



## 2022 JOINT MEDIA PROJECT REPORT



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### CREDITS

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## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### CONTENTS

Preface	04
Foreword: Role of Media in Achieving the SDGs	05
Message	06
Wanted A Global Treaty to Combat Plastic Pollution	07
Feminist UN Campaign Report Wants UN Chief to Walk the Talk	10
Africa Battles for Rightful Place in the UN	12
Timor Leste: Oil Revenue Fails to Address Child Stunting	15
Sri Lanka: Government's Badly Planned Organic Farming Policy Upsets Rice Farmers	18
Coronavirus Cases Are Shooting Up Across Africa	21
UN Report Concerned About Hunger and Food Insecurity in Latin America	23
US, Russia Stall Attempts to Ban Killer Robots	25
New Laos-China Rail Link Opens Up Southeast Asia for Trade and Tourism	28
Universities Need to Be More Accessible Instead of a Privilege	30
COP26: Final Communiqué Fails to Address Climate Change Impact on Food Security	33
As Political Leadership Falters, SGI Proposes Annual UN Youth Climate Summits	35
Thailand: Monk Helps COVID Affected People	37
Climate Change: How This Crisis Will Impact the Achievement of The SDGs?	40
Youth Group Fights to Save Indigenous Land on The Palawan Island in the Philippines	42
Without Tourists Thailand's Famous Massage Industry on The Brink of Collapse	45
Security Challenges We Face Are Climate and Disease, World Leaders Need to Rise Up	47
Tackling Global Hunger at Its Roots	50
Pakistan's Islamic Community Development Pioneer Bags Alternative Nobel Prize	52
Amid Widespread Military Conflicts & Civil Wars, UN Promotes the Culture of Peace	54
Leading Athletes Stress the Role of Sport in Building a Better World for All	56
Australia and New Zealand React to IPCC Report with Rhetoric Rather Than Action	58
Clean Cooking Technology Important To Achieving Sustainable Energy Access	61
Dreams Have Come True As the University of Central Asia Graduates its Inaugural Cohort	63
Decentralisation Vital to Achieving the UN's Global Goals	65
Call for Referring Conflict-related Sexual Violence to International Criminal Court	67
Covid-ravaged India Hard Put to Cope with the Crisis	69
Latin America and the Caribbean Boost Chances of Success at Climate Conference	72
Renewables Are the Building Blocks of Global Energy Transition	74
COVID-19 Accelerates Digitalization of Economies and Societies	76
World Bank-IMF Pledge Support for Pandemic Affected Countries	78
African Free Trade Area Expected to Lift Millions out of Extreme Poverty	80
Global Pandemic Hits the World's Poorest the Hardest	82

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### PREFACE

By Ramesh Jaura

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

We are delighted to present you a compilation of independent and in-depth news and analyses by IDN from April 2021 to March 2022. It is part of a Joint Media Project of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate Group with IDN as the Flagship Agency in partnership with Soka Gakkai International in consultative status with ECOSOC.

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

2021-2022 is the sixth year of the INPS Group's media project with the SGI, a lay Buddhist organization with headquarters in Tokyo. But IDN has been a party to the previous joint projects on 'Education for Global Citizenship' and 'Fostering Global Citizenship' respectively—as the result of an agreement between the precursor of the International Press Syndicate (INPS) Japan and the SGI. We are pleased that at the time of writing these lines, we are already in the seventh year of the INPS Group's 'SDGs for All' joint media project with the SGI.

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

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

The SDGs, also known as Global Goals, are unique in that they call for action by all countries, poor, rich and middle-income to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection.

All the more reason that countries recognize their primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the progress made in implementing the Goals, which will require quality, accessible and timely data collection.

Sincere thanks to Dr. Iyad Abumoghli, Founder and Director, Faith for Earth Initiative by UNEP to write a Foreword, and Ms. Alexandra Masako Goossens-Ishii, Programme coordinator, Environment & Climate Change at the SGI Office for UN Affairs to kindly send her message. <>



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### FOREWORD

#### Role of Media in Achieving the SDGs

By Dr. Iyad Abumoghli

*Founder and Director, Faith for Earth Initiative by UNEP*



There is no doubt about the complexity of the global challenges we are all facing today, including social, economic, and environmental ones, let alone new and protracted conflicts that are affecting all aspects of a dignified life for many people. It has been proven time and again by the scientists that these calamities, including the environmental ones are man-made. While we have been dealing with these issues, we were hit by a notorious pandemic, COVID19, that has added extra pressure on the already strained development of people and the health of the planet.

The SDGs are the greatest chance we established to improving life for future generations. They are ambitious in making sure no one is left behind. More importantly, they involve us all, governments, the private sector, civil society, including religious communities, media, and all stakeholders to build a more sustainable, safer, more prosperous planet for all humanity.

The media, of all its types, including traditional and social, is one of the most powerful tools that can support the implementation and achievement of the SDGs. From one hand, media is important to spread awareness, not only about the importance

of the challenges we face, but also on ways and means to address them, bringing success stories that have worked and can be replicated in other parts of the world. From the other hand, media is powerful tool for ensuring accountability in relation to delivering on commitments by stakeholders in achieving the goals.

In the age of social media, at the fingertips of almost everyone, the role of media becomes even more important and needed. Free and independent media can influence public opinion and action and can provide a free and adequate space for more effective stakeholders engagement, providing a voice to the voiceless. Media can also monitor misinformation and advocate for change.

In doing so, media will need to adopt highest standards of integrity and impartiality which requires a global compact and code of conduct. In 2018, the United Nations launched the SDG Media Compact that is currently considered as a powerful alliance of over 200 members around the world. The SDG Media Compact works on motivating news organizations to use their resources to support the achievement of the goals.

The Compact provides a gateway to the UN for industry leaders and innovators interested in deepening their commitment to supporting the achievement of the SDGs.

It is reassuring to see media organizations such as the IDN-InDepthNews of the non-profit International Press Syndicate group taking the lead as an instrument to create awareness about the SDGs and play a vital role in their implementation.

We need all hands-on deck, and the media has one of the most powerful hands that can support the global efforts in its strive to achieve equity, justice and sustainable development. <>

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### MESSAGE

*From Alexandra Masako Goossens-Ishii, Programme coordinator, Environment & Climate Change at the SGI Office for UN Affairs [Relevant SDGs 4 & 13]*



The role of the media is relevant to the ongoing debates in the UN climate talks. One of the relevant frameworks is called “Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE).” As I have been involved in the process on behalf of SGI, I would like to share about the framework and SGI’s relevant commitment.

Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) is a term adopted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that include 6 elements to catalyze collective action towards more ambitious, inclusive and effective climate action: 1) education, 2) training, 3) public awareness, 4) public participation, 5) public access to information, and 6) international cooperation on these issues.

ACE has the potential to raise ambition and drive change at all levels by empowering people and communities with the necessary tools, information, and skills to take action on the climate crisis and by ensuring their human right to effectively engage in policy-making.

There are several key actions that states can take, including: 1) establishing a national ACE focal point, 2) creating a national ACE strategy, and 3) integrating ACE in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) both in the content and in the process of writing the NDCs.

ACE is not only directed at states and civil society has an important role to play, including especially the media in raising awareness and providing information. In this sense, the media can also play a crucial role in non formal and informal education settings.

At COP26, a new Glasgow Work Programme for ACE (2021-2030) was adopted to continue supporting ACE implementation. As part of the Education, Communication and Outreach Stakeholders (ECOS) community and the Working Group on Human Rights and Climate Change, SGI representatives actively negotiated for states to adopt an ambitious new work program to be rooted in human rights, climate justice, and environmental democracy, and in line with the 2030 Agenda.

While it was a difficult battle - that was eventually lost - to ground the Glasgow Work Programme in a rights-based approach, states did adopt a decision to negotiate an Action Plan to be adopted at COP27 with concrete activities to enhance the impact of ACE for transformative climate action.

In its ACE submission to the UNFCCC in February this year, SGI emphasized that “As feelings of eco-anxiety are rising, methods of learning and education should focus on empowerment and the cultivation of creativity and not just the provision of distressing information. In keeping with the key priority on tools and support, the Glasgow Work Programme Action Plan could include activities highlighting tools and experiences relating to enhancing experiential learning; storytelling for transformative engagement; using the Earth Charter, as a set of values and principles for a just, sustainable and peaceful future, in connection with the UNESCO Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change”.

As mentioned above, “public awareness” is one of ACE’s 6 elements. The media has a critical role and in this context I appreciate this media project’s efforts of raising awareness on global issues including the multifaceted climate emergency, not only from a pessimistic viewpoint but also from a constructive perspective that seeks to inspire action. I hope more people become proactive in tackling the issue through this project. <>

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Wanted A Global Treaty to Combat Plastic Pollution, 'One of the Greatest Human-Made Threats our Planet Faces'

By Thalif Deen



*Photo: A 30-foot-high monument entitled 'Turn off the plastics tap' by Canadian activist and artist Benjamin von Wong stands outside the venue for the UN Environment Assembly that concluded on March 2, 2022 in Nairobi, Kenya. Credit: UNEP/Cyril Villemain*

UNITED NATIONS (IDN) — In the 1967 Hollywood box office hit “The Graduate”—a romantic comedy directed by Mike Nichols and based on a novel by Charles Webb—the newly-graduated Dustin Hoffman gets an unsolicited piece of advice: “The future is plastics”.

The widely disseminated one-liner was hailed as a boost for the world’s plastic industry. But 55 years later, the industry is under fire because of the environmental hazards it generates.

A proposed legally-binding international treaty on plastics, which is expected to be finalized by 2024 by the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), will have a significant impact on the worldwide industry because it is expected to cover the full life cycle of plastic—from production to pollution.

The treaty holds the potential and the promise of being the “biggest multilateral environmental breakthrough” since the 2015 Paris climate agreement, said Inger Andersen, executive director of the [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#) based in Nairobi.

“What we need is an international framework that aims to end the flow of plastic into nature by 2030, aligns with the best available science and holds governments and businesses to account.”

According to the Washington-based [Center for International Environmental Law \(CIEL\)](#), “pollution from plastic production, use, and disposal is one of the greatest human-made threats our planet faces”.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

*Inge Anderson, Executive Director, UNEP >*

Of the approximately 415 million metric tons of plastic waste produced annually, nearly 80% is either landfilled or loose in the environment, and another 12% is incinerated or burned, wreaking havoc on livelihoods and ecosystems.

The result is an estimated \$13 billion in annual environmental damage to marine ecosystems, in addition to other economic losses and significant health and human concerns, said CIEL in a statement released last month.

