Zeid”. From 2000–2007 and again from 2010–2014 he was Jordan’s ambassador to the UN, and from 2007–2010 he was Jordan’s ambassador to the U.S.

In 2005 he was seconded to the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations to write the landmark “Zeid Report” on combatting Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in UN peacekeeping operations. He developed a reputation as a fearlessly outspoken and inspiring High Commissioner but was thought to be less effective as an administrator.

Guterres said Zeid had served with “leadership, passion, courage and skill” for the past four years, adding that he wished “to express my deep gratitude to my good colleague and friend.”

Zeid warmly welcomed Bachelet’s appointment. “She has all the attributes – courage, perseverance, passion, and a deep commitment to human rights – to make her a successful High Commissioner,” he said on August 10 in a statement, adding that the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) “looks forward to welcoming her and working under her leadership for the promotion and protection of all human rights, for everyone, everywhere.”

Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon said he welcomed Zeid’s departure, explaining that he “never missed a chance to invent falsehoods and lies when it comes to Israel.”

Following the General Assembly decision, several delegations delivered congratulatory remarks on Bachelet’s appointment.

Chile’s delegate said the appointment is critically important as this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and at a time when human rights norms face challenges. He stressed the need for the international community to uphold human rights.

Iran’s delegate asked Bachelet to lead her office in accordance of relevant resolutions, making it clear that human rights is “not a tool for powerful countries to use against their dislikes” and to address politicization and polarization stemming from such practices.

Several delegations stressed the need to support UN Commissioner’s office both financially and politically.

Stefanie Amadeo, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Nikki Haley’s deputy said: “The United States’ withdrawal from the Human Rights

Council was not a withdrawal from our commitment to advancing universal human rights within the UN system and around the world.” She was referring to U.S. decision to withdraw from its seat on the 47-member UNHRC earlier in 2017.

“The failures of the Human Rights Council to address some of the most egregious human rights abuses of our day make the Secretary-General’s selection of a new High Commissioner for Human Rights all the more important,” Amadeo said.

“The High Commissioner can have a strong voice on these critical issues, especially when the Human Rights Council fails to live up to its name. It is incumbent on the Secretary-General’s choice, Ms. Bachelet, to avoid the failures of the UN human rights system in the past, particularly the Human Rights Council’s consistent failure to address extreme human rights abuses in the Western Hemisphere, in Venezuela, and Cuba in particular,” she added,

“The UN system has failed to adequately address major human rights crises in Iran, North Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and elsewhere, or stop its chronic, disproportionate obsession with Israel. It is up to Ms. Bachelet to speak out against these failures rather than accept the status quo. We hope that she does. The United States will,” the U.S. delegate declared.

Cuba’s delegate said that the United States was availing of the meeting as an opportunity to “twist reality”. Cuba had signed on to more human rights treaties than the United States. She described how the U.S. violates human rights, a view which was also shared by the representative of Venezuela, who said that country has no moral right to preach.

Also speaking were the delegations of Madagascar (on behalf of the African States), Solomon Islands (on behalf of the Asia-Pacific States), Estonia (on behalf of the Eastern European States), Argentina (on behalf of Latin American and Caribbean States), New Zealand (also speaking for Australia and Canada), European Union, United Kingdom and Switzerland.

UN Watch Executive Director Hillel Neuer said he was concerned by Bachelet’s support for governments with known records of human rights abuses.

“There’s no question that the former Chilean president is a highly educated and intelligent politician, who also brings important negotiating skills. But she has a controversial record when it comes to her support for the human rights abusing governments who rule Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, and we need to know how she plans to address these urgent situations before her nomination is voted upon,” Neuer said.

Against this backdrop, political observers point to what Mary Robinson, who served one four-year term and one one-year term (1997-2002) as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said in an interview with UNA-UK: “The one office that has to always speak truth to power.”

She told UNA-UK in an interview on July 17, 2018: “I had decided not to go forward for a second seven-year term as President and shortly after I made that decision, the first High Commissioner, Ayala Lasso, resigned suddenly. He went back to Ecuador to be Foreign Minister... The Irish government canvassed very heavily for me. It was quite contested... And then in July 1997, Kofi Annan nominated me and I was shortly afterwards approved by the General Assembly.

“Then I went to see Kofi in New York and he put great pressure on me to start in September because he wanted the High Commissioner to be there for the UN General Assembly. I eventually succumbed to that pressure because I was afraid that if I didn’t he might change his mind and not appoint me. I regretted it later because it wasn’t a good idea to leave the Presidency early, it left a bad impression that I had somehow used the Presidency as a stepping stone to higher things, which wasn’t true. And once I got there it was clear these weren’t really ‘higher things’.”

UNA-UK notes that Bachelet was one of the first names mentioned in connection to the role, many months ago, before the process was publicly launched. “Yet the appointment has taken place under unprecedented time pressure, with her now having just three weeks to prepare for the role – less than any previous High Commissioner.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 August 2018]

‘2030 SDGS GAME’ AROUSES GROWING INTEREST IN JAPAN

BY RAMESH JAURA AND KATSUHIRO ASAGIRI



Image: 2030 SDGs Game. Credit: Imacocollabo

BERLIN | TOKYO (IDN) – Reports have it that when Albert Einstein was some five years old and confined to bed, his father gave him a magnetic pocket compass to play with. He twisted and turned it, wondering how the needle always knew to point towards the north.

Takeo Inamura and Nobuhide Fukui share a similarly profound curiosity about how the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, world leaders adopted in September 2015 at an historic UN

Summit in New York, could really transform the world.

And, what could be done to bring home to the common man and woman that there is no magic wand to realize the grand vision of SDGs, to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind?

They felt a strong conviction that a simple game to explain the logic behind the 17 Goals and encourage individual and community commit-

ment would generate vital impulses to set the ball rolling. They put their heads together and developed under the umbrella of Japanese NGO Imacocollabo, the 2030 SDGs Game, Inamura tells IDN.

‘Imacocollabo’ consists of the three words: ‘ima’, ‘coco’, and ‘collabo’. Ima means ‘now’, Coco means ‘here’, and Collabo refers to ‘collaboration’. Accordingly, the company’s motto is: “We all need to act – not sometime, but right now. Not from somewhere, but from right where we are. And to have impact, we need to act in collaboration with others.”

Inamura is together with Muranaka co-founder of Imacocollabo; Inamura and Fukui are co-developers; Fukui being a professional card developer.

The rules of the Game are simple. A player uses money and time with the intent to achieve a goal by the end of the game in a ‘yellow’, ‘blue’ or ‘green’ project. Each project is targeted at people in the real world with different interests and values.

A Fortune Seeker, for example, for whom money matters most, would need 1200 units of wealth at the end of the game. Because only “a sufficiently abundant world” would allow the Fortune Seeker to avail of “the wealth earned”.

One who believes in Living in Comfort and Leisure must have 15 units of time at the end of game to have a sufficient abundance to enjoy the time earned. An Environmental Conservation Warrior needs to have more than 10 Green Intentions at the end of the game – to live in a world that feels worth living in.

“The 2030 SDGs Game is a game that takes you on an experiential journey to discover how the world can achieve these 17 powerful goals between now and 2030,” says Muranaka

Through the game play and reflection, players not only discover what ‘sustainable development’ is all about, but also find the critical factors for social transformation through personal and community experience.

The Game approach has three objectives. One of these is to give people a direct experience of participating in co-creating a sustainable world (“I can do it”; “what I do makes a difference”)

It simplifies and makes accessible an extremely complex issue to a level that allows people to begin to understand, while stimulating natural curiosity to learn more.

Furthermore, it activates players’ natural instincts to set their aim toward a worthy goal, simultaneously building confidence and making it enjoyable, while inspiring and motivating players to take action in the real world.

2030 SDGs is a multiplayer, in-person, card-based game that simulates taking the “real world” into the year 2030. It is designed to be played with from 5 to 50 players. That number can be ex-

panded to a maximum of around 200 with multiple parallel ‘worlds’ operating at the same time.

Playtime is approximately one hour; with the necessary explanation and reflection afterward, it requires a minimum of 90 minutes, and generally works best in a two-and-half hour time frame.

In Japan, more than 200 accredited facilitators host the Game, and many game events are held all over Japan in corporate, governmental, educational, and community settings with the intention to transform the consciousness of each participant in profound ways, in turn transforming their actions.

The ‘2030 SDGs experience’ has become a powerful social phenomenon in Japan, earning extensive media coverage and reaching more than 12,000 participants in 2017, Muranaka tells IDN.

“Now, due to a growing demand to bring the game to the rest of the world, we have created an English edition and are beginning to introduce it to a wider audience overseas,” he adds.

Inamura recalls that to begin with, he wanted to play the 2030 SDGs Game with 10 to 15 of his friends, and he shared the event information on Facebook. “Surprisingly I instantly had more than 800 likes, and many of them were friends of friends.” He was overwhelmed.

The first game was well received and some of the 20 participants suggested inviting their respective communities to play. “From there on, every time I played the game, 2-3 participants would ask me to play it with their respective communities. Subsequently, the game spread out swiftly.”

Inamura continues: “We have had many requests from people who want to ‘buy the game’. We have, therefore, given much thought to options such as simply selling the game kits, providing the cards essentially free of charge and raising money through crowd funding.”

But unlike many of the publicly available card games or board games, which have clear rules that guarantees certain quality regardless of the navigation skills, 2030 SDGs is essentially a simulation game with unlimited variety of scenarios, depending on the decisions, actions or involvement of the players. Thus, if the facilitator lacks the appropriate skill set, the game may drift away from the original purpose, or it sometimes does not work out at all.

“We decided to have a facilitator training course so that people can facilitate the game by themselves. Meanwhile, we have more than 200 certified facilitators in Japan and they play the game all over the country.

“The more a facilitator can bridge the Game world and the Real one, the greater is the power of the game to attract people and encourage them share their experiences with others,” says Muranaka.

A wide range of people – from age 10 to age 80 – can play the game. It is played primarily in schools as well as elder care homes. But the best match is from junior high school to adults.

“In the English-speaking world, the Game’s acceptance is as large as it was in the beginning in Japan. In fact, we will be travelling to the U.S. in October and Europe in November.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 23 August 2018]

COSTA RICA SET TO ACHIEVE CARBON NEUTRALITY BY 2021

BY FABIOLA ORTIZ



Photo credit: Rafael Murillo, Courtesy Congress SEE

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (IDN) – It has been twenty two years since Costa Rica embarked on its national program of payment for environmental services (PES), the first in the world to start a nationwide scheme for compensating landowners for keeping the forests standing for people and the planet.

Now that the world struggles to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit the global temperature rise by the end of the century, this Central American nation of five million people has served as an example of public policies addressing the taxation of fossil fuels in favour of the protection of nature. The country pledges to become carbon neutral by 2021.

“We expected that the developed countries would provide financial support to developing nations in order to protect natural resources. However, no backing has been offered whatsoever,” the general director of Costa Rica’s National Forest Finance Fund (FONAFIFO) told IDN:

International funds such as the Green Climate Fund are difficult to access, complained Rodriguez. “Costa Rica is among the first five countries with a national carbon emission reduction strategy and there has not yet been a single country willing to partner with us and help with funds,” criticised Rodriguez during the first Latin American Congress on Sustainability, Ecology and Evolution (SEE) held from September 26 to 29, 2018 in San Jose. A special panel discussed Costa Rican experience in paying for ecological services.

Hosting 5 percent of the world’s biodiversity, Costa Rica has more than half of its territory covered with forests and champions 350 days a year powered by renewable sources.

Its past was not that bright and sustainable though. In the 1980s, the country was on the brink of an environmental crisis reaching high rates of deforestation – around 70,000 hectares a year, the equivalent to 1.7 percent of the national territory.

The country's forest cover currently accounts for 52,4 percent of its territory. Back in 1987, it was only 21 percent. On the trail of the Rio Summit in 1992, Costa Rica started a pioneer initiative by creating in 1996 the PES within the new Forest Act that criminalised the change of land use – if a property was covered by forest, it would be illegal to clear the land for cattle ranching or growing monoculture.

The PES was a way of rewarding small and medium landowners for the ecosystem services their forests provided, such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity preservation and protection of water springs.

The lack of international funds boosted Costa Rica's U-turn when the country taxed the fossil fuels consumption. It had been the first time in the world that a country created a special tariff for the use of gasoline to finance forestry recovery.

After two decades, the gasoline tax resulted in an amount of US\$ 500 million that had been transferred to protect 1,250,000 hectares, nearly one fourth of Costa Rica's territory.

Every year FONAFIFO receives requests of around 180,000 hectares to benefit from the PES. Hitherto, the Fund is able to commit to protecting only 50,000 hectares a year due to budgetary constraints.

“The PES program has been strengthened every year. The change in the mindset reflects the country's vision, it is a shift in the paradigm,” emphasised. Rodríguez.

One third of the properties that benefit from the PES are companies, cooperatives and associations; another third comprehend indigenous territories that account for 340,000 hectares.

The payment scheme can contribute significantly to Costa Rica meeting its target of carbon neutrality in three years, suggested experts at the environmental congress. Growing the forest cover plays a fundamental role for the reduction of emissions.

The country emits 21,6 million tons of CO₂ and wishes to cut 19 percent and compensate the rest of its emissions.

René Castro-Salazar, the assistant-director general of the Climate, Biodiversity, Land and Water Department of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and former Costa Rica's minister of Environment told IDN that the PES may help other developing countries to implement the Paris Agreement.

“At that time when we launched the program, it was very difficult to measure the carbon sequestration. We had to use airplanes; nowadays it is

possible to calculate with satellite and new technologies. It took us the first time over a year and a half, and now the analysis can take only a week,” explained Castro-Salazar who was responsible for implementing the payment schemes for environmental services in Costa Rica, and who was in charge of the first carbon transaction in the world.

“Countries like Mexico are now developing a PES of their own that has evolved from Costa Rican experience. It is more sophisticated and includes categories such as communal properties owned by peasants (campesinos) or indigenous tribes,” he said.

In Castro-Salazar's opinion, the PES is not about subsidising but rewarding who takes care of the biological diversity and hinders illegal logging and clearing the forest.

“Costa Rica has deeply changed in the last decade,” agreed Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, Costa Rican minister of Environment and Energy in his opening speech at the congress.

“However, we still have a negative environmental footprint per capita costing around five per cent of our national GDP (gross domestic product). We can only change that by having a new model of consumption and production,” he maintained. [IDN-InDepthNews – 03 October 2018]

AN INDIAN WOMAN RISES FROM THE DOWNTRODDEN TO A SOCIALLY AWARE MULTIMILLIONAIRE

BY SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN



Photo: Kalpana Saroj. Credit: kamanitubes.com

BANGALORE (IDN) – In 2013, Kalpana Saroj, Chairperson of the Mumbai-based Kamani Tubes Ltd. (KTL), was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth highest honour for civilians, for her achievements in the fields of Trade and Industry.

Saroj was successful in turning around the fortunes of KTL, a manufacturing company producing quality copper and copper alloy pipes and tubes. She succeeded where others, including well-networked, male corporate honchos, failed.

What makes her accomplishments all the more impressive is the fact that she is a Dalit (formerly 'Untouchables', the lowest caste in India's millennia-old caste hierarchy) and a woman too. "Her rise to the top is, without a doubt, a function of her personal fortitude and grit," Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, consultant for #dalitwomenfight, told IDN.

Set up by Ramjibhai Kamani in 1959-60, KTL was initially a profitable enterprise. Then, as bitter feuds erupted among members of the Kamani family, its fortunes plummeted. It was shut down repeatedly and with financial losses mounting, it was declared a 'sick unit'. In 1989, the running of the company was handed over to a co-operative of KTL's workers but that too failed to put the unit back on track.

It was in 2001 that KTL's workers approached Saroj to revive the debt-ridden company and save their jobs. At that point, KTL was sinking under the weight of loans worth Rs 116 crore (1.16 billion) – or USD 1,566 million and 140 cases of litigation. Many advised Saroj against buying the company. She knew nothing about manufacturing copper products, they warned. The company's liabilities were too huge. It would destroy her.

However, Saroj took up the challenge and within a few years not only did she put KTL back on the rails and turn it into a profitable enterprise – today the company has an annual turnover of Rs 100 crore (one billion) – or USD 135.71 million and the capacity to produce 7,000-10,000 metric tons of alloy – but also, she paid back the company's loans. Importantly, she saved 566 families from destitution. She cleared all the dues that the company owed the workers in unpaid salaries stretching over several years.

Saroj's rise in the world of business over the past decade has been spectacular. The annual turnover of her businesses, which extend across non-ferrous manufacturing, sugar production and building construction, is estimated at over Rs 2,000 crore (20 billion) – or USD 271.42 billion. She is a Board member of the Bharatiya Mahila Bank, a state-run women-only bank, and of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI).

But more than her accomplishments in the world of business it is Saroj's remarkable overcoming of social obstacles that deserves applause. Saroj is a Dalit woman.

Dalits have suffered persecution for several millennia. They have been excluded from education, employment, temples and public spaces. They are forced to do 'unclean' jobs like cleaning toilets, skinning cows, etc.

Independent India banned the practice of Untouchability, i.e. the social, physical and political exclusion of Dalits. Legislation to prevent violence against Dalits was enacted and seats for Dalits in schools, public sector jobs and legislatures have been reserved.

Still, on every socio-economic indicator Dalits are at the bottom of the heap. They account for the bulk of India's poor, the illiterate, malnourished and unemployed.

Dalit women like Saroj are worse off, as they are doubly marginalized, suffering on account of being Dalit and women.

This is particularly so in India's corporate world. Dalits are a minority here and Dalit women a rarity and at the upper echelons, almost non-existent.

"Even if we do manage to get in, the corporate is not designed to be conducive for Dalits to feel safe, confident, or valued," says Dhanaraj. This is "a system that hinges on networking, social capital and 'culture fit' – things that Dalits miss out on given how casteist most Indians still are in creating/sustaining relationships with people they consider 'inferior'," she says.

According to Dhanaraj, "attaining leadership positions is even more difficult regardless of how hard/smart they work. For Dalit women, these challenges

are amplified since they battle both patriarchy and caste within the workplace. In addition to resisting stereotypes, they also find it difficult to find mentors and sponsors."

Born into a poor Dalit family in Roparkheda village in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, Saroj's struggles began early in life. There was no rejoicing at her birth; her uncle called her a zehar ki pudiya (little pocket of poison). In India, girls are looked upon as burdens on the family.

She had to fight poverty, deeply-entrenched patriarchy in Indian society as well as social persecution as a Dalit.

Poverty forced Saroj's parents to get her married when she was just 12 years old. In her new home in a Mumbai slum Saroj was ill-treated by her in-laws. It was "personal hell," she recalls. When her father saw her situation, he took her back to his village.

Life is not easy for an Indian woman, especially a little girl, who dares to walk out on her husband. Saroj was ridiculed in her village and as life became unbearable, she attempted suicide. But fate intervened and she survived.