According to CIEL, plastics begin as fossil fuels, and every step of the plastics life cycle emits greenhouse gases. If plastic production and use grow as currently planned, by 2030, the greenhouse gas emissions along the plastics life cycle could reach 1.34 gigatons per year.

By 2050, the cumulation of these greenhouse gas emissions from plastics

could reach over 56 gigatons—10-13 per cent of the entire remaining carbon budget. The increase in plastic production and consumption threatens the global community's ability to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C.

On March 2, the [Fifth United Nations Environment Assembly](#) (UNEA) concluded with the historic passage of a mandate to advance the treaty, plus the establishment of an Intergovernmental Panel on Chemicals, along with a wide variety of measures to address chemicals and waste.

Participating in the Assembly were Heads of State, Ministers of environment and representatives from 175 nations

The mandate contains first-ever protections for human rights, recognition for waste pickers, and the acknowledgment of the role of Indigenous peoples.

At the conclusion of the negotiations, Andrés Del Castillo, Senior Attorney at CIEL, said coming out of UNEA, "we have a mandate that can serve as a meaningful scaffolding for a legally-binding instrument on the full life cycle of plastics, that pays special attention to the marine environment".

"With detailed, specific provisions throughout the mandate, we have the ingredients to craft a treaty that is comprehensive in scope and that sufficiently addresses the plastic crisis".

But the ninety hours of hard-fought negotiations also reveal that the road ahead will not be simple or easy—there is still much to be done to ensure that the resulting treaty delivers on its promises for health, climate, biodiversity, and human rights," he told IDN.

Asked if the treaty will have to go before the 193-member UN General Assembly for final approval, he said: "No, normally, it will be necessary for a diplomatic conference, where plenipotentiaries will adopt the legal instrument".

According to CIEL, the plastics crisis is inherently transboundary, with supply chains crossing borders and the impacts of pollution extending to every region of the planet and nearly every facet of human life.





## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE



*Global Climate Change – Vital Change of the Planet | NASA*

Given the unique nature of the crisis, a concerted and coordinated global response is required to address it adequately and mitigate the harms currently inflicted on people and environments from the overproduction, toxic footprint, and misuse of this material.

The current legal regime addresses some elements of plastic pollution, but it is fragmented, with elements focusing on some portions of marine litter, fishing gear, waste, and chemicals, all existing parallel to one another, said CIEL.

“The structure lacks coherence and coordination between measures that address plastic pollution on land and at sea, and there are significant gaps in regulations and control across sources of pollution from the full life cycle of plastics.

To prevent pollution from plastics, the global community urgently needs a dedicated instrument—a new plastics treaty—that aims to reduce or eliminate harms from the entire life cycle of plastics, from production and design to waste prevention and management”.

At the conclusion of the negotiations on March 1, David Azoulay, Senior Attorney, Director of Environmental Health programme, said the historic nature of the mandate cannot be understated.

Six years ago, he said, a legally binding treaty that addresses the full life cycle of plastics seemed impossible and today’s announcement is the result of multiple movements coming together to understand and address an emergency.

“The power of this movement is evident in what we’ve been able to accomplish together. And coupled with the commitments expressed by countries such as Peru, Rwanda, Norway, and the European Union, to ensure we have a sufficient response to the plastics crisis is nothing short of extraordinary”.

“Now, as we turn to negotiate a plastics treaty, we must continue to work together to ensure that the most robust protections for health, climate, biodiversity, and human rights are not watered down or undermined by Parties or industry,” he declared. [IDN-InDepthNews — 11 March 2022]

## Feminist UN Campaign Report Wants UN Chief to Walk the Talk

By J C Suresh



Photo credit: You Move Campaign

WASHINGTON, D.C. (IDN) — “Talk less, act more .... All words are like feathers in the air,” commented an informant of the [Feminist UN Campaign's report](#) on UN Secretary-General António Guterres' commitment to gender equality in his five-year first term.

In fact, key informants reported that staff remain disillusioned with the UN's “macho culture of impunity,” are profoundly mistrustful of reporting and justice mechanisms in the system and are fearful of retaliation.

Moreover, the closed-door process for the selection of UN Women's new Executive Director, Sima Sami Bahous, is considered a major misstep on the part of the Secretary-General toward a feminist transformation.

The Campaign hopes that the UN Chief will push for a more comprehensive and progressive agenda during his second term, 2022-2026. It should be an agenda that centralizes intersectionality, defends human rights, takes action on structural and systemic change, and advances gender across the entire UN system

The Campaign's [report](#) on Guterres' commitment to gender equality in the fifth year of his first term, notes that after measured improvement in 2020, the UN Chief's grade decreased from a “B” to a “B-” in 2021. The Feminist UN Campaign drafted a feminist vision for the world body in 2016 and

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

has graded the Secretary-General on his performance toward that vision over the last five years. Since 2017, the report card has measured the extent to which the Secretary-General advanced progress on six priority areas for a more gender-equitable UN system.

1. Articulate and Implement a Feminist Leadership Agenda
2. Ensure Feminist Implementation and Accountability for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
3. Financing for Gender Equality
4. Parity and Rights Protections
5. Enable A Feminist Transformation for CSW and UN Women
6. Promote the Freedom of Information in the UN System

"The Feminist UN Report card demonstrates how careful analysis, and collective and thoughtful scrutiny can chart a pathway toward a more feminist UN. The report card plays an important role for civil society, elevating their voices and holding the institution and its leadership to account for meaningful gender equality in its ranks and in its work," said Sarah Gammage, a report reviewer and Latin America Policy Director at The Nature Conservancy.

This year, the Secretary-General's performance declined considerably in four of the six priorities laid out by the Campaign: (1) Articulate and Implement a Feminist Leadership Agenda (2) Ensure Feminist Implementation and Accountability for the SDGs (4) Parity and Rights Protections (5) Enable A Feminist Transformation for CSW and UN Women. Meanwhile, there was some improvement in (3) Financing for Gender Equality and (6) Promote the Freedom of Information in the U.N. System.

The Campaign report authors found overarching themes included a lack of systemic accountability, inconsistent transparency with information and access, and a limited understanding or push for intersectionality in gender initiatives.

On 'Articulating and Implementing a Feminist Leadership Agenda', the Secretary-General

has done well in reiterating the importance of gender. However, his calls are devoid of actionable commitments or accountability beyond the progress toward gender parity. He uses language that prioritized the protection of women, as opposed to their autonomy, participation, and active consultation in the design and implementation of solutions.

Also, references to adolescent girls, LGBTQIA+ rights, disabilities, and harassment were largely missing from the Guterres' speeches in 2021. The Campaign wants the Secretary-General to sharpen his intersectional feminist analysis and promote an understanding of intersectionality across the UN system, so that it becomes a key consideration in policies, programs and leadership decisions.

The current achievements for the integration of gender across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—goals set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015—have been minimal, at best, and implementation and accountability in regard to SDG 5, which focuses specifically on gender equality, has been limited, notes the Campaign.

Of the 18 indicators used to gather data on country-level progress toward SDG 5, only two of them have sufficient data to assess progress over time across all countries. The Secretary-General must push member states to accelerate progress to collect the data needed to track all SDG indicators, declares the report.

On the topics of Rights Protections and a Feminist Transformation for CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) and UN Women, there was a concerning lack of accountability and transparency in 2021. Progress stalled on responding to sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse in the UN system.

Guterres' score increased in Financing for Gender Equality and Freedom of Information due to the application of the gender equality marker system to additional funds and collective efforts to promote access to data, resources and meetings through virtual platforms. [IDN-InDepthNews - 09 March 2022]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Africa Battles for Rightful Place in the UN

By Jeffrey Moyo



*Photo: African leaders at 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union. Credit: African Union.*

HARARE | ADDIS ABABA (IDN) — Held in Addis Ababa the Ethiopian capital, the 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union early February seems long gone, with loud calls from African leaders for reform of the United Nations system.

The loudest calls came from the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed who boldly took the UN to task.

With the coronavirus restrictions loosening up across the world, the Assembly of the African Union Heads of State and Government this year [commenced](#) its 35th Ordinary session, the first to be held in person following a pause in 2021 when the Assembly was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is the right time to reform and revitalize the United Nations system to reflect current global

realities and ensure that it is a more representative and equitable body,” [said](#) the Ethiopian Prime Minister.

One after the other, African leaders reiterated the need for reform at the UN, with the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa denoting the way the developing continent has been treated unfairly by the continental body in the fight against climate change.

Denoting the unfairness, the South African President [said](#) “a one-size-fits-all approach to complex issues such as a transition from fossil fuels that disregards the realities on the ground in Africa will simply not work, and is neither just nor equitable”.

Yet the Ethiopian Prime Minister was blunter as he took on the bull by its horns, demanding a fair share for Africa in the UN Security Council.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

"Consistent with our Ezulwini Consensus of 2005, we should collectively insist that Africa's reasonable request for no less than two permanent seats and five non-permanent seats in the UN Security Council be adopted," said the Ethiopian Prime Minister.

The Ezulwini Consensus is a position on international relations and reform of the UN agreed by the African Union more than 15 years ago.

African leaders like the Ethiopian Prime Minister have not been apologetic about their calls for the reform of the UN, saying "Africa's voice on the world stage needs to be heard loud and clear". He added, "Africa must also be represented on important international bodies."

Taking over as the new AU chairperson this year from the Democratic Republic of Congo President Antoine Tshisekedi who was chairperson last year, Senegalese President Macky Sall in his inaugural speech, presented peace as a main goal of his one-year term.

"Our challenges are still far too numerous and urgent whether it be peace or security, unconstitutional changes of government, the protection of the environment, health as well as the economic and social development," [said](#) Sall.

As calls grew for the reform of the UN, more similar calls were made for the AU itself by Mr Moussa Faki the AU Commission Chairperson, who pointed to legal and political limits that impact the powers and leadership of the AU Commission on matters of regional and continental importance.

While Mr Faki took this self-introspection of the world body, the Ethiopia's Prime Minister disparaged the way the developing continent has for years been downtrodden and undermined in all spheres even as it is aligned to the UN.

"Today, more than seven decades after the creation of the United Nations, Africa remains a junior partner without meaningful input or

role in the system of international governance. This is particularly true of the United Nations where Africa lacks representation on the Security Council and is underrepresented in a variety of ways," said the Ethiopian Prime Minister.

He also bemoaned the way the global media portrayed the African continent.

"Africa is often portrayed in the international media negatively. The endless representation as a continent troubled by civil wars, hunger, corruption, greed, disease, and poverty is demeaning and dehumanizing and likely driven by a calculated strategy and agenda," said Abiy Ahmed.

In fact, the Ethiopian PM preached more about the unity of African countries in the face of what he perceived as being side-lined in the UN.