Her survival proved to be a turning point. Before the suicide, there was "nothing but darkness in life", Saroj recalls, adding that she used to be "very emotional and easily hurt". When she got out of the hospital she realized that that struggle was a part of her life and it was her "job to face" struggle.

The next phase of Saroj's life was difficult too but unlike in the past, she felt no fear in facing challenges.

Saroj returned to Mumbai in search of a job and began working as a helper in a textile mill. She moved on to working at a tailoring shop and then set up her own tailoring unit followed by a furniture store. Sugar factories, real estate and films followed. In 1978, she started Sushikshit Berozgar Yuvak Sanghatana, an organization to help unemployed youth find jobs.

Saroj's determination and hard work helped her rise to the top and while her successes were achieved on her own steam, she has ensured that others benefit too. Most importantly, her achievements are inspiring millions of Dalits and women in India. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 October 2018]

WORLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS' ASTANA CONGRESS PLEDGES 'UNITY IN DIVERSITY'

BY RAMESH JAURA



World Religious Leaders' Astana Congress Pledges 'Unity in Diversity'

ASTANA (IDN) – At a critical point in time when religious tolerance is being consigned to oblivion, an international conference has appealed “to all people of faith and goodwill” to unite, and called for “ensuring peace and harmony on our planet”.

The appeal emerged from the two-day Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, the Kazakh city founded on the principle of “unity in diversity”. The Congress concluded with a ‘peace concert’ in which 500 choir singers from five continents of the world took part.

A children’s choir consisting of little singers kicked off the concert with the songs by Sergey Rakhmaninov, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Altynbek Korazbayev and many others. The concert gathered choir singers from India, Indonesia, Georgia, Hungary, Israel, Italy, the Republic of Korea, China, Bulgaria, and Australia. It was organized by the Ministry of Culture and Sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The conference was attended by 82 delegations from 46 countries representing all world and traditional religions as well as political leaders and

representatives of international organizations, including the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), OSCE, UNESCO, and the League of Arab States among others.

This was the sixth Congress since 2003 when Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev initiated the first such gathering in the Central Asian Republic – a multicultural society made up of 18 million people, representing more than 100 ethnic groups, 18 religious denominations, and 3,715 religious associations.

The Congress helped initiate a global dialogue between religions and civilizations and played a major role in promoting mutual understanding and respect in societies and countries. Its valuable contribution to promoting dialogue and understanding was recognized in 2004 by UN Resolution A/RES/59/23.

Acting upon a recommendation by the Congress, the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly declared 2010 the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures.

In the three years since the last Congress, Astana has hosted several important global events whose decisions, as President Nazarbayev said in his opening remarks to the Congress on October 10, “had a wide international resonance, since

they were instilled with the idea of peacekeeping, partnership, tolerance, creation.”

This is especially important since the world has entered a turbulent state. “All of us, including politicians, and religious leaders, cannot but be concerned by the use of sanctions, inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts, trade wars, environmental pollution,” noted the Kazakh President.

The Congress Declaration of October 11 stresses “the importance of cooperation between leaders of world and traditional religions with state and public institutions seeking to promote peaceful coexistence of peoples and states through dialogue and propaganda of positive human values”.

The Declaration notes “the special role of governments, as well as of governmental and non-governmental, national and international organizations, and the mass media in promoting the ideals of peace and mutual understanding between States, societies and peoples”.

The Declaration condemns in the strongest possible terms the continuation of grave, systematic and massive abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law “by international terrorist organizations, as well as the support and/or sponsorship of terrorism that undermine mutual trust and cooperation between followers of different religions and among followers of the same faith”.

The Declaration rejects all forms of manipulation of religion in political conflicts, expression of selfishness and intolerance, aggressive national-

ism and claims of exclusivity. It regards the problem of foreign terrorist fighters returning home or moving elsewhere “a new global challenge for all states in the fight against international terrorism and religious extremism”.

Commenting the Declaration, Dmitry Safonov, the executive secretary of the Interfaith Council of Russia said: “Religion will play the peacebuilding role.”

“We should not confuse Islam with terrorism. It is the mistake of many media. Islam is the religion of peace and tolerance. It doesn’t promote extremism. Security and safety is a human right. That is what Islam believes,” said Mufti of Tajikistan Saidmukarram Abduqodirzoda.

Recalling the congresses since 2003 – in 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 – Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev said: “This is the gradual process. The first congresses disagreed on many issues. Now they have more understanding. It is a big success that they are talking about peace and cooperation. Earlier it was hard to even imagine how all of them can sit together. Now it is easy.”

Ashikbayev and other Kazakh officials also stressed the importance of taking concrete actions. One of the first steps forward could be the opening of a Centre for the Development of Inter-Confessional and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue that will serve as the hub for reconciliation and building peace. The Centre was proposed by President Nazarbayev in his opening address to the Congress.

Another key measure Deputy Foreign Minister Ashikbayev mentioned is the need to educate youth, which is also included in the Declaration. It specifies that education should be about religions, tolerance and respect for family values.

The Declaration calls on governments “to revitalize the work with the youth to prevent their radicalization”.

It also stresses the need to promote in every way possible the involvement of the leaders of world and traditional religions in making greater efforts to achieve long-term stability and to prevent violent incidents caused by hatred and intolerance.

The Declaration further call for strengthening cooperation of religious leaders with international institutions, governments and public institutions being a key message for the successful implementation of vital recommendations and programs aimed at comprehensive security in the world.

Further, it stresses the need to render every possible assistance to all societies and peoples, irrespective of race, religion, belief, language and gender, in ensuring an inalienable right to a peaceful life, and to respect equal rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless of racial, language, religious, national, ethnic or social background, property, birth or other status, and act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood.

The VII Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions will be convened in 2021 – again in Astana. [IDN-InDepthNews – 14 October 2018]

A CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS FOR THE ROHINGYAS

BY NAIMUL HAQ



Photo: Cox's Bazar deputy commissioner Md Kamal Hossain visiting Rohingya camp Kutupalong. Credit: Md Mojibur Rahman Rana.

DHAKA, Bangladesh (IDN) – Despite a well-coordinated effort to address the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar, a coastal town bordering Myanmar, some major challenges still need attention.

The local administration admits that with over one million forcibly displaced Myanmar citizens arriving in such a short time, it is indeed difficult to manage the environmental damages and rising crime rates faced by the local people.

Cox's Bazar deputy commissioner Md Kamal Hossain told IDN that in terms of supplies of food, commodities and household basics efforts have been well coordinated. However, "environmental damage and the crimes rising by the day are major concerns but they are being addressed now and hopefully we would soon find solutions."

More than 693,000 displaced Myanmar nationals have taken refuge in Bangladesh in 25 separate camps making the clusters the largest in the world.

Kutupalong and Balukhali, two of the biggest camps, are hosting over 631,000 refugees who fled their ancestral homes in Rakhine state in Myanmar to escape what they call systematic persecution.

The influx has had a significant impact on the environment and the host population. The land – once green shrub and rows of forest protecting the local communities from gushing winds during storms and frequent wild elephant herd attacks – has literally been turned into a desert as the refugees have been cutting the surrounding trees to use the wood as fuel for cooking and also clear the timber for settlement.

Cox's Bazar, known as one of Bangladesh's most vibrant main tourist destinations located some 300 km south east of the capital Dhaka, has been literally awash with foreign aid workers since the influx in August 2017 that suddenly mushroomed in the scenic hilly area.

The area's hotel managements are prospering, and many Bangladeshis have found jobs with humanitarian organizations. But day laborers and poorer locals have complained about price hikes for basic goods and about losing work to refugees willing to accept far lower wages.

With the flow of refugees still continuing to settle in camps where they find safe haven, the

local population is now outnumbered by ‘foreigners’. This situation has created a crisis, with the poorer segment of the local population no longer able to find work as the Rohingyas offer cheaper labour. The idle men without any earnings are also said to be involved in various crimes, including human traffic and drug smuggling.

A glimpse of the Rohingyas settled in Kutupalong camp in Ukhiya upazila of Cox’s Bazar where forest can be seen in the background. Credit: Naiumul Haq | IDN-INPS

Speaking to IDN, Sarwar Jahan Choudhury, Chairman of Ukhiya Upazila in Cox’s Bazar District, said: “It is indeed unfortunate that cheaper labour offered by the Rohingya men have forced many of the local day labourers to leave and seek higher wages in other cities. We have had reports of conflicts with the locals over issues such as finding jobs. Poor people also complain of higher prices of commodities due to the presence of humanitarian agency workers.”

Choudhury said, “On one hand, the economy is thriving due to the reasons of the Rohingya refugee responses while on the other hand, the plight of the local poor people is turning from bad to worse. If this situation continues for a long time the things may turn even worse.”

Local law enforcers also admit that crime rates have increased significantly. A total of 55 Rohingya men have been arrested in the last six months in connection with 19 alleged murders. Other serious crimes, including rape, human trafficking and drug smuggling, have reportedly been operated by special gangs inside refugee camps.

Hossain said that in a move to address the rise in crimes in and around the camps, 11 check points have been set up and more than 1,000 police and 220 Special Forces deployed, and “the army is ready to support in any combined operation regarding law and order issues.”

Meanwhile, to reduce dependency on forests for wood, the district administration has started distributing compressed gas cylinders and kerosene stoves among the refugees.

Asked about the response to denuded forests, Annika Sandlund, Acting Senior Coordinator for the Rohingya refugee response and head of the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) in Cox’s Bazar told IDN: “With regard to mitigating the impact on the environment, we are working in close collaboration with the national authorities. A three-year programme has been put in place, led by the Forestry Department, to mitigate risks and ensure that new trees are being planted.”

Sandlund also said that “alternative mechanisms to combat fuel intensive methods of cooking are being put in place. Given the physical location of the camps, these measures had already started within a year of the influx, which is remarkable in terms of linking humanitarian needs to development programmes. This has been made possible due to the government’s commitment to lead the response and help combat climate change in this area.”

According to Sandlund, “the humanitarian response has been successful but remains severely underfunded. We are entering into the cyclone

season which could be potentially devastating in the camps. Preparedness measures have been taken, but ultimately if a cyclone makes a landfall in this area, the focus will have to move from preparedness to response. Additional resources will be needed. The risk of a cyclone only adds to the enormous sense of uncertainty the refugees face about their future.”

Sources said that only 40 percent of the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (March-December 2018) is funded, and an additional 579 million dollars is required to meet the urgent needs of Rohingya refugees and the local host communities until the end of the year.

The camps, located on hilly terrain, remain extremely congested which makes it difficult to relocate families currently living in landslide and flood risk areas. Most of the shelters have been hastily built on undulating and sandy terrain which is susceptible to landslide and flooding. Congestion also leads to protection, health, water and sanitation concerns.

Médecins Sans Frontières - Bangladesh, already playing a leading role in addressing some of the critical challenges of water, sanitation and healthcare issues, said that there is insufficient water supply in terms of both quantity and quality, poor sanitation due to overcrowding and badly-maintained latrines and poor living conditions (refugees still live in bamboo and plastic-sheeting shelters), all of which are elements that contribute to spreading of diseases. [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 October 2018]

ARAL SEA PROMISES TO RISE LIKE PHOENIX FROM THE 'ASHES'

BY RADWAN JAKEEM



Photo: Working from dusk until dawn, fishermen from around the town of Aral in Kazakhstan haul in a catch from the North Aral Sea, where the water level has risen and salinity has decreased – in stark contrast to the larger South Aral Sea, which has gone nearly dry. Credit: Aramco World

NEW YORK (IDN) - The zone of destruction created as a consequence of what has been called “one of the planet’s worst environmental disasters” has long crossed the frontiers of Central Asia, demanding urgent measures from the international community.

Every year more than 150 million tons of toxic dust from the bottom of the dried up Aral Sea are

carried long distances by the wind to the people in Asia, Europe and even the thinly populated Arctic.

Before it started shrinking, the Aral Sea was the fourth largest lake in the world – after the Caspian Sea, the Great Lakes in North America and Lake Chad – an oasis in the Central Asian desert that fed all the adjacent cities. It offered prosperous fishing and a resort destination.

But from the 1960s onward, the lake-sea began to dry up rapidly in part because the two major rivers feeding the sea, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, were diverted for Soviet projects to irrigate cotton and rice fields. The oasis turned into a cracked white desert with islands of rusted ships.

Since then, the era of projects to save the Aral Sea has begun. The northern part was saved by

Kazakhstan. Initially, work began on the construction of the dam Kokaral to stop the ingress of water into the sand.

When the dried pool began to fill with water, biologists started restoration of flora and fauna. Those efforts were not in vain: now the water level in the Small Aral has reached 50 meters, the concentration of salt in a liter has decreased so much that the pond has again become suitable for fish, whose number of species meanwhile exceeds two dozen.

Thanks to the measures taken in the territory of Kazakhstan, the so-called Small Aral has been restored, but this is only 1/20 of the water area and 1/40 of the water mass of the former sea. The rest of the former Aral is now a lifeless desert.

Kazakhstan not only outlined the plan of action. It also succeeded in acquiring two World Bank loans for the project “Regulation of the Syr Darya river bed and preservation of the northern part of the Aral Sea”. The total cost of the two phases is more than \$200 million.

An example of the revival of the Small Aral gives hope to scientists that it is also possible to revive the Aral Sea. But this requires adequate financial support, political will and competent scientific approach.

First, it is necessary to improve long-standing irrigation canals in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Secondly, to refuse to maintain small reservoirs in the delta of the Amu Darya, which evaporate

in the summer anyway. These flows can be directed to the filling of the western part of the Great Aral, where there is still water. Thirdly, it is necessary to abandon the cultivation of moisture-loving crops, which, despite the ecological disaster, continue to grow on an industrial scale in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Everyone recognizes that the drying sea is a widespread catastrophe, the consequences of which, if not dealt with, will continue to be felt throughout the world for a long time. The number of people affected by the drying out of the Aral Sea already exceeds 5 million. These are people who have been diagnosed with respiratory diseases, esophageal diseases, laryngeal cancer and even blindness in the face of environmental catastrophe.

Against this backdrop, the heads of the founder states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – met in Turkmenistan on August 24, 2018. The meeting was special. At least because the last time the delegates of this forum met was nine years ago. There were quite a few pressing reasons for serious negotiations. However, disagreements always gained the upper hand.

Now there is a discernible trend towards rapprochement among the region’s players. Central Asian states have exhibited their intention to agree even on the most problematic items on the general agenda. It remains to be hoped that the Aral Sea will be no exception.

Estimates of projects to save the Greater Aral Sea will be many times higher. But judging by the concerns of the international community and the frightening estimates of international researchers about the consequences of the complete drying out of the sea, there should be no problem in galvanizing adequate financial support. There is every reason to muster political will among all countries, connected by a single water system with a drying pond and rivers feeding it.

Therefore, if Uzbekistan declares its readiness to save the sea, the authorities of the country should realize that this would necessitate sacrificing projects for the exploration and production of oil and gas at the bottom of a dried basin. We will need to choose between ecology, public health on the one hand and phantom revenues from hydrocarbon production on the other.

With this in view, organizers of the summit held in Turkmenistan hope to draw the attention of leading financial institutions, international organizations, foreign corporations, and the business community on the whole for the benefit of the environment.

It is to be hoped that the recent historic meeting of the heads of the founding states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, which took place after almost a decade, will open a new chapter in its activities, giving a powerful impetus to regional partnership in Central Asia. [IDN-InDepthNews – 14 November 2018]

CONFERENCE CALLS FOR MAINSTREAMING HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

BY NEENA BHANDARI



Photo: A glimpse of the exhibition on human rights education. Credit: NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning.

SYDNEY (IDN) – More investment is needed in human rights education and strengthening of civil society to address inequality and sustainability – the main objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This was the key message from the Ninth International Conference on Human Rights Education (ICHRE) held in Sydney, Australia.

Drawing inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which marks its 70th Anniversary this year, the ICHRE 2018 (November 26-29) recommended all stakeholders to mainstream human rights education as a tool for social cohesion towards peaceful coexistence; and strive to bridge the significant gap between integrating human rights education in the curricula and its implementation.

“Beyond human rights education, people have to be enabled and empowered to exercise their inalienable rights, to live by those rights, and to uphold their rights and the rights of others,” said Dr Mmantsetsa Marope, Director of UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education, in her opening address.

She highlighted: “Three core factors – good governance, good health, and quality and relevant education – converge to enable and empower people to create and live a culture of human rights. These three factors are paramount, because they determine other factors that can facilitate or impede the realization of human rights.”

The sixth consultation of the implementation of UNESCO’s 1974 Recommendation in 2016 reported that more effort was required to strengthening teachers’ capacity to implement human rights education.

Equitas - International Centre for Human Rights Education, which provides tools and training to teachers and people working with children to integrate human rights values and approaches in the work that they do, reaches out to 100,000 young people across 50 communities in Canada each year.

Equitas Executive Director Ian Hamilton told IDN, “Currently our programme is focused on helping to educate primary school children aged between 6 and 12 years and adolescent youth between 13 and 18 years.

“Through our program, Play It Fair we use a series of games and activities to introduce human rights to children and encourage them to think critically about what is happening around them and how they can promote human rights values – equality, respect, inclusion and exclusion.

“For example, we ask children to play musical chairs the traditional way and then play a cooperative version and use that as an entry point to talk about inclusion and exclusion.”

Hamilton added: “We have seen that these tools also transform the people, who are working with children. They learn the content about the same time as the children, but it also makes them feel empowered, being equipped to deal with these issues.”

Equitas also works with young adults using similar participatory approaches and results, and through its virtual forum: speakingrights.ca.

Youth is the focus of the fourth phase (2020-2024) of the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education launched in September 2018.

Elisa Gazzotti, Programme Coordinator and Co-chair NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning, Soka Gakkai International Office for UN Affairs in Geneva, told IDN, “We use the technique of storytelling to engage young people to share how through human rights education they were able to steer their lives in a positive direction and become fully engaged actors in their communities.”

“We organised a workshop here around Transforming Lives – the power of human rights education exhibition, which was co-organised by SGI together with global coalition for human rights education HRE2020, the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning and others in 2017 to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training. It shows how human rights education has transformed the lives of people in Burkina Faso, Peru, Portugal, Turkey and Australia,” Gazzotti added.

Arash Bordbar, a third-year engineering student at the Western Sydney University and Chair of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council had fled Iran at the age of 15 years and stayed in Malaysia for five years before being

resettled in Australia in 2015. He is now a youth worker at the Community Migrant Resource Centre, where he is supporting newly arrived migrants get education and find employment.

Similarly Apajok Biar, 23, who was born in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya and came to Australia in 1997 with her family under a Humanitarian visa, is chairperson and co-founder of South Sudan Voices of Salvation Inc, a not-for-profit youth run and led organisation. As youth participation officer at Cumberland Council in Sydney, she has been working to ensure that young people from all backgrounds have the opportunity to have a say in decisions that affect them at all levels - local, state, international.