"The greatest lesson that Ethiopia has learned over the past year is that without the solidarity of our African brothers and sisters, our existence as a nation would have been at great risk. United we stand, divided we fall.... Our steadfast unity is the anchor and foundation of our Agenda 2063," he declared.

Even as African leaders made demands for their rightful positions in the UN, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres [said](#) that Africa was "a source of hope" for the world, and highlighted the examples of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Decade of Financial and Economic Inclusion for African Women.

Despite African leaders like Ethiopia's Prime Minister protesting about being undermined in the UN, Mr. Guterres said the collaboration between the UN and AU "is stronger than ever".

But as things stand, the composition of the UN Security Council established 77 years ago, with the geopolitical realities having changed drastically over the years, the council has experienced minor changes. >>>

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE



*Security Council. UN Photo/Mark Garten*

In this case, the victors of the Second World War have continued to shape the UN Charter in their national interests, assigning themselves the permanent seats and associated veto power, among themselves.

Yet according to a formal statement by South Africa's previous International Relations Minister Ms. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane speaking in the South African parliament in Cape Town in 2011, "the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) urgently requires reform to rectify inequitable power relations".

Apparently in agreement with the Ethiopian Prime Minister who spoke at this year's Assembly of the AU, then, the SA Minister then said "we reiterate that the reform of the UNSC is urgent and would go a long way in rectifying inequitable power relations within the Security Council".

In 2020 at the peak of coronavirus cases across the world, in a recorded statement by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to congratulate the UN General Assembly on its 75th anniversary, he said "UNSC reform is necessary in order to make the UN system active again".

"Leaving the fates of 7 billion people up to the justice of five countries was neither sustainable nor fair. A council structure based on democratic, transparent, accountable, effective and fair representation has become a necessity for humanity beyond choice," [said](#) Erdogan. in 2020.

True to Erdogan's remarks, this amid the Ethiopian Prime Minister's calls for Africa to have a voice at the UN Security Council, the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France all have permanent seats on the Security Council, meaning that they can veto any draft global resolution.

In Zimbabwe, the ruling Zimbabwe Africa National Union Patriotic Front known as a diehard supporter, Taurayi Kandishaya voiced his concern for Africa's weak position at the UN.

"African countries are treated as nonentities or rather perpetual juniors at all UN bodies and being part of that global organization as Africans simply means dehumanizing ourselves," Kandishaya told IDN.

But a political analyst in Zimbabwe, Denis Bhebhe sees otherwise: "Africa is full of tyrannical leaders and adding their influence to the UN Security Council is simply adding to the influence of countries like China and Russia, countries that have always opposed any global moves to rein in dictators when matters reach the UN," Bhebhe told IDN. [IDN-InDepthNews — 23 February 2022].

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Timor Leste: Oil Revenue Fails to Address Child Stunting

By Annamarie Reyes



*Photo: Women travel long distances to get water in a single pump in Batugade, Bobonaro, Timor Leste.  
Credit: Annamarie Reyes*

DILI, Timor Leste (IDN) — The world's newest democracy of Timor Leste is currently confronting a surge of omicron cases after being one of the safest countries from Covid. But as it continues to manage the pandemic fairly well, the story is quite the opposite when it comes to the problem of child stunting.

The issue continues to haunt Timor Leste decades after gaining independence, with a rate of 53-57% of child stunting among its under 5-year-old children.

"Lack of proper nutrition has consequences for Timorese children's future health, education, productivity and capacity," says the Dili-based agency [La'o Hamutuk—Timor Leste's Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis](#). They believe Timorese children do not have

access to enough nutritious food and hence this has a grave impact on the next generation.

Their own analysis states: "This situation is complex and not easy to resolve. The availability of nutritious food is exacerbated because agricultural production is not a national priority, and by the prohibitive cost of nutritious foods."

The latest report from the [Global Hunger Index \(GHI\)](#), indicates that Timor Leste has a level of hunger that is "alarming" just one step under "extremely alarming" on the world ladder.

Among 107 countries surveyed Timor Leste sits at 106, requiring urgent action, with only one nation—Chad—facing a more grave situation. The [World Food Programme's](#) estimate also points to 1-2% of GDP lost to

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

malnutrition every year, among a population of 1.3 million people.

"It's not just about severe malnutrition; our children suffer from diarrhoea, and have no proper access to water and sanitation," La'ó Hamutuk's Researcher of Economy and State Finance, Eliziar Febes Gomes told IDN.

Timor Leste's Demographic and Health Survey 2016 shows only 50% of households have access to improved sanitation facilities and only 58% of people in rural areas have access to potable water in or close to their homes.

Child stunting is often a result of inadequate food consumption in terms of quantity and quality and would usually be happening over a long period of time. In Timor Leste, the problem would have begun as early as among child-bearing age women and men; who in the first place grew up undernourished or malnourished from the previous generation.

Timor people's chronic inadequate food consumption has been linked to low agricultural productivity, scarce livelihood sources, poor sanitation, water, irrigation, health and infrastructures systems as well as poor long-term financial security.

### **Young Timorese speaking out**

La'ó Hamutuk's concerns for the country's children and young people is reflected in the daily lives of many young Timorese.

Tichya Gusmao whose family hails from surviving by tilling the land in the districts (Timor's rural area) is trying to do her bit. "I have joined a horticultural activity in our village, where I will share what I have learnt about nutrition and agriculture with my community to help fix our young people's problem with food," she told IDN.

On the other side of Dili, in far-flung Viqueque, Elzita struggled for a while to find a computer so she could complete her school assignment. "When it's hard, we only eat what we have on the farm. My parents get income by selling fruits and vegetables in the market. I'm learning about maternal health and want to

help our young people take care of our children and new-born."

Ade wants to become a veterinarian and is an intern with an animal clinic. He says that his family's main source of income is agricultural production. "But the problem in Timor Leste is that this sector has poor income. He wants the government to help young people with basic necessities and not totally rely on petroleum oil reserves as "it will end anytime."

Similar sentiments are what's in the future horizons for Eugenia and Leao.

Eugenia is active in her local centre for youth in the Southern Bacau district, "As a young woman I want to always look into how I can contribute to helping others and not just stay at home." Leao Carvalho is juggling volunteering between nutrition and youth civic work. "We need to empower our communities to make our land more productive."

All of them are in their 20's reflecting the predominantly young population of Timor Leste with the average adult population age at 35 years old.

According to the latest Integrated Food Security Classification (IPC) report to 2023, "climate risks and hazards" have also played a serious role. In April 2021, the country suffered a devastating super typhoon where homes, services, buildings and roads were completely damaged. More than 13,000 people were displaced, 44,000 households were affected and 50 people died from the cyclone Seroja.

Meanwhile, the toll from the pandemic with the latest 156 cases, has compounded the problem. Just under 20,000 people had tested positive to Covid in 2021.

### **Oil and gas reserves depleting**

Charles Scheiner, Researcher at La'ó Hamutuk has authored a report which raises concern about Timor Leste's heavy reliance on extractive resources of oil and gas.

"Timor Leste is one of the most petroleum-dependent countries in the world in terms of export revenues from oil and gas. But it's not



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

because it has a lot of oil and gas, it's because it has very few other kinds of resources. So, money from oil and gas has paid for 86%, the great majority of state spending over the last 20 years. For example, the schools' systems and many other things that benefit children, such as with nutrition programs—even though they're not as good as we hope they would be," says Scheiner.

According to Scheiner, Timor Leste's predominantly young population were mostly born after the Indonesian occupation ended 21 years ago. But most live in rural areas growing up with inadequate food, education, health support, with few employment prospects.

Only a quarter of the 820,000 working-age people are in the formal economy: mostly in construction and public administration. In jobs in Dili, related to the oil and gas industry. The rest of majority of the population rely on informal work in agriculture, farming or fishing.

There have been little benefits from the oil and gas reserves for the majority of the population. "For the 10-15 per cent of the middle class and upper-class people, their lives have significantly improved," notes Scheiner. "But if you measure more than 40% of people who are in poverty, their lives have not changed very much".

The money the government has spent has either gone to pay civil servants, or infrastructure offices for government buildings, in Dili, that helps the more affluent people. Civil servants are considered upper class.

But the great majority of Timorese are subsistence farmers, and they haven't spent much on them. "More than half of the money the government has spent has gone outside the country—to import things or pay for foreign companies to implement projects," says Scheiner.

La'o Hamutuk's has pointed out through their own investigations that non-renewable resources are depleting, and also very

expensive to produce, where investors may find they're no longer economical to produce. The resource boom around 2005-12 where 23 US billion dollars were generated have run out.

Currently, the country's 86% of state spending comes from its petroleum oil reserves and at the rate of its extraction oil and gas could run out in a few years. The main exploration site Bayu-Undan has almost depleted any viable resources left.

"There have been 2 test wells that were drilled a few months ago. One onshore in Timor Leste's territory, the first onshore well in 50 years. And one offshore in a field that a small Australian company is running. They thought there was more oil to get out there. They both turn out to be non - commercial. The companies have decided not to continue," Scheiner points out.

Meanwhile, Gomes laments the fact that despite their lobbying for decades now, the problem of child stunting from malnutrition remains unsolved. "When the government is not wisely spending the money, we really worry about our future. These big (infrastructure) projects could also be a risk to our social economy and our environment," she argues.

"I can say that Timor Leste for the last 2-3 years has been in an uncertain political situation. It means that the government has not been putting our people as the centre of their decision making, but only their own interests," explains Gomes.

With a national election coming up soon, Gomes hopes, "Timorese young people will choose a good leader (who is) more concerned about our reality. I believe that if (such a new) government puts the people of Timor Leste as the centre of decision-making, we can solve our child stunting problem and will prepare our future generations (for a better life)."

Timor Leste's Presidential elections are scheduled for March 19, 2022. [IDN- InDepthNews — 11 February 2022]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Sri Lanka: Government's Badly Planned Organic Farming Policy Upsets Rice Farmers

By R.M.Samanmalee Swarnalatha



*Photo: Paddy field in Polonnaruwa. Credit: L.G. Piyarathna*

POLLONNARUWA, Sri Lanka (IDN) — Sri Lankan government's badly planned organic farming policy that has banned the use of chemical fertilizer in farms has upset farmers in this rice-growing heartland and a political stronghold of the ruling coalition. The policy has also drawn criticism from agricultural experts, who warn that Sri Lanka's food security is at stake.

Chairman of Minneriya Integrated Farmer Organization, Anil Gunawardhna argues that the government organic fertilizer program is an utter failure because it was announced without any proper program and work plan to achieve its aims.

"The government's original plan was to achieve this organic cultivation in ten years time. However, without any discussion with farmers they banned the import of chemical fertilizer," he complains.