“Knowledge of these rights can both improve relations between people of different ethnicity and belief, and nourish civil society,” said Dr Sev Ozdowski, Conference Convener and Director of Equity and Diversity at Western Sydney University.

Over 300 representatives from international human rights organisations, civil society, educational institutions, media and citizens participated in the ICHRE 2018, a series initiated by Dr Sev Ozdowski, to advance human rights education for the role it plays in furthering democracy, the rule of law, social harmony and justice.

While UDHR has been reinforced by several legal instruments, including conventions, charters, declarations, and national legislation, and the global discourse has broadened to include gender equality, people living with disabilities and LGBTIQ communities, the biggest challenge is the threat facing human rights organisations and defenders.

“That is the most dangerous threat because if we silence those voices then our capacity to educate and mobilise the public reduces and we will end up excluding most people,” Equitas Executive Director Hamilton told IDN.

In many countries, human rights are still not a priority. Tsering Tsomo, Executive Director of Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, an NGO based in Dharamsala (India) said: “In Tibet, the Chinese authoritarian regime has criminalised the UDHR itself by punishing people who translated the UDHR in Tibetan language and disseminated it amongst Tibetans.

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION HAS ACQUIRED A PROMINENT ROLE ON THE UN AGENDA

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (Article 26)
- World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna Declaration 1993
- The United Nations' Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, 1998.
- United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004)
- The UN World Programme for Human Rights Education. The first phase (2005 to 2009) focused on human rights education in the primary and secondary school systems; the second phase (2010 to 2014) focused on human rights education in higher education and human rights training for teachers and educators, civil servants, law enforcement officials and military personnel; the third and current phase (2015 to 2019) focuses on strengthening the implementation of the first two phases and promoting human rights training for media professionals and journalists; and the UN Human Rights Council has made youth the focus in the fourth phase (2020-2024) launched in September 2018.
- The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 2011.
- The UN General Assembly has included human rights education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a specific target of Goal 4 on quality education (Target 4.7).
- Human rights and preventing and countering violent extremism: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council in October 2015.

“This happened in 1989 when 10 Tibetan monks were sent to jail for propagating the UDHR, just a year after the Chinese government publicly acknowledged the existence of Human Rights Day. Along with celebrating the 70th anniversary, we also observe the 30th anniversary of the imprisonment of the 10 Tibetan monks.”

UDHR holds the Guinness Book World Record as the most translated document. It is now available in more than 500 languages and dialects.

“In Tibet, there is a lot of rhetoric about human rights, but no implementation. Instead there is total impunity for the crimes committed by security forces and an upsurge in government spending on domestic security, which has long surpassed defence spending. This has resulted in a series of human rights violations.

“The challenge for the UN and human rights organisations is to counter the economic and political pressure exerted by powerful countries in reframing the international human rights discourse and in silencing critical civil society voices,” Tsomo told IDN.

Speaking on the path from UDHR to the World Programme for Human Rights Education, Cynthia Veliko, South-East Asia Regional Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the High Com-

missioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Bangkok said: “The shocking retrenchment in leadership on human rights in many States across the globe over the past few years poses a real threat to the historic progress made, often painstakingly, over the decades that followed the 1948 adoption of the UDHR.”

“The continued realisation of the principles set out in the UDHR ultimately cannot be achieved without human rights education. It is an essential investment that is required to shape future world leaders with the principles of humanity and integrity that are required to build and sustain a humane world,” Veliko added.

The ICHRE 2018 Declaration also raised concerns on the human rights implications of insufficient progress in climate change mitigation and adaptation, increasing food and water insecurity, rising sea levels, inter-state and internal conflict leading to increased migration, escalating new arms race among major powers, and rising levels of violence – particularly violence against women and children.

The Declaration called for greater awareness of the opportunities and risks of new forms of communication and media opportunities, which will help engage and reach more children and young adults, but also pose the threat of human rights abuse online. [IDN-InDepthNews – 03 December 2018]

JAPAN SHINES WITH A YOUTH FORUM TO COMMEMORATE UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS DECLARATION

BY KATSUHIRO ASAGIRI



Photo: Youth Forum in Tokyo. Credit: Yukie Asagiri | IDN-INPS

TOKYO (IDN) – When the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in Paris on December 10, 1948, it came up with a milestone document in the history of human rights that took into account the horrendous experiences of the Second World War.

With the end of that war, and the creation of the United Nations, the international community vowed never again to allow atrocities like those of the Second World War happen again. It pledged, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

The 70th anniversary of the Declaration was commemorated with multifarious events around the world. One such event, the UDHR 70th Anniversary

Youth Forum, was hosted in Tokyo on December 9, 2018 with the support of the United Nations Information Centre Japan by a coalition of Amnesty International Japan, Soka Gakkai Peace Committee, the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), Human Rights Now, and the Human Rights Watch.

The significance of the activity in Tokyo was accentuated by the fact that the Japanese government has emphasised on several occasions the country's firm belief in the promotion and protection of human rights as a legitimate interest of the international community which the Human Rights Council seeks to promote. The Council is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 States responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe.

For upholding the highest standards of human rights enshrined and guaranteed in its Constitution, Japan was elected to the Council in October 2016 to serve a three-year term beginning on January 1, 2017 that expires end of 2019.

While UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised in a video message to the Youth Forum that “for 70 years, the UDHR has been a global beacon – shining a light for dignity, equality and well-being”, keynote speaker Atsushi Shibuya, a photo journalist who has been reporting on conflicts, poverty, human rights with pictures and essays from around the world, presented a picture book titled ‘Everyone is precious’ comprising articles related to the UDHR and corresponding photos taken by him.

Shibuya said the UDHR has contributed to the creation of two values: Equality (everyone is the same) and Individuality (everyone is his/her own, different from others). While keeping in mind the limitations of both values, it is important to open a new path by blending the two, he said.

“In other words, it is important to make Equality a warp and Individuality a woof and weave the two symmetrically to create a new value: ‘Everyone is precious,’” explained Shibuya.

In the ensuing panel discussion, moderator Kaoru Nemoto, Director of the United Nations Information Centre in Tokyo, pointed out that more than one third of the 169 targets of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focuses on the roles to be played by the youth. Against this backdrop, the UN World Program for Human Rights Education in its fourth phase starting 2020 will focus on youth, Nemoto said.

Kazuko Ito, Secretary General of Human Rights Now, declared that human rights are an imperative for daily life. “It is a right to live by my own values with dignity.” She pleads for looking at issues with a long-term perspective.

Although it might appear that nothing has been changing within a short period of time, things have been taking a turn for the better. A case in point, Ito said, is the changing perception of people in regard to sexual harassment and the establishment of International Criminal Court after the Rwanda Genocide in 1994.

The Rwandan genocide, also known as the genocide against the Tutsi, was a mass slaughter of Tutsi in Rwanda during the Rwandan Civil War, which had started in 1990. It was directed by members of the Hutu majority government during the 100-day period from April 7 to mid-July 1994.

Human Rights are “like blood” – something that flows through our veins and are indispensable for our lives, said Riyo Yoshioka, Senior Program Officer, Asia Division of the Human Rights Watch. The significance of the UDHR, Yoshioka said, is underscored by new challenges presented by killer robots and climate change.

Megumi Komori, Deputy Secretary General of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), said that human rights is “something you realize when it is denied or violated”. A sense of empathy and solidarity are crucial to protect human rights.

IMADR has been working with the ‘Dalit’ communities – comprising people considered as ‘untouchable’ – in India. As far as discrimination issue is concerned, said Komori, “we still have many problems”. But one positive aspect is the development of internet technology which has allowed Dalit to speak out their grievances to the world and, for example, ask for support by lawyers and paralegals by contacting them via internet.

On the other hand, a negative example of technology is the issue of hate speech on internet, noted the IMADR Deputy Secretary General. “I feel that those hate speeches are more pervasive than voices promoting human rights on internet because one discriminatory message posted on internet, can go viral.”

Hideaki Nakagawa, Secretary General of Amnesty International Japan, said that developing one’s imagination by putting oneself in the shoes of people whose human rights are not protected is an important step toward promoting human rights. Amnesty International has been focusing on protecting human rights defenders around the world, who often become targets of persecutions.

In-depth discussions apart, the youth forum venue displayed the panels of the exhibition Transforming Lives: The Power of Human Rights Education. The exposition comprising 25 panels was created in 2016 to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training.

It was co-organized by the SGI, together with the Global Coalition for Human Rights Education (HRE 2020), the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning and the Platform for Human Rights Education and Training, with thanks to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The exhibition introduces case studies where human rights education has transformed values, beliefs and attitudes of individuals and groups, leading to positive initiatives to promote human rights in diverse communities in Australia, Burkina Faso, Peru, Portugal and Turkey. It also encourages viewers to take action in their own immediate environment, starting from their own families and communities. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 December 2018]

EXCEPT A FEW DISSENTERS WORLD LEADERS PLEDGE TO BOLSTER MULTILATERALISM

BY RAMESH JAURA



Photo: María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the seventy-third session of the General Assembly, gavels to a close the General Assembly's annual general debate. UN Photo | Cia Pak

NEW YORK (IDN) – As the new year unfolds, UN Secretary-General António Guterres' appeal for addressing the "trust deficit disorder" plaguing the world, and General Assembly President María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés' plea for stressing the need to enshrine the General Assembly as the "chief peacebuilding organization in the world" will serve as a clarion call to urgent action by the international community. All the more so be-

cause the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2018 was held against the backdrop of burgeoning unilateralism and large-scale migration.