Writing in *The Sunday Times* in May last year just after the government banned chemical fertilizer imports, agricultural scientist Saman Dharmakeethi criticized the decision predicting that it would cause loss of forests and a food crisis.

In his election campaign in 2019 under the theme of 'Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour' President Gotabaya Rajapakse, clearly mentioned that "building up a community of citizens who are healthy and productive, we need to develop the habit of consuming food with no contamination with harmful chemicals". In order to guarantee the peoples' right to such safe food, the entire Sri Lankan agriculture will be promoted to use organic fertilizers within ten years, the election policy platform said.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

When President Rajapakse banned the importation of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in April 2021, he cited health concerns. The ban on its importation was imposed through an Extraordinary Gazette Notification on May 6 last year, following the Cabinet endorsement of the plan under the theme of "Creating a Green Socio-economy with Sustainable Solutions for Climate Change". The document admitted that the use of chemical fertilizers has led to better harvests but has also contaminated lakes, canals and groundwater.

For more than two decades a mysterious kidney disease has been spreading among farmers in the mainly rice-growing areas, which has baffled both hydrologists and medical experts. It is suspected that the overuse of chemicals in farming may be the cause.

### **Weaning Away From "Green Revolution" Technology**

With many vested interests at work, the government is learning a bitter lesson that it is not easy to wean away farmers from the use of chemicals in farming. It needs careful planning and closer consultations with farmers.

The agricultural production system in Sri Lanka consists of two traditional and well-defined components. One is the plantation section, established during the colonial period, consisting of large units, and producing perennial crops such as coffee, tea, rubber, and coconut mainly for export. The other is the smallholder sector comprised of small farms, which produce most of the country's rice, vegetables, legumes, tubers, spices, and fruits.

While, fertilizers and pesticides have long been used for the production of plantation crops in Sri Lanka, until several decades ago, most of the smallholder operations were farmed with little or no input of agricultural chemicals. Wide use of chemical fertilizer was introduced to the country during the so-called 'green revolution' in the decades 1960-70 along with "high-yielding" seeds.

### **Costly Fertilizer Imports and Subsidy**

In 2020, Sri Lanka imported (both state and private sector) foreign fertilizers worth \$259 million, representing 1.6 per cent of the country's total imports by value according to Central Bank statistics. Sources indicate that the 2021 import bill could potentially total in the range of \$300-\$400 million given current international prices. By limiting and/or banning costly foreign exchange draining fertilizer and agrochemical imports, the Sri Lankan government aims to generate significant import cost savings.

But, Professor Buddhi Marambe, a former Dean of Agriculture Faculty at the University of Peradeniya in recent newspaper articles has warned that an overnight shift to organic fertilizer could lead to crop declines that in turn cause huge food shortages within months. "We have spoken based on science. Without going for evidence-based decisions, nothing will go right," he argues, refuting claims by the government that they are being manipulated. "Food security is national security," he stresses, adding, "We must have sustainable policies to ensure food security because there is no point relying on food imports from outside".

### **Rice Farmers' Grievances**

Some rural farmers have already decided not to cultivate Sri Lanka's staple rice in the ongoing 'Maha' or next 'Yala' cultivation seasons, because of the government's failure to supply necessary fertilizers. Farmers here are deeply unhappy at the sudden banning of the import of chemical fertilizer. They mainly cultivate paddy, low country vegetables, cereals, grains, and onions. However, in this 'Maha' season, they could not use chemical fertilizer, If the government promised to supply the required organic fertilizer, farmers say they didn't receive it at the correct time.

Rice farmers have thus used different fertilizer that is normally used for tea, cinnamon, and coconut. They say this season's rice harvest is very disappointing with resulting low incomes.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Piyarathna, Chairman, Eksath Sulu Farmer Organization, representing farmers from Dehiyannewela, Divilunkadawala, Viharagama, Medirigiriya areas told IDN that there are 142 farmers in their farmer organization and they cultivate more than 190 acres using minor irrigation water. "Our farmers normally harvest 100- 120 bushel (2500-3000 kg) per acre using chemical fertilizer. However, this time farmers can't expect such harvest due to improper fertilizer usage" he says, adding, "farming is now a business enterprise, (and) farmers cultivate not only for (their)consumption".

Paddy plants take around 3-6 months to grow from seeds to mature plants, depending on the variety and environmental conditions. They undergo three general growth phases: vegetative, reproductive, and ripening. "Our farmers cultivate two groups: the short-duration varieties which mature in 105-120 days and the long-duration varieties which mature in 150 days", he explained. "They (farmers) use hybrid seed and not traditional varieties. These hybrids varieties need quality fertilizer to increase the harvest. By using organic fertilizer farmers can't expect high yield".

Piyarathna says that farmers in the Polonnaruwa area have complained that the compost they have received is of inferior quality with most of the purchased compost having debris, seeds and stones.

Kapila Ariyawasnsa, a 38-year-old farmer from the Ekamuthu Bedum Ela Farmer Organization in Mahaweli river irrigation System B told IDN that he cultivate 8 acres of low land both in Yala and Maha seasons - mainly paddy - and there are also 206 rice farmers belonging to his organization. He thinks that the proposed organic fertilizer program is not practical in their area.

"There are not enough resources to make compost in our village. Greenery vegetables can be cultivated using compost, not paddy," he argues, because "there is no traditional varieties and only have all hybrid seeds (and)

these hybrid seeds need required fertilizer for bumper harvest". Further, he said that he had to spend Rs 23000 (USD 115) to purchase Yuria in the black market.

Ariyawasnsa, predicts that the rural economy will collapse after the coming rice harvest. "Farmers won't have the yield this time, they would get only 30 per cent of the harvest" he predicts. "Most of the people in Mahaweli area depend on agriculture". He added that not only Mahaweli B zone, but most farmers in the Polonnaruwa District, would face bad harvests due to the government's organic fertilizer program. "The current government's policy (has been based on) unplanned policy decisions" he laments.

### **A Farmer's Expectation**

There is also growing interest among farmers in producing organically-grown food products and they understand the export potential for it. Some farm production units have already experienced considerable success in such ventures. Organic food production and marketing could be greatly expanded in Sri Lanka.

But, research is needed to develop organic farming systems and practices that are efficient, productive, and profitable. This is the criticism the government is facing at the moment.

M.G. Dayawathi Chairman of Kalukele People's company said that banning chemical fertilizer has affected their company's microfinance system too. "We have given more than 52 lakhs (5.2 million) of cultivation loans to 75 farmers for this Maha season. Unfortunately, farmers would not make the expected income and they are not in a position to repay loans" she told IDN.

"Moreover, farmers mortgage their gold and their vehicles to purchase chemical fertilizer in the black market. They are trapped in a loan cycle. Government cannot expect livelihood improvement (among farmers) with this kind of unplanned program". [IDN-InDepthNews — 09 February 2022].

## Coronavirus Cases Are Shooting Up Across Africa

By Jeffrey Moyo



*Photo credit: WHO/Marta Villa Monge*

HARARE (IDN) — There are over 228 000 coronavirus cases in Zimbabwe, with more than 5000 deaths while north of this country stands Zambia laden with over 300 000 coronavirus cases and more than 3000 COVID-related deaths and not to be left out, is Mozambique east of Zimbabwe, contending with more than 200 000 coronavirus cases, this with over 2000 deaths related to the feared pandemic.

As this happens, health experts like Malawi's Joseph Banda have said for Africa as a whole, there is no respite as coronavirus cases continue to rise, getting out of hand in the process.

"Since the disease started pounding African countries in 2019, the continent has not had a break from the cases which have continued to shoot up. Yes, there might be little being said by

the media about coronavirus cases on the African continent, but I can tell you more and more people on the continent are contracting the disease," Banda told IDN.

He (Banda) also made startling claims that coronavirus cases in some African countries were being underreported. By the end of 2021, Africa in fact faced yet another challenging year as coronavirus continued to pound the poor continent from Cape to Cairo.

"Africa has suffered due to coronavirus and its economies can testify to this because when cases kept rising, industries continued to shut operations resulting in many Africans losing their jobs," Nerdy Chivaviro, an independent economist in Zimbabwe, told IDN.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

According to the African Union, while the Covid-19 crisis has taken toll on the entire world economy, it has hit Africa the hardest, leaving key sectors of the African economy crippled, with tourism, air transport, and the oil sector visibly impacted.

Thanks to coronavirus, in May 2020, Zimbabwe's tourism Minister Mangaliso Ndlovhu went on record in the media saying the tourism sector could lose up to US\$1,1 billion due to travel restrictions that have already crippled the travel industry.

The Zimbabwean government Minister said this when he addressed reporters after meeting tourism players in the country's capital, Harare.

Two years later, Africa as a whole has seen Covid-19 continuing to spread, this fuelled by new variants while vaccine deliveries to the continent stuttered before picking up, causing delays in vaccination drives amid intensified calls for equity. Last year, South Africa became the first country in the world to detect Omicron variant which has so far affected millions of people the world over although often with mild symptoms.

Yet in spite of the challenges posed by Omicron, Africa has so far made significant advances in health including spearheading the novel oral polio vaccine rollout, reinforcing COVID-19 genomic sequencing and vaccination drives as well as eliminating sleeping sickness in the continent's countries like Cote d'Ivoire and Gambia. <https://www.afro.who.int/our-work-2021>

By early 2021, the African continent had begun to record rising number of COVID-19 cases, with a daily average of approximately 25 000.

For many health experts in Africa like Lameck Mwansa based in Zambia, coronavirus cases are on the rise, but they are just no longer given the publicity received by the pandemic when it first arrived.

"Cases of coronavirus are certainly on an upward trend here in Zambia and Africa as a whole. The only difference now is that, the cases are not being publicized as before and that is why the

world has become complacent in the face of the pandemic resulting in endless cases being recorded daily," Mwansa told IDN.

In South Africa, Phindiwe Zama who works as a nurse at a private clinic in Johannesburg claimed they are still overwhelmed with patients suffering from coronavirus even as the world seems to get quieter and quieter about the pandemic.

"We still have patients getting admitted as they suffer from coronavirus, some with severe cases while some just come and get discharged as they show mild symptoms. More of these cases are related to the Omicron variant," Zama told IDN.

In Congo Brazzaville, there is no respite as the African nation also battles perpetual cases of the coronavirus pandemic. Currently, there have been 23,485 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Congo Brazzaville, with about 1,700 people sick there, which is one in every 3,100 inhabitants, according to the World Health Organization.

Yet countries like Congo Brazzaville are not alone in their contention with rising coronavirus variants. In fact, across Africa, COVID-19 cases have risen steadily since mid-September 2020, with a steeper rise from late November.