Though the heads of governments and states attending the General Assembly united under the theme of making the United Nations relevant to all people, accentuating that only through a multilateral rules-based order can the international

community meet evolving challenges, the overwhelming consensus was marred by discordant notes thrown in by the U.S., Hungary and Israel.

In his opening address to the general debate of the 73rd session on September 18, UN Secretary-General Guterres warned that expanding polarization and populism have left the world suffering from a bad case of "trust deficit disorder". While living standards for millions have improved, that cannot be taken for granted, he said, declaring: "Multilateralism is under fire precisely when we need it most."

He went on to call upon world leaders to renew their commitment to a rules-based order, with the United Nations at its centre. "In the face of massive existential threats to people and planet — but, equally, at a time of compelling opportunities for shared prosperity — there is no way forward but collective, common-sense action for the common good," he stressed. "This is how we rebuild trust."

Despite chaos and confusion in the world, there are winds of hope, he said, citing Eritrea's peace initiatives with neighbouring States, the signing of a peace agreement between the rival leaders of South Sudan and summit meetings involving the leaders of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the United States and the Republic of Korea.

UN General Assembly President Espinosa from Ecuador – fourth woman President in the history of the United Nations – said multilateralism stands alone as the only viable response to the problems facing the international community. “No one can be indifferent to human suffering,” she said. “Wars, conflicts, economic crises and environmental degradation affect us all equally.”

Urging the Organization to heed the call of the millions of disenfranchised, displaced and unemployed, she declared: “People must feel like what is discussed in these halls will impact their daily lives,” emphasizing that her presidency will focus on promoting gender equality, implementing the new Global Compact on Migration, and providing decent-work opportunities for women, young people and persons with disabilities.

She called upon Member States to combat violence against women, reverse policies that are killing the planet and to enshrine the General Assembly as the “chief peacebuilding organization in the world”. The threats of climate change, biodiversity erosion, human trafficking, environmental pollution, large-scale displacement of both migrants and refugees, terrorism and ethnic conflicts are now at the top of the agenda, she emphasized.

As a wrap-up of the 73rd General Assembly Session by the UN reveals, throughout the general debate, world leaders shared their respective visions of the international community’s most pressing challenges, ranging from climate change, through nuclear proliferation and protracted conflict to large-scale migration, economic inequality and the elimination of extreme poverty through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

TRUMP BASHES IRAN – ROUHANI SPEAKS OF ‘ECONOMIC TERRORISM’

U.S. President Donald Trump apparently despised such lofty ideals. He made the case for State sovereignty, arguing that nations can work better together when they respect their neighbours and defend their people’s interests. “America’s policy of principled realism means we will not be held hostage to old dogmas, discredited ideologies and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years, time and time again,” he said.

Accusing Iran’s leaders of sowing chaos, death and destruction, disrespecting the borders and sovereignty of neighbouring States and plundering national resources, he declared: “We cannot allow the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism to possess the planet’s most dangerous weapons.” He reiterated his decision to pull the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and to reimpose nuclear sanctions on Iran.

However, President Hassan Rouhani of Iran countered those accusations, saying Washington, D.C., seems determined to render all international institutions ineffectual. Underlining Iran’s compliance thus far with all its commitments, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), he criticized the United States for resorting to a flimsy excuse to justify its withdrawal from the accord and for pressuring other countries to violate it.

“Unlawful unilateral sanctions in themselves constitute a form of ‘economic terrorism,’” he said, expressing objections to bullying on the part of the United States. No State or nation can be brought to the negotiation table by force, he

emphasized, adding that dialogue can resume with the ending of “threats and unjust sanctions that negate the principle of ethics and international law”.

DIPLOMATIC BREAKTHROUGHS

There were also announcements of diplomatic breakthroughs and political progress. Ri Yong Ho, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, highlighted efforts being made towards a new peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Chairman Kim Jong Un conducted energetic diplomatic activities with the goal of transforming the Peninsula into a land of peace, free from nuclear weapons, he said, noting progress both in North-South relations and between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the United States. “The Korean Peninsula, the hottest spot in the globe, will become the cradle of peace and prosperity,” he added.

Several African leaders highlighted efforts towards greater democracy and sustainable development, and called for expanded multilateral cooperation as well as reform of the Security Council.

President Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone said the peaceful transfer of power in his country — from an incumbent political party to the opposition — demonstrated its commitment to democratic governance. Calling for comprehensive Security Council reform, he pointed out that Africa is the only region without permanent representation and which is underrepresented in the non-permanent category.

Ministers from Horn of Africa countries pointed to reconciliation across the region, including the end of the two-decade long dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Somalia.

“A region which has been one of the most conflict-ridden in Africa, [the] Horn of Africa is indeed becoming [the] hope of Africa,” said Workineh Gebeyehu Negewo, Ethiopia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, calling upon the Security Council to consider seriously lifting the sanctions imposed on Eritrea.

Likewise, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Djibouti’s Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, recalled that the Presidents of his own country and Eritrea recently agreed to open a new chapter between “these two brother countries”.

GLOBAL COMPACT – DISSENTING VOICES

With the stage set for the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, speakers called for a redoubling of efforts to help migrants. President Michel Temer of Brazil said migrants are being threatened by lingering crises and have had to make a risky decision to leave their homelands. “There was a duty to protect them through the Global Compact for Migration,” he said.

President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico said his country has worked in the past two years to establish the Compact’s guiding principles: respect for the human rights of all migrants, as well as shared responsibility and full respect for the sovereignty of States. “The adoption of this instru-

ment in Marrakesh will provide Member States with a fundamental document for the international management of migration,” he added.

However, there were discordant notes too. Some Member States challenged those views, with Péter Szijjártó, Hungary’s Foreign Minister, saying that his Government will not sign the Compact because it promotes a multicultural society over a homogeneous one.

“From Hungary’s perspective, migration is a destabilizing force,” he said, adding that migration is not beneficial for everyone, especially countries hosting large numbers of migrants from different cultures. “Migration is not a fundamental human right,” he noted, emphasizing that violating national borders should not be considered a right.

HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS

The UN General Assembly also held a number of topical high-level meetings throughout the session. On September 24 — the day before opening its general debate — it held the Nelson Mandela Peace Summit in tribute to the celebrated qualities of the late President of South Africa and his service to humanity.

Unanimously adopting a political declaration (document A/73/L.1), world leaders recognized the period from 2019 to 2028 as the Nelson Mandela Decade of Peace. Heads of State and Government as well as other representatives of Member States reaffirmed their commitment to uphold the sovereign equality of all States, to ensure respect for their territorial integrity and political independence, and uphold the duty to refrain from the threat or use of force.

On September 26, the General Assembly President convened a high-level meeting to commemorate and promote the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. Throughout the day, Heads of State and Government as well as other senior officials from more than 50 countries, observer delegations States and civil society spotlighted the many ways in which nuclear weapons endanger humanity — from the modernization of existing arsenals by major Powers to the risk of deadly nuclear technology falling into terrorist hands.

The Assembly also endorsed a political declaration titled ‘United to End Tuberculosis: An Urgent Global Response to a Global Epidemic’ at a high-level meeting on the issue. Member States reaffirmed their commitment to end the global tuberculosis epidemic by 2030, committing themselves to accelerate national and collective actions, investments and innovations in fighting the preventable disease.

Heads of State and Government recognized that tuberculosis disproportionately affects developing regions and countries. They pledged to provide leadership, acknowledging that multi-drug-resistant strains can reverse gains made in combating the disease, which remains among the top 10 causes of death worldwide.

Holding a high-level meeting the next day – under the theme ‘Scaling up multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral responses for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ – the Assembly endorsed a declaration by which world leaders vowed to scale up efforts to prevent and control non-communicable diseases,

committing to provide greater policy coherence through a whole-of-Government approach.

Importantly, health systems should be strengthened — and reoriented — towards universal health coverage and the improvement of health outcomes, while greater access to affordable, safe, effective and quality medicines and diagnostics should be promoted.

On October 10, the Assembly adopted two draft resolutions containing the declarations on tuberculosis and non-communicable diseases. On December 4, it held another high-level meeting on gaps and impediments faced by middle-income countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Throughout the day-long meeting, speakers challenged models of development shaped by wealthy States. Assembly President Espinosa emphasized that middle-income countries will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda unless the obstacles they face are duly addressed.

Prime Minister Gaston Alphonso Browne of Antigua and Barbuda echoed that sentiment: “It is in the best interest of humanity that we work collectively in building a transformational model of cooperation for sustainable global development.”

The Assembly commemorated — on December 18 — the anniversaries of the Universal Decla-

ration of Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. During a series of high-level plenary meetings, the Assembly honoured the recipients of the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights for their outstanding contributions to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said upholding all people’s human rights is the only possible path to peace. Attacks on fundamental rights and freedoms of the Universal Declaration are not motivated by that document’s failure, but rather stem from its success, she said, urging Member States to work towards peace and justice for all.

During the main part of the session, concerns over selectivity and double standards emerged once again as the Assembly took up the report of the Human Rights Council and considered increased representation in the Security Council.

At its twentieth plenary meeting, the Assembly decided to grant additional rights and privileges of participation to the State of Palestine when it assumes its position as Chair of the Group of 77 developing countries and China for 2019.

Furthermore, the Assembly considered for the first time a draft resolution condemning the activities of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Despite gaining

plurality support through a recorded vote, it failed to meet the two thirds required for adoption.