As that happens, since last year, a new COVID-19 variant known as 501Y.V2 has been circulating widely in neighboring South Africa, accounting for most of the new infections in the Southern African country.

There are however no indications the new variant increases the severity of coronavirus, according to the World Health Organization.

"Even if the new variant is not more virulent, a virus that can spread more easily will put further strain on hospitals and health workers who are in many cases already overstretched," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa in a virtual press conference last year.

Dr Moeti also said "this is a stark reminder that the virus is relentless, that it still presents a manifest threat, and that our war is far from won." [IDN-InDepthNews – 27 January 2022]

## UN Report Concerned About Hunger and Food Insecurity in Latin America

By Jaya Ramachandran

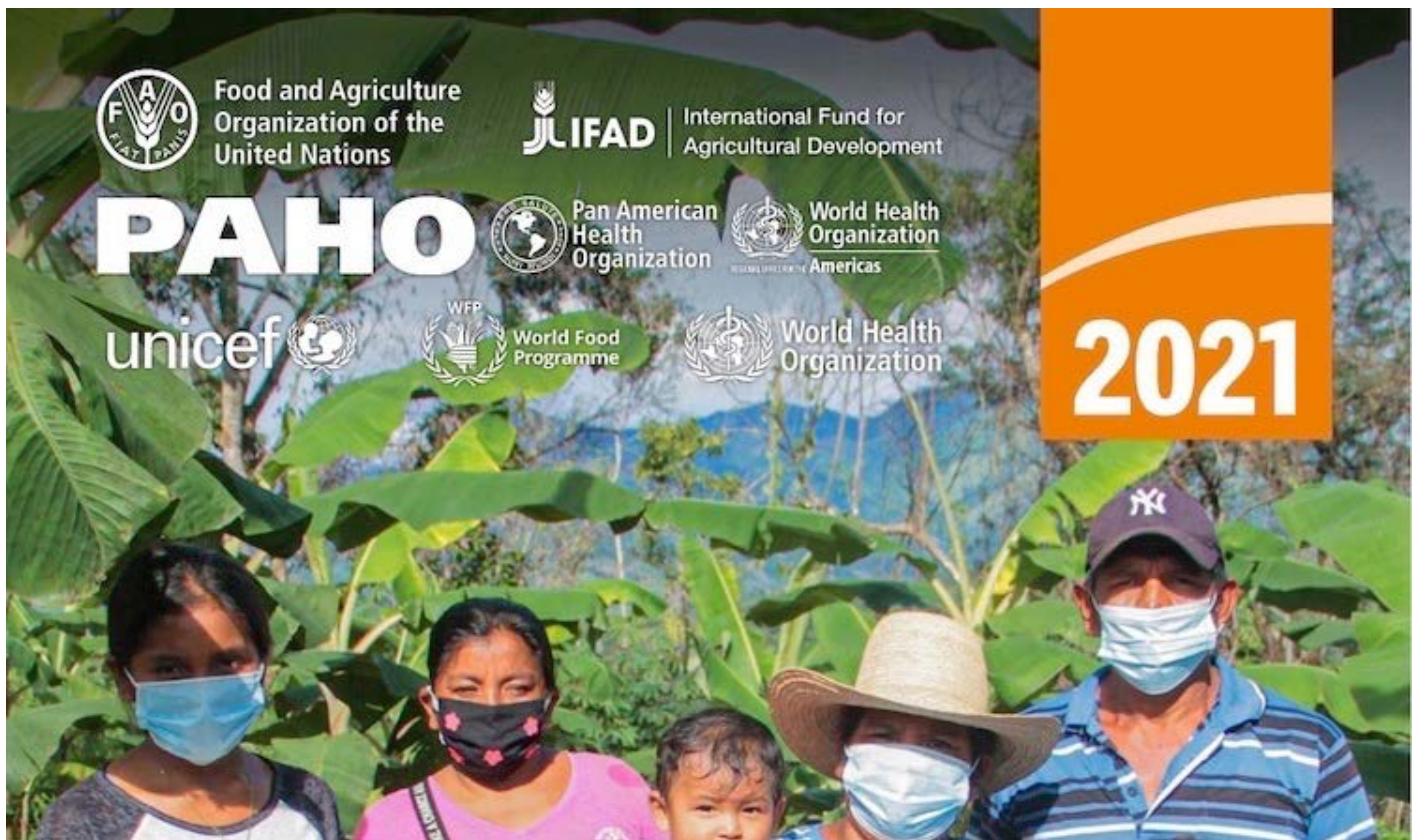


Photo credit: UN

ROME (IDN) — The rise in hunger and food insecurity levels that have been occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2015, were exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The region is now even further off-track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 2.1 to end hunger and achieve food security, according to the latest [Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition](#).

The report is a joint publication of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ([FAO](#)), the International Fund for Agricultural Development ([IFAD](#)), the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization ([PAHO/WHO](#)), the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)), and the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)). The report points out that hunger

and food insecurity rose more sharply in Latin America and the Caribbean than in any other region in the world. The number of people living with hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean increased by 13.8 million, reaching 59.7 million people (9.1 per cent of the population) in 2020.

That was a 30 per cent increase, or 13.8 million additional people, compared to 2019.

Also, four out of every ten people in the region—267 million—experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020, 60 million more than in 2019, an increase of nine percentage points, the most pronounced rise in relation to the other world regions.

The report warns that the region is also losing the battle against other forms of malnutrition. 106 million people—one in every four adults—suffer from obesity and, in 2020, 3.9 million

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

children—7.5 per cent of those under five years of age—were overweight.

It also reported an increase in food insecurity, stating that 41 per cent of the region's population is "moderately or severely food insecure, which translates to 267 million people whose human right to food is not being met".

In South America, the number of those suffering from hunger increased by 18 million people between 2014 and 2020. However, the report says half of the increase, an estimated 9 million people, "occurred between 2019 and 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic".

"This suggests an increase of 36 per cent in the number of people living with hunger in just one year," it says.

Among the countries with the highest numbers of people suffering from hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean are Haiti, Venezuela, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The report also states that the COVID-19 pandemic has "exacerbated" the problem of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, due to the fact that it has "reduced the incomes of millions of people in the region".

"However, the pandemic alone is not responsible for all these setbacks, as the regional statistics for hunger have been increasing for six consecutive years," the report says.

In a statement Julio A. Berdegué, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's regional representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, has called for action to stem the growing trend.

"We must say it loud and clear: Latin America and the Caribbean (are) facing a critical situation in terms of food security," he says. While the number of those who suffer from hunger increased, the report also stated that in

other parts of the region, the battle against other forms of malnutrition, including obesity, is being lost.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, an estimated 106 million people, or one in every four adults, suffer from obesity. Between 2016 and 2020, the prevalence of obesity increased 9.5 per cent in the Caribbean, 8.2 per cent in Mexico and Central America and 7.2 per cent in South America.

Furthermore, the number of overweight children continues to rise, with an estimated 3.9 million obese children, 7.5 per cent of whom are under 5. The number, the report says, is nearly 2 per cent above the world average.

The report says that the new statistics will contribute to "policy dialogue for post-pandemic recovery, which is fundamental to closing gaps in equality and meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

"We cannot reverse these trends unless we transform our agri-food systems to make them efficient, resilient, inclusive and sustainable enough to provide a healthy diet for everyone, leaving no one behind," the report says.

In Latin America and the Caribbean during 2020, moderate or severe food insecurity affected 40.9 per cent of the population, well above the prevalence recorded at the world level (30.4 per cent). Between 2014 and 2020, moderate or severe food insecurity rose by 16 percentage points. More than half of that increase occurred in the last year alone, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as prevalence rose from 31.9 per cent

to 40.9 per cent, representing an increase of 9 percentage points, the most pronounced in relation to other regions of the world. [IDN-InDepthNews – 06 January 2022]

***In Latin America and the Caribbean, an estimated 106 million people, or one in every four adults, suffer from obesity. Between 2016 and 2020, the prevalence of obesity increased 9.5 per cent in the Caribbean, 8.2 per cent in Mexico and Central America and 7.2 per cent in South America.***



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### US, Russia Stall Attempts to Ban Killer Robots

By Thalif Deen



*Photo: UNMAS, MINUSMA Mark International Day for Mine Awareness. Robots have been deployed for mine clearance by military authorities in many countries, but concerns are rising over regulation of autonomous weapons which use Artificial Intelligence. UN Photo/Marco Dormino*

NEW YORK (IDN) — As the US withdrew the last of its troops from Afghanistan on August 31 following a deadly 20-year-old war, one of the messages coming out of Washington was clear: the US will curtail “boots on the ground” in all future conflicts—even though there are still more than 40,000 American troops stationed around the Middle East.

But the wave of the future may be 'killer robots'—mostly the deployment of drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—in “shadow wars,” particularly against terrorist groups worldwide.

In one of its last attacks, this time directed at a misidentified ISIS-K terrorist safe house, the US launched a drone strike with a single Hellfire missile on August 29 in Kabul that killed 10 civilians, among them as many as seven children, which the Pentagon later described as “a tragic mistake”. But no one was punished for these civilian killings.

The attack was guided not by artificial intelligence (AI) but by faulty intelligence—as it has occurred frequently in civil wars and battle zones in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan—with perhaps many more such deadly debacles to come.

Meanwhile, the Sixth Review Conference of the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW), which took place in Geneva from December 13-17, 2021, was expected to be a crucial meeting on the future of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). But predictably, it failed.

Ben Donaldson, Head of Campaigns at the United Nations Association, based in UK, told IDN, at the conclusion of the meeting on December 18, “the outcome is tone deaf to the cries for urgent action from the majority governments, the tech community and the UN Secretary-General”.

It’s no coincidence that, despite eight years of discussion, this UN body has nothing to show for it while military investments in autonomous weapons and swarming robots have skyrocketed, he said.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

"The handful of powerful states developing these weapons are the same states responsible for blocking progress through the creation of new legally binding rules," said Donaldson, who is also a steering committee member of the 'UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots'.

"The limits of the CCW as a forum have been laid bare. But a strong coalition of states, civil society and tech leaders are determined to make progress," he pointed out.

The successful cluster munitions and landmines treaties have shown that progress can be made outside the UN and progressive states look ready to step up to the plate.

"In 2022 we expect the majority who are serious about ensuring the decision to kill is never outsourced to a machine will start work on a new treaty to ban these weapons. Those states guilty of blocking action at the UN will have to decide "which side of history do we want to be on?" Donaldson declared.

In a hard-hitting statement released December 17, Amnesty International, one of the leaders of the 'Stop Killer Robots Coalition', said it's now clear that a minority of states, including the US and Russia, already investing heavily in the development of autonomous weapons, are committed to using the consensus rule at the UN's Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) to hold the majority of states hostage and block progress towards an international legal response to autonomy in weapons systems.