REMEMBERING KOFI ANNAN

The 73rd session was marked by yet another significant event: On September 21, the Assembly paid tribute to the late Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who died on August 18, with Member States, colleagues and family members remembering him as a child of Africa and the only United Nations chief to rise through the ranks of the Secretariat.

Assembly President Espinosa said Kofi Annan will be remembered as a great leader who worked for peace, security and human rights. He pushed for boys and girls to have equal access to education and fought HIV/AIDS and malaria, she recalled. “He was family,” said Secretary-General Guterres, while former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described Annan as a humble man with an illuminating vision.

Madagascar’s delegate, speaking on behalf of the African States, said Annan always demonstrated a passion for serving humanity. Sri Lanka’s representative, on behalf of the Asia-Pacific Group, recalled Annan’s contributions to the Millennium Development Goals which lifted millions out of poverty.

Kojo Annan said that his father always lived by the creed “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”. [IDN-InDepthNews – 28 December 2018]

THE BIOMASS SHORE PROJECT – A LEADING MODEL FOR NEXT-GENERATION INNOVATION

VIEWPOINT BY MIDORI KURAHASHI

The author is Project Associate Professor, Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, the University of Tokyo, Japan.



Photo: In a desert area located on the west coast of Australia. The lake looks pink because of Dunaliella. Credit: Midori Kurahashi.

TOKYO (IDN) – Worldwide forest fires and the abnormal heat experienced last summer are still fresh in our memory. Many people throughout the world had a sense that some kind of unsettling change is happening. Even so, response is slow and measures are not being taken. One reason for this is that the world is driven by people who believe that the cost of stopping global warming is too great for the achieved effect.

Like it or not, we are all crewmembers on the same ship, sailing the seas and fishing. A small hole has opened in the bottom of the ship, but we are too busy fishing and can't bother ourselves with the matter of a small hole.

However, if we don't take action, the hole will definitely get bigger. The problem will accelerate, a large amount of seawater will pour in, and the ship will sink while we stand helplessly by. Everyone knows what the top priority should be, but our leaders are dazzled by the schools of fish before their eyes and don't even recognize that a hole has been opened, or they underestimate the problem and try to defer action.

We human beings (*Homo sapiens*) only recently appeared on the earth as a species with a highly developed cerebrum, sharply distinguished from other animals (or, at least, so it is believed). Indeed, the cerebrum has created complex societies, a continuous stream of discoveries, inventions, and developments, and is now trying to produce artificial intelligence.

Within that history, the benefits of discovering and developing petroleum have been inestimable, and resulted in dramatic changes to our daily lives. In the beginning, petroleum was a dormant substance never taken up into ecosystems. We humans turned our eyes to this substance and, starting about 120–140 years ago, we began full-scale use and have continually burnt petroleum since then.

Today, however, the traffic light is signaling “yellow” for the continued existence of the species *Homo sapiens* due to continual massive burning of fossil fuels such as petroleum.

These events, occurring in the real world, are like watching a live-action version of Pandora's box from Greek mythology. What has escaped from Pan-

dora's box is not just carbon dioxide. We have created and released many things – environmental hormones derived from chemical substances, ozone gas, nuclear waste, and the microplastics which are a recent focus of concern – and yet none of these have been collected.

Can the cerebrums of Homo sapiens overcome these difficult problems, as we have always done before? Unfortunately, my prediction is pessimistic.

One reason is that the speed of increase in carbon dioxide concentration is too fast. In the past, the carbon dioxide concentration on the earth has repeatedly risen and fallen in the range of 170–300 ppm with a cycle of about 100,000 years, but the level surpassed 315 ppm in 1958 and only 57 years later, in 2015, exceeded 400 ppm.

During this period, researchers spent time developing an understanding of the current situation and the cause-effect relationship between the rise in carbon dioxide concentration and climate change.

Recently, it seems we've finally reached the point where we can point out the tragic future facing polar bears, coral reefs, and the small islands that will be submerged under rising oceans. Under these conditions, there are many good reasons for our lack of a sense of crisis until now.

It is not my intention to stoke a crisis mindset, but there is a considerable gap between the actual risk and our sense of crisis. The future impacts of climate change will not only be direct disasters; the flames are likely to rise from all different directions.

For example, consider the problem of pandemics. Living organisms have adaptively evolved by varying their DNA in response to environmental changes. Organisms like bacteria can adapt by changing their DNA quickly in response to the ultra-high-speed environmental changes currently underway.

In cases like livestock and human beings, however, it takes a few years to a few tens of years to modify DNA (i.e., it takes time to give birth to offspring). Livestock and human beings – weakened by their inability to keep up with rapid climate change – will become susceptible to attacks by more vigorous viruses and bacteria.

As a result, it's just a matter of time until pandemics move from the movie screen to the real world. Going forward, researchers will repeatedly carry out large-scale studies and experiments from multiple perspectives to determine what will happen when the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere exceeds 1000 ppm, and they will publish after consolidating their results and reaching a consensus.

However, by that time, the carbon dioxide concentrations assumed in their experiments will be real. In this way, the problem-solving speed of the human cerebrum cannot keep up with the excessively high rate of increase in carbon dioxide concentration.

It has previously been thought that there is no real need to worry about direct impacts on the human body in the case of a carbon dioxide concentration of 1000–3000 ppm, which all people have experienced in daily life in enclosed spaces. However, according to a number of highly reliable recent experimental studies, if a person is exposed for a long time even to a concentration of 1000–3000 ppm, there is a marked decline in high-level abilities such as formulating strategies.

If conditions continue as is (and the probability of that is quite high), the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere will likely exceed 1000 ppm only 80 years from now. If that happens, humankind will recede further and further from solutions and, in the end, will go down in the history of terrestrial organisms as a species that went extinct due to an "own goal". It's an ironic turn of events, but it's not absurd to see this as a kind of law of nature.

There are other reasons for my pessimistic prediction. Although it's a huge problem, our vaunted cerebrum devised solutions long ago. For now, it's enough to just put a rubber stopper in the bottom of the boat.

In other words, it's enough to stop using fossil fuel in the near term. Our main purpose in burning fossil fuel is to obtain electrical and thermal energy. Electricity is a type of secondary energy, and can be produced from renewable energy suited to each region, and usage as thermal energy can be switched to carbon-neutral green energy.

At the same time, a considerable reduction in carbon dioxide emissions can be achieved simply by raising heat usage efficiency through consistent utili-

zation of existing heat pump technology and similar approaches. It's simple. But we can't do it. We can do it, but we don't do it.

The choice of not doing anything is also a product of the human cerebrum. We cannot face the inconvenient truth. We are subject to immoderate desire and greed – caught up in the allure of immediate profit.

It's a crazy story where we grab gold bars, but won't let them go off even as they drag us into the deep sea; but this too is the unvarnished reality of our cerebrum, and lays bare its limits. I'm in no way being critical; I simply believe we should be aware of these limits.

There's an optimistic ending to the story of Pandora's box. After all of the evils and troubles were released, a card with the word "hope" remained at the bottom of the box. There should still be a path leading to hope.

Coastal deserts are rich source of renewable energy. Biomass complexities will replace petrochemical complexes to meet the challenge of creating a sustainable society. Collage by the author. To help with that, I would like here to introduce the Biomass Shore Project (BSP) that I am proposing. As explained earlier, the main purpose of burning fossil fuels is to obtain energy. Frankly put, fossil fuels with high energy density are like refined sugar and we are addicted. What we must do is switch from a society with unlimited usage of fossil fuels (high energy density) to a society which efficiently uses renewable energy (low energy density).

The purpose of this project is to formulate a model of a society which can carry out industrial activities while reducing carbon dioxide. This will be achieved by establishing a biomass industrial complex to replace the petroleum industrial complex, and will be done in coastal desert regions that have not previously been utilized.

The following are goals for creating a renewable society that does not increase carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere:

1. Large scale (scale involving commitment to components of the atmosphere)
2. Positive economic balance (economic sustainability acting as a driving force)
3. Feasible in a short time (they say we've already reached the point where the crisis cannot be averted, and the situation permits no delay)

This industrial complex will be composed of the following units: a temperature difference desalination system employing solar heat, a large-scale microalgae biomass production system using halophilic microalgae, plant-derived chemical industry taking microalgae products as a starting point, fermentation industry, smart agriculture industry, and smart aqua industry.

As an example indicating the nature of BSP in simple terms, the deep ocean water (DOW) which wells up in large amounts offshore from Peru and Chile will be separated into concentrated DOW and fresh water (used for applications such as agriculture) by using temperature difference desalination technology (employing solar heat and the low temperature of DOW).

Ponds will be created on desert shores, filled with concentrated DOW (seawater containing fertilizer), and will be used to culture halophilic microalgae.

A variety of organic substances will be extracted from microalgae, and a biomass industrial complex will be created by consolidating and linking the above industries using these organic substances as raw materials.

The key point is that the energy required by BSP will be entirely supplied by renewable energy (first candidate: solar heat). Carbon dioxide balance will be maintained and strong competitiveness also achieved in each industry by using renewable energy and low-cost raw materials.

The large-scale microalgae ponds in deserts will likely absorb carbon dioxide as a replacement for shrinking tropical rainforests. My ardent hope is for BSP to be realized soon and become a model for a post-fossil-fuel society. [IDN- InDepthNews – 02 January 2018]

WORLD RELIGIONS PREPARE FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT SUMMIT

BY RAMESH JAURA



Photo: Pope Francis addresses participants in a conference on religions and the sustainable development goals, in the Vatican's Clementine Hall March 8, 2019. Credit: Vatican Media.

VATICAN CITY (IDN) – Nearly six months before the heads of state and government convene to review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the UN General Assembly's 'SDG Summit' in September, the world religions have tasked themselves with elaborating “a road map or lines of action that can connect religious contributions to the implementation of the SDGs”.

“The idea is to work together on this joint ‘journey’ in order to raise ambition and forge a new global solidarity,” Cardinal Peter K. Turkson, a Ghanaian cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, who heads the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, said in an interview with IDN.

The Dicastery and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue organised a three-day International Conference on Religions and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Listening to the cry of the earth and the poor’.

Participants in the conference that concluded on March 9 were the representatives of different religions, diplomats, and leaders of international organisations, engaged with implementing sustainable development goals, as well as scholars and researchers in the general area of international development.

Speaking to participants on March 8, the Pope said: “Three and a half years since the adoption of the sustainable development goals, we must be even more acutely aware of the importance of accelerating and adapting our actions in responding adequately to both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor – they are connected.”

The challenges are complex and have multiple causes; the response, therefore, must necessarily be complex and well-structured, respectful of the diverse cultural riches of peoples, the Pontiff added.

“If we are truly concerned about developing an ecology capable of repairing the damage we have done, no branch of science or form of wisdom should be overlooked, and this includes religions and the languages particular to them... Religions can help us along the path of authentic integral development, which is the new name of peace ...”.

The reason, Pope Francis explained, is that the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, approved by more than 190 nations in September 2015, were a great step forward for global dialogue, marking a vitally ‘new and universal solidarity’...

“Different religious traditions, including the Catholic tradition, have embraced the objectives of sustainable development because they are the result of global participatory processes that, on the one hand, reflect the values of people and, on the other, are sustained by an integral vision of development,” he added.

In opening remarks to the conference on March 7, Cardinal Turkson said that there are three groups of people who can provide the extra energy required for sustainable future.

“The young people, who are demanding change and calling for intergenerational justice. The indigenous people, who inhabit 80 percent of the land with biodiversity reserves in the world and remind us of the importance of the interconnection between our wellbeing and our territory. And religious people, who can provide inspiration for converting us from our own attitudes of domination and destruction, and for promoting attitudes of love and care,” Cardinal Turkson noted.

The three groups, all of them represented at the Vatican conference, can also encourage humanity to change the structures that foment inequality and environmental damage, into structures that promote inclusion and ecological caring, he added. “While listening to these three groups, we can find the way of responding effectively to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Asked what religions have to do with development, Cardinal Turkson told IDN: “Sustainable development, as the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (UNWCED) defines it, is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. What social institution best pursues this than religion?”

Besides, with about 80 per cent of the world’s population professing a belief in God, religion is “an inescapable reality in international development”. Religions, Cardinal Turkson added, are key players in the development of humankind. Religions have invested greatly in education and the healthcare needs of peoples all over the world. They have been often the first respondents to disasters and organize relief services (cf. Caritas networks, Relief agencies of Religions, Tzu Chi Buddhists of Taiwan, etc).

According to a UNICEF report, religions provide 64 percent of education in Sub-Saharan Africa, and run around a third of all medical facilities of the planet.

Finally, religions bring and inspire purpose for change. “If we want to forge sustainable development, we may need to change urgently and radically patterns of lifestyles, ways of producing goods, trading, consuming and wasting. Such a change requires deep motivation, a motivation that the technical language of development often cannot provide.

“Among powerful stories that trigger life-change, religious narratives stand out. These narratives, transmitted from one generation to another, have captured the imagination of millions of people and countless communities worldwide. They can actually provide the incentive for the transformation we need today.”

In 2018, the Inter-governmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) warned that humanity has less than a decade to embark on a systemic transformation of our consumption and production systems so as to keep global warming within the range of 1.5 degrees, Cardinal Turkson said. “So please, let us not lose this sense of urgency for change while we debate on the way we are shaping the future of our planet,” he implored. [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 March 2019]

VATICAN ENCOURAGES FAITH COMMUNITIES TO HELP ACHIEVE SDGS

BY RAMESH JAURA



Photo: Pope Francis addresses participants of an international conference entitled, 'Religions and the Sustainable Development Goals'. Credit: Vatican Media.

BERLIN | VATICAN CITY (IDN) – Much water has flown under the Tiber bridges since the Holy See declined an invitation in 1923 to join the League of Nations stating that its only competency was in matters of elucidation of questions of principle in morality and public international law.

Forty-one years later, the Holy See became a permanent observer state at the United Nations on April 6, 1964. Since then four Popes have addressed the UN General Assembly: Paul VI in 1965, John Paul II in 1979 and 1995, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in 2008, and Pope Francis in 2015.

All of them expressed their great esteem for the Organization, which they considered the appropriate juridical and political response to the present moment of history, marked by humankind's technical ability to overcome distances and frontiers and, apparently, to overcome all natural limits to the exercise of power.

Pope Francis also highlighted the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations Member States on the 70th anniversary of the UN on September 25, 2015.

The Agenda provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership.

Three and a half years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the Vatican's Dicastery and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue hosted from March 7-9, 2019 a three-day International Conference on Religions and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Listening to the cry of the earth and the poor'.

Participants were the representatives of different religions, diplomats, and leaders of international organisations, engaged with implementing sustainable development goals, as well as scholars and researches in the general area of international development.

Among representatives of faith-based and other civil society organisations was Hirotsugu Terasaki, the Director General of Peace and Global Issues of the lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai International (SGI), in Tokyo, Japan. He found the conference “indeed significant”.

“The underlying spirit of the SDGs is the commitment to leave no one behind. So, the first thing I would stress is the importance of dialogue based on mutual acknowledgement of the dignity and worth of each individual,” he told IDN.

Besides, he explained, “a shared recognition of the essential nature of the challenges we face is the starting point for concrete action. As members of civil society people of faith have a crucial role to play in the search for solutions.”

Muhammed Abu Zaid, Chairman of the Sunni Court of Saida in Lebanon, told IDN that the conference had brought people of different faiths together, “not only to talk to each other but also to work out an action plan” in order to preserve the planet Earth, which is after all an important aim of the SDGs.

“Partnership between faith communities for a common goal of preserving this planet, he said, “is the crux of the conference and the best thing that can be done.”

Asked whether the conference would help remove acrimonies between religions, Zaid said: “Yes, it should help remove the acrimonies. But by itself it's not enough. We have to walk the talk. We need to walk the journey together and have an action plan to change our teachings and our theories to something that is more practical.”

Vandana Shiva, an Indian scholar, environmental activist, food sovereignty advocate, and alter-globalization author, who addressed the inter-religious conference on the ‘Hindu perspective’, said that there is no difference in the deep spiritual perspective of Hinduism and Christianity. “Both talk about the integrity of creation, though they use different words,” she told IDN.

“We say in the Upanishads: ‘Avoid greed’. Christ went and turned the tables of the money lenders. So, the basic principles are common,” she said. “I think the Vedas and Upanishads are the oldest spiritual texts of the world, and they show how to live as human beings on a planet to sustain its life. So, the main difference will be that Abraham traditions are 2,000 years old, ours are ten thousand years old. Grandmothers are always wiser.”

The best known Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all monotheistic. They also all believe that people should pray to and worship God often. Of monotheistic religions, the Abrahamic religions have the world's largest number of followers.

The Upanishads, a part of the Vedas, are ancient Sanskrit texts that contain some of the central philosophical concepts and ideas of Hinduism, some of which are shared with religious traditions like Buddhism and Jainism.

Michael Møller, UN Under-Secretary-General and Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva said this was “one of the best conferences on SDG implementation and partnerships” that he had “attended in a while”, and he was going home “with a renewed sense of optimism and purpose”.

Earlier, speaking to participants in a plenary session, Møller said, as he was travelling to Rome from Geneva, he was reflecting on the relationship between the United Nations and religion.

“The United Nations – while being a secular organization – has been aligned with the great faiths of the world since its very inception,” he said.

“As a beacon of hope for humanity, the UN – like the great faiths – is there to bring people together in the universal aspiration for a better world; a tolerant, peaceful world; a world in which everyone can hope to advance from the circumstances of their birth, irrespective of whether they are born poor or rich, or indeed whether they are born a man or a woman.

“The UN was created not only for the powerful, but for the marginalized, the downtrodden, the vulnerable. It was created to leave no one behind, an aspiration and clear objective at the very heart of the Sustainable Development Goals,” added the UN Geneva chief.

He quoted “great Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld” who once said: “The United Nations stands outside – necessarily outside – all confessions. But it is, nevertheless, an instrument of faith. As such, it is inspired by what unites, and not by what divides, the great religions of the world.”

Møller continued: “And it is still true: at the heart of our actions we are dealing in universal values: to be merciful, to be tolerant, to love thy neighbor.

“No tradition can claim monopoly on such teachings; they are ingrained in the human spirit, and enshrined in international human rights law. They animate the UN Charter and they encapsulate the essence of the 2030 Agenda.”

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dinal of the Roman Catholic Church, who heads the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, said in an interview with IDN.

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‘Perspectives for a World Free from Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament’ was the theme of Vatican’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development from November 10-11, 2017 in which religious leaders and representatives of civil society, officials of State and international organizations, eminent academics, Nobel Laureates, and students, participated. [IDN-InDepthNews – 31 March 2019]



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1 NO POVERTY 	2 ZERO HUNGER 	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	5 GENDER EQUALITY 	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY 	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
13 CLIMATE ACTION 	14 LIFE BELOW WATER 	15 LIFE ON LAND 	16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 	 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG Poster

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