Following the failure of the 6th Review Conference of the CCW to agree on steps to negotiate new law, there is recognition of the urgent need for a legal response that echoes the conditions that led to the creation of the landmine and cluster munitions treaties.

"After 8 years of discussions with a clear majority of states consistently calling for the negotiation of new international law to ensure meaningful human control over the use of force, the 6th Review Conference has adopted a mandate that falls shockingly short of the outcome the world needs. States will continue

CCW meetings next year without agreeing to work towards a specific goal," said Amnesty.

Speaking of the proposed code of conduct by the US, Ray Acheson, Director, Reaching Critical Will, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom told IDN "based on what we have seen from the US and the other states blocking negotiations of a treaty to prevent the development and use of autonomous weapons (such as Russia, Israel, India, and handful of others), a code of conduct agreed by consensus would not be effective".

These countries have spent the last eight years espousing the alleged virtues of autonomous weapon systems. "We need a legally binding instrument that includes clear prohibitions and restrictions that ensure meaningful human control is maintained over weapons and the use of force, and that safeguards human rights and dignity," Acheson said.

"In contrast, a code of conduct as envisioned by the US assumes the development of autonomous weapons as a given and even promotes that, normalizing increasingly autonomous violence. We've already gone down this path of distancing humans from the violence they undertake with the use of armed drones and other remote warfare technologies."

These weapons have caused incredible human suffering and civilian casualties, they have undermined international law and lowered the threshold for the use of force, and they have disproportionately been used and tested against populations in the global south, Acheson pointed out.

Autonomous weapon systems would exacerbate these harms and more. The development of such systems must be considered in the context of the development of other emerging autonomous and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

Biometric data collection; facial, voice, gait, and cardiac recognition; predictive policing software; tools of surveillance; mechanisms to categorise and sort human beings—all are

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

increasingly being used by militaries and police globally.

"We can see how, time and again, governments, militaries, and police forces use advanced technologies for violence and control. We can see the trajectory of these developments and the world they are actively constructing.

We need to act now to prevent weapons from operating on the basis of algorithms, sensors, and software," Acheson declared.

In its statement, Amnesty also pointed out that Austrian Foreign Minister, Alexander Schallenberg and New Zealand's Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control, Phil Twyford both called for the development of new international law regulating autonomous weapons.

The new government coalition agreements of Norway and Germany promise to take action on this issue. There has been consistent cross-regional leadership at the UN with 68 states calling for a legal instrument.

Thousands of tech and AI experts and scientists, the Stop Killer Robots campaign, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the ICRC, 26 Nobel Laureates and wider civil society have called for new international law. The stage is now set for an external process on killer robots.

In a position paper, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) says after initial activation or launch by a person, an autonomous weapon system self-initiates or triggers a strike in response to information from the environment received through sensors and on the basis of a generalized "target profile".

This means that the user does not choose, or even know, the specific target(s) and the precise timing and/or location of the resulting application(s) of force.

The use of autonomous weapon systems entails risks due to the difficulties in anticipating and limiting their effects. This loss of human control and judgement in the use of force and weapons

raises serious concerns from humanitarian, legal and ethical perspectives.

The process by which autonomous weapon systems function:

- brings risks of harm for those affected by armed conflict, both civilians and combatants, as well as dangers of conflict escalation
- raises challenges for compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law, notably, the rules on the conduct of hostilities for the protection of civilians
- raises fundamental ethical concerns for humanity, in effect substituting human decisions about life and death with sensor, software and machine processes.

Since 2015, ICRC has urged States to establish internationally agreed limits on autonomous weapon systems to ensure civilian protection, compliance with international humanitarian law, and ethical acceptability.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said last September it is difficult to conceive of a more destabilizing invention than autonomous lethal weapons.

He said a proposed Global Summit of the Future, to be held in two years, is expected to consider all these issues and more.

The summit would also consider a New Agenda for Peace that would include measures to reduce strategic risks from nuclear arms, cyberwarfare and lethal autonomous weapons.

A new United Nations Futures Lab will publish regular reports on megatrends and risks. To support these efforts, Guterres said, "we will launch a UN 2.0 that offers more relevant, systemwide, multilateral and multi-stakeholder solutions to the challenges of the 21st century." [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 December 2021]

## New Laos-China Rail Link Opens Up Southeast Asia for Trade and Tourism

By Kalinga Seneviratne *market in*



Photo: A woman selling locally grown rice in a Luang Prabang market. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne

SINGAPORE (IDN) — A new 414 kilometres high-speed rail link between China and Laos has finally opened landlocked mountainous Laos to the region and made it possible for trade and tourism to expand across Southeast Asia. This link has technically facilitated rail travel from China to Singapore, and land-based trade that could make the South China Sea less important for regional trade.

This rail link built at a cost of \$5.9 billion is a central plank of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while it also is part of Laos' strategic vision to go from landlocked to "land-linked" economy and overcome the development lag that has come with being an inland, mountainous state.

Speaking to China's Xinhua news agency in August, Lao Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh said the BRI "is an opportunity, through economic infrastructure, trade, investment and people-to-people connectivity to deepen the mutual trust and help between China and Belt and Road Initiative countries" and the rail link is an important part of it.

The new rail line starts from the Laos capital Vientiane and goes up to Boten on the northern border with China. It is then linked to the Chinese rail system across the border at Mohan. The first two freight trains have crossed the

border both ways already transporting goods worth \$3 million. The border is still closed for human traffic due to the pandemic.

During the railway's opening ceremony on December 3 where Buddhist monks chanted and sprayed holy water on the Chinese-built train engine, Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith said that it marked the day as the beginning of a new era for Laos, as the country made a significant step on its transition from a land-locked mountainous nation to a land-linked logistical hub.

On its opening day, the railway station in Vientiane was packed from early morning with middle-class *Vientianers* who were determined to secure a seat on what was, for many, the first-ever ride on a train. More than 5,000 people have purchased tickets to ride on the train during the first week of its operations, and Laotian Times reported that more than 114,000 residents in the Chinese city of Kunming have purchased tickets to travel to Laos when the border is expected to be opened next month.

The Laos-China Railway Co. will operate Laos' segment of the railway, as a joint venture between the China Railway Group and two other Chinese government-owned companies, which collectively hold a 70 per cent stake in the rail project. A Lao state company holds the remaining 30 per cent. Laos' debt liability in the project is believed to be \$1.54 billion with the Chinese joint-venture partner owning another \$2.4 billion.

This is Laos's first rail network and the Chinese had to train hundreds of Laotians in running the network—from engine drivers to linesmen and railway maintenance workers. Sida Phengphongsawanh who comes from the hilly town of Muangxay, about 100 km from the Chinese border is one of the train drivers trained by the Chinese.

Her hometown has traded with the Chinese across the border for a long time. "The Laos-

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

China railway has given me a stable job, and at the national level," she told Xinhua, predicting that it will drive all-around development of the country, and help her hometown of Muangxay by facilitating the importation of their products to China.

With proper planning and appropriate foreign investments in development activities along the rail route, the Laos-China railway would help to improve several aspects of the Lao economy, including tourism and export-import industry that could help Laos to manage its debt liability.

"These infrastructure projects are proof that Beijing's massive Belt and Road Initiative continues to break ground even amid a pandemic, with far-reaching implications for Southeast Asia. They will no doubt burnish Beijing's appeal as a vital partner in promoting connectivity and spurring economic recovery in the region," said Lucio Blanco Pitlo a research fellow at the Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation in Manila in a commentary published this month by Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post.

The new transport networks will be even more crucial after the world's largest free trade agreement, the Regional Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) takes effect in 2022, bringing together all 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its five dialogue partners, including China, points out Pitlo.

The Laos-China Railway, which broke ground in 2015 and marks the effective extension of China's high-speed rail system beyond its own borders, is an impressive technological undertaking by the Chinese. They had to navigate in terrain that still has unexploded bombs dropped by the US during the Vietnam war. The standard gauge single line railway cuts through rugged mountain terrain with 61 km of bridges and 198 km of tunnel. It has 21 stations within Laos with 10 for passenger traffic and others for goods traffic that indicates the dual development nature of the project.

"To which extent this benefits the country's predominantly rural population remains open to

question," notes The Diplomat's Sebastian Strangio. "Throughout its six years of construction, people who were displaced from their homes to make way for the railway complained they were paid too little (compensation)," he added. He also points out that one U.S.-based analyst has described the railway as "essentially a Chinese public infrastructure project that happens to exist in another country".

This railway is not the only Chinese backed transport project in the region. In 2018, several Chinese companies signed an agreement with the Laotian government to build a 580 km highway from Vientiane to Pakse, a city in southern Laos near the Cambodian border that could link the rail corridor with a good road network across the country that will facilitate more trade between provinces and with neighbouring states, acting as a driver of economic growth.

Another project, the construction of Thanaleng Dry Port (TDP) and Vientiane Logistics Park (VLP), and linking it with Vung Ang Port, on the coast of Vietnam's central Ha Tinh province, and the 190 km Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway, in neighbouring Cambodia, is expected to open next year. Chinese companies are also busy building new airports in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh and the popular tourist city Siem Reap. The TDP and VLP projects are, however, not funded by China.

While there is a flurry of construction giving shape to efforts by Asian neighbours to synergise the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and China's BRI, that was a key item in the China-ASEAN special commemorative summit in November, the alternatives to the so-called "China debt-traps" are yet to be realised notes Pitlo.

"From Japan's *Partnership for Quality Infrastructure*, the United States' *Build Back Better World* to Europe's recently unveiled *Global Gateway* shows how Beijing's drive is forcing rivals to compete" argues Pitlo. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 December 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Universities Need to Be More Accessible Instead of a Privilege

By Kalinga Seneviratne



*Photo credit: World Access to Higher Education Days.*

SYDNEY (IDN) — If we are going to create a better world in the post-pandemic era higher education (HE) systems need to be more flexible and accessible, and governments need to be made to understand that funding the public university sector is essential to creating more equitable and socially stable societies. This is the message that came out clearly from the [World Access to Higher Education Day \(WAHED\)](#)—a day-long virtual conference coordinated from London and held on November 17 titled “Who will go to University in 2030?”.

The HE sector has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its structure may have been changed forever with the introduction of online learning. But, this creates enormous challenges for access and equity in HE. Access to quality education is in [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 4](#), but this is largely

seen in terms of primary and secondary schooling rather than HE.

“The idea of WAHED is to bring together those who do believe in the need for access and equity in the higher education system and commit individual universities and organizations to address these issues,” said Prof Graeme Atherton, Director National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), a non-profit organization based in the UK and the convener of WAHED 2021, in his opening remarks to the conference.

The five-session online event included speakers from Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Asia, with a majority of the speakers female, a statement by itself. Many of the speakers pointed out that HE is still a privilege in both the Global North and the Global South with children of those who have already got

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

degrees more likely to go to university. With the governments not giving priority to funding public universities, many families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not even consider a university education.

In Brazil, the current government has cut funding to public universities, forcing young people to go to private universities pointed out Prof Marcelo Knobel of Universidades Estadual de Campinas. "This is a real challenge (for equity) with 75 per cent of students enrolled in private universities set up for-profit" he noted, adding, "to guarantee success in higher education (public universities) need real improvements".

"Higher education is under attack for its costs, promoting inequality," noted Dr Courtney Brown, Vice President of Strategic Impact, Lumina Foundation, USA. Education systems analyst, David Cosier from Eurydice agrees pointing out that data from Europe indicates that 68 per cent of students going to university have parents who have degrees. "Inequality remains a strong feature in Europe," he said, adding that inequality needs to be addressed in the school system and early childhood.

A report released ahead of the fourth WAHED meeting by the [Asia Europe Meeting \(ASEM\)](#) warns that focused and consistent policies are needed to respond to a possible worsening of access and equity in HE for disadvantaged groups following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing upon a survey of national policies in 47 ASEM member countries, the report says less than a third (30 per cent) have specific higher education equity strategies, and only 34 per cent have specific targets related to access and success in higher education.

"In 84 per cent of countries COVID-19 has had a significant impact on policies related to equitable access and success," says the report prepared by Professor Atherton in association with Singapore-based [Asia Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#).

The report's focus is a change from the traditional arguments based on ethnic or religious minorities. It is on socio-economically

disadvantaged families and economically marginalized communities who could be within majority ethnic or religious communities. Thus, this issue also addresses [SDG 10](#) which is 'Reduced Inequalities' in society.

A point emphasized by many speakers at WAHED is the need to develop links between students in the final years of high school and universities so that they are aware of the opportunities available and the requirements for entry. This needs to be viewed as a development issue where education ministries would need to develop strategies with other development agencies.

"Role of higher education in development is an argument that has not been won," said Joanna Newman, chief executive and secretary-general of the [Association of Commonwealth Universities](#). "Access to higher education is still a privilege," she said, adding that we need to believe that "people who go to universities not only earn more for themselves but, also contribute to societies they live in".

Newman regrets that universities of today care more about rankings and competition, which has contributed to the view that universities are seen as ivory towers. "As a sector, we haven't made a cohesive argument why we matter in the development (equation)," she noted.

The challenge in Uganda, according to Maud Kamatenesi Mugisha, Vice-Chancellor of Bishop Stuart University, is to come up with good curriculum and facilities for online learning. She said that during the COVID pandemic only 3 or 4 universities were able to go online. "We need to look at new structures for teaching using ICTs," argues Mugisha. "E-learning needs to be affordable to people with limited financial resources."

Mugisha pointed out that Uganda not only needs good ICT networks but also energy to power the system. She recommends using solar power for it. "(During the pandemic) sometimes 15 students sat together at a home that had a laptop to join in their higher education," she said. "(Yet) some others have not accessed higher education for 2 years."

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Dr Hilligje van't Land, Secretary-General, [International Association of Universities](#) believes that equitable access to universities is a primary requirement of development. She pointed out that funding a good public school system is essential to a successful HE system.

"A well-educated citizenry is a requirement to build the foundation of social equity (in the society)" and thus who will go to university in 2030 will depend on "the quality of the education available to them (from childhood)".

Brunei, Bulgaria, and Malaysia offered some ideas to address this problem. The oil-rich sultanate of Brunei in Southeast Asia had both a high level of demand for HE as well as a high level of dropouts.

To address the latter issue, they developed an "enlightening choice" strategy by introducing a new law to prepare students for HE at the secondary school level. They also provided more HE courses with apprenticeships. "We want students to make choices at 15 so that at high school they work on it," said Anis Faudzulani Dzikiflee, of the Department of Higher Education of Brunei.

In Bulgaria according to Dr Ivana Radonova of the Ministry of Education and Science, they introduced a contract system between students and employers.

"Company will get a graduate who knows the company's requirements, (while) universities would know what the companies' requirements are," explained Dr Radonova. The state also guarantees loans to students in need and pays them off if they find difficulty in servicing the debts after graduation.

"Our higher education policy encourages universities to act socially responsible," she said, explaining how the government has set up a national map to work out where universities need to be built, "because we need to build universities to help in local development".

In Malaysia where a high percentage of young people go for some form of HE, the government has a vision 2030 strategy to develop human resources for the sector.

"We are introducing lifelong learning for non-traditional learners along with flexible pathways of learning," explained Prof Wan Zuhainis binte Saad, Director of Academic Excellence Division, Department of Higher Education.

These strategies, through open and distance learning, are not a temporary measure, she said, and it is part of a strategy to provide "bundled course models" for flexible learning. A system called 'EXCEL' is also being designed to offer "flexibility in passion-based learning," said Dr Saad.

Brown argued that universities have changed during the pandemic and they have created new opportunities and funding models to reach out to students. "If we are thinking of going back to (what it was in) 2019, I'm not optimistic," he said. "We need to work on these new models (to increase access to and equity in HE)".

Even in North America, university funding may need to be considered as a development issue. Brown pointed out that in the US, about 36 million drop out of university each year. "We need to understand our students' needs and design courses to suit them," he pointed out.

This may include evening courses, financial aid, and daycare for children as mature-age students and life-long learning takes shape. He noted that about 90 million working adults in the US have never considered HE because it's too expensive for them.

Be it in the US, Europe, Africa or across Asia, the new opportunities with online learning created to overcome the pandemic could be utilized to make HE more accessible and equitable, as it could be a life-long learning process integrated into the development needs of individual countries.

There have been 30 parallel WAHED events across the globe in a bid to establish networks to push for access and equity policies in HE. "If we are to take these issues forward, we need to think about how to frame it," argued Prof Atherton. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 November 2021]



## COP26: Final Communiqué Fails To Address Climate Change Impact On Food Security

Viewpoint by Kalinga Seneviratne



Photo credit: COP26 | UNFCCC

SYDNEY (IDN) — About a third of global gas emissions come from agriculture and land use, yet, the final communiqué of COP26 failed to make any direct reference to the relationship between climate action and the world’s food systems. This is at a time, when the [World Food Program \(WFP\)](#) has warned that up to 45 million people in 43 countries are on the brink of a famine.

For nearly three decades now, the United Nations has been bringing together almost every country on earth for an annual global climate summit—called COPs—which stands for ‘Conference of the Parties’. This year’s two weeks talkfest that ended on the weekend in Glasgow was the 26th, and in this quarter of a century climate change has transformed from a fringe issue that is of concerns to mainly Green parties to one which is in the mainstream of global politics and media attention.

The [Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\)](#), in a report released in April this year, estimated that more than 680 million family farms occupying 70-80 percent of the world’s farmland, produce about 80 percent of the world’s food. Yet, an issue that involves the livelihood of at least 3 billion people and has a direct impact on the achievement of food security as prescribed in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2, did not attract a

direct mention in any of the 97 clauses that were in the COP26 final communiqué.

In a communiqué that begins with the words, “*Recognizing* the role of multilateralism in addressing climate change and promoting regional and international cooperation in order to strengthen climate action in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty”, could not find space to refer to an issue that is central to eradicate poverty—food security. The preamble also refers to the “importance for some of climatic justice”, and it is dressed up as a human rights and social inequality issue, presumably to placate some civil society groups.

A number of clauses, such as clause 15, urge developed country Parties to “urgently and significantly scale up their provision of climate finance, technology transfer and capacity-building for adaptation so as to respond to the needs of developing country Parties as part of a global effort”. This is a line pushed by many developing countries at COP26, but, it lacked detailed commitments.

Clause 27 talks about a decision to establish a work programme to urgently scale up mitigation ambition—meaning measures to minimizing greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere. And clause 38 emphasizes the importance of protecting, conserving and restoring nature and

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

ecosystems with forests and other terrestrial and marine ecosystems acting as sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases—but no link to the farmlands and fisheries that is the lifeblood of millions of communities. Next clause says that they recognize “that enhanced support for developing country Parties will allow for higher ambition in their actions”.

In clause 44 there is an acknowledgement of the developed country Parties’ failure to mobilise \$100 billion annually by 2020 for mitigation actions (as agreed over a decade ago). Clause 73 says that COP26 had decided to establish the “Glasgow Dialogue Between Parties” to look at providing financial support to communities that are suffering from irreversible damage from climatic impacts. But, the developing countries have asked for a facility to be established for this purpose not another dialogue.

The thrust of the communiqué seems to be heavily focused on technological solutions to mitigate climatic change impacts on communities which puts developing countries at the mercy of mainly western technology and transfer. There is no hint of rich countries making sacrifices such as cutting their cattle or sheep herd numbers to reduce methane gas emissions. This was a reason why Australia and the US refused to sign into the methane gas emission reduction agreement.

London’s *Guardian* reported that none of the presidents of the UK’s four farming unions present at COP26 were willing to reduce livestock numbers and instead they told the *Guardian* that methane emissions could be dealt with through new technologies rather than reducing the number of cows on farms. Thomas Vilsack, the US secretary of agriculture, has also told the newspaper that he believes Americans can carry on eating the same amount of meat while keeping the world within safe limits on global heating.

“Food systems are largely absent from the climate conversations,” notes Ruth Richardson, president at the Global Alliance for the Future of Food. “And we know that when we look at food systems as a whole—when we’re talking about chopping down the rainforest for livestock

production, we’re talking about transporting beef across the country and long supply chains, and we’re looking at all the various aspects of food systems—we know that they are the No. 1 contributor to greenhouse gas emissions,” she told [Devex](#) adding, “unless we deal with food systems, we’re not dealing with climate.”

The proposed solutions from COP26 seem to go in two different direction but being presented as complimentary—reforestation on the one hand and technological innovation in agriculture on the other.

Rodney Ferguson, CEO of [Winrock](#), a US international development organization, argues that if small scale farmers are to be incorporated into climate-smart agriculture, it would require providing them with technology that they could afford to use and feed their families.

“If it remains an additional cost borne by a smallholder whose annual income may only be \$300 a year anyway and you’re asking he or she to implement methodologies or products—or not do things that may cost \$50—that’s never going to succeed,” he told [Devex](#).

There was however, one day—November 10—allocated for discussion of sustainable agriculture and land use called the ‘Nature and Land Use Day’. During the day a number of initiatives were announced including the Global Action Agenda on Innovation in Agriculture’ signed by 150 countries—a global initiative aimed at reaching 100 million farmers with net-zero and nature-positive innovations.

Though this don’t seem to have gone into the COP26 communiqué, Shane Holland of UK’s [Slow Food](#) welcomes such commitments but points out that similar pledges in 2010 by rich countries are yet to be realised. He also questions whose land would be earmarked for reforestation? Pointing out that, we need to tackle the causes of climate change at its source by ending the world’s hunger for global commodity crops such as soya (for feeding farm animals), and palm oil at its source. “Until we do this, global food will continue to drive climate change,” he adds. [IDN-InDepthNews – 15 November 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### As Political Leadership Falters, SGI Proposes Annual UN Youth Climate Summits

By Kurt Reynolds



Photo: The SGI (Soka Gakkai International), SGI-UK andn the Centre for Applied Buddhism (CfAB) co-organized youth forum in Glasgow. Credit SGI-UK

LONDON (IDN) — As the COP26 climate summit in Scotland was winding down, the long-term pledges and bountiful promises made by world leaders seemed never-ending—stretching all the way to 2070.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a global roadmap to achieve a radical

The targeted dates were a peek into the future, perhaps an uncertain future judging by failed promises: 2023, 2025, 2030, 2050 and 2070.

But a lingering question remains: how many of these world leaders will be politically alive to either help implement these pledges or live long enough to see them realized.

The chances are slim—which creates a significant role for a younger generation to take the lead role in the fight against climate change.

The Tokyo-based [Soka Gakkai International \(SGI\)](#), a global, community-based Buddhist social movement promoting peace, culture and education, was one of the lead campaigners in Glasgow sponsoring not only several side events but also urging more and more young people take up the responsibility of adopting solutions to the current climate emergency.

How can young people overcome barriers of marginalisation and prejudice—and how best

transformation of energy access and transition by 2030, while also contributing to net zero emissions by 2050.

The roadmap sets an aggressive timeline to ensure that 500 million more people gain access to electricity in a mere four years' time, by 2025, and 1 billion more people gain access to clean cooking solutions.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a net-zero emissions target, pledging India will become carbon neutral by 2070.

And political leaders from Canada and Germany said, in a joint statement, they expect "significant progress towards the US \$100 billion goal in 2022" while expressing confidence it would be met by 2023.

The leaders of the G20, comprising the world's major industrial nations, pledged to "pursue efforts" to limit the global average temperature rise to within 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

Meanwhile, a coalition of banks, investors and insurers, that collectively control \$130 trillion in assets, said it would commit to reaching net zero emissions across its investments by 2050.

can they be supported in achieving their visions for climate-resilient futures and climate justice?

The hope, expressed by SGI, is how best to envision stronger inter-generational collaboration and how to overcome divisive narratives of youth and adults bringing generations together to address the climate crisis based on a shared concern for our planet.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has proposed annual UN Youth Climate Summits leading to 2030 and has called for a Security Council Resolution mainstreaming youth participation in climate-related decision-making.

He rightly points out the world today is faced with a complex set of urgent crises that can only be described as unprecedented in the history of humankind.

In addition to the increasing incidence, every passing year, of extreme weather events that reflect the worsening problem of climate

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

change, the onslaught of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to threaten social and economic stability throughout the world.

"I use the term 'unprecedented' here not merely in reference to the overlapping and interlocking layers of crisis we are experiencing today. Humanity has been confronted with various kinds of challenges throughout its long history, yet it has never faced a situation in which the entire world is impacted at once, gravely threatening the lives, livelihood and dignity of people in countries everywhere, throwing them into conditions in which they find themselves requiring urgent assistance.", he said.

With 12 million members representing 192 countries and territories, the SGI's social mission is to establish respect for the dignity of life, in all its forms, as the foundation of society. SGI is also an international NGO in consultative status with the UN.

SGI's vision was reflected on November 8 in a statement made by former US President Barack Obama who helped clinch the [2015 Paris Climate agreement](#).

"The most important energy in this movement is coming from young people. And the reason is simple. They have more at stake in this than anybody else", he said, speaking at the COP26 summit, amid a standing ovation.

"I am the father of two daughters in their early 20s. it's not always easy being young today. For most of your lives, if you are in that generation, you've been bombarded about what the future would look like if we don't do anything about climate change," he declared.

In a statement released in Glasgow, SGI focused specifically on Youth Engagement and Leadership:

"Listening to the voices of young people is not optional; it is the only logical path forward if we are genuinely concerned about the future of our world. Youth have the clear-sightedness, the creativity and the boldness to lead us forward in ways that break down old stalemates and refresh our spirits. We must invest all our energy

in empowering and supporting them, working together with them to find solutions to all the problems we face."

At COP26, it is crucial, said SGI, that State Parties and negotiators:

- Record, share and amplify youth voices, including especially the outcomes of the Pre-COP Youth4Climate Event and the 16th Conference of Youth (COY16).
- Give real leadership opportunities related to climate issues to youth.

From a broader UN perspective, it is essential to:

- Hold regional- and national-level youth summits focusing on climate and other post-COVID challenges that we must face together.
- Establish a UN Youth Council that would regularize and sustain youth engagement and leadership.
- For the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution encouraging the mainstreaming of youth participation in climate-related decision-making, similar to Security Council Resolution 2250, which urges member states to strengthen the role played by young people in peace and security issues.

The underlying theme of the panel discussions, sponsored jointly by Soka Gakkai International-UK (SGI-UK) and Centre for Applied Buddhism @ Websters Glasgow, was "Sowing Seeds of Hope: Action for Climate Justice" and "Multi-faith dialogue Climate Justice—the power of faith communities acting together."

Among the discussions on the role of youth was one titled: "Beyond Rhetoric —Youth Leadership for Climate Action" where young climate activists from the Global South and North discussed the challenges and opportunities for youth on the frontlines of climate action and explore how to better facilitate intergenerational collaboration. [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 November 2021]

**Thailand: Monk Helps COVID Affected People to Embark on A New Sustainable Livelihood**

By Pattama Vilailert



*Photo: Phramaha Hansa with villagers in Khok Nong Na. Credit: Pattama Vilailert*

SISAKET, Thailand (IDN) — With a series of COVID-19 lockdowns, many workers in Bangkok and other major business cities like Pattaya, Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Samut Prakarn flocked to their hometowns. They are forced to seek ways to begin their new lives and rationalise how to live sustainably in the long term.

In Thailand, it is common to see laypeople giving alms to monks in the morning all over the country as part of merit-making before starting their day. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some monks have reversed roles in merit-making.

At Wat Ban Tha Khoi Nang, Phramaha *Hansa* Dhammhaso, abbot and director of the International Buddhist Studies College (IBSC), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya (University) translates timeless teachings of the Buddha into his community development work of 'Peace Village' (Khok Nong Na).

"Peace Village comes from four kinds of Buddha teachings on developments of physical, social, mental and intellectual (aspects) and I have turned them into our strategies to address ongoing problems", Phramaha *Hansa* told IDN.

"The first issue in the village is poverty (and) we need to create sustainable occupations (to address it). If people are still poor, how can we develop peace in the village?" he asks. "So, I apply the Sufficient Economy of King Rama IX's ideology to develop Khok Nong Na model".

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

The late King Bhumibol (Rama IX) introduced the concept of 'Sufficiency Economics' when Thailand faced a severe economic downturn in the late 1990s. There are three pillars underlining this economic model—moderation, reasonableness and self-immunity. All three are based on Buddhist philosophy.

According to His Majesty's official philosophy self-immunity outlines four areas that everybody should strive to achieve including: Immunity to changes in material circumstance, Immunity to social changes, Immunity to environmental changes and immunity to cultural changes.

In explaining the application of these Buddhist teachings to his village, Phramaha Hansa explains that the environment is important. "Many people tried to corrupt the land, so I told them to follow the 5 precepts (Panchasila), stressing on the 2nd precept: not to steal nor cheat, and eventually it worked out", he says happily.

"Lastly, villagers' well-being (is also important because) old people in the village have a lot of health problems, thus I brought my health expert students from Bangkok to train them on how to take care of themselves.

Also, in the misery time of COVID-19 lockdowns, I have helped a lot of Sisaket and adjacent province returnees to settle in their hometowns."

The Bank of Thailand revealed that since the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (from February-April 2020), 2 million workers moved in and out of cities. In the latter part of the year 2020 over 200,000 people per month were on the move. Most of them are aged 21-60 years (80%) and more than half are low-income people.

The laid-off workers migrating out of Bangkok and surrounding provinces like the main tourist cities such as Phuket and Chaing Mai were significant. The workers were unable to bear the cost of living in large cities and decided to return to their hometowns.

Bauchai, a migrant worker originally from Ban Tha Khoi Nang, Sisaket shares the same fate. Before the outbreak, she used to live in the vicinity of Bangkok and worked as a seamstress in a small factory for over 30 years.

"In February 2020, during the COVID-19 first wave, I saw the rising number of infected people, and later in April, it got worse, so I planned to move back to Sisaket permanently. At the end of 2020, I settled myself in Ban Tha Khoi Nang, my hometown", she told IDN.

In the first and the second waves of the outbreak (around February 2020-January 2021), there were enough hospital beds to cater to COVID-19 cases. As for the third wave from April-June 2021, community and city hospitals could only provide direct medical care and supervision to COVID-19 patients.

However, from late July to the middle of August 2021, the number of cases had continuously hiked from 15,000 to 22,000 a day. According to the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), the highest infected cases were clustered in Bangkok and major business cities like Samut Sakhon, Chon Buri and Samut Prakarn.

When the number of cases soared, the incident of bed scarcity happened in Bangkok and the main cities. The infected people had to go back to their hometowns for treatment and isolation.

"In Ban Tha Khoi Nang, Sisaket, from the middle of July to August 2021, sons and daughters of Sisaket's residents wanted to come back to the village, I reminded them to isolate themselves in our forest temple. Also, I together with the director of the hospital, set up field hospitals: the first hospital catered to 35 people while the second one could take care of 100 people," explained Phramaha Hansa.

"People that knew about this activity called me from Samut Sakhon, Ayutthaya, Samut Prakran and other provinces to ask if they could come for isolation and treatment here. I told them to do so and, in some cases, I sent the van to pick them up. Thus, so far I had helped around 1,400 people."

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Aside from setting up field hospitals, Phramaha *Hansa* was also a focal point for district and public health authorities to communicate with villagers and those that got infected. He was live on Facebook with the concerned authorities to inform people on ongoing treatment accessibility, isolation protocol and others.

Treatment and isolation are not the only contributions of Phramaha *Hansa*, “besides giving them food and water for 2 months, we have Khok Nong Na where they can learn about farming, growing organic vegetables and helping one another and in the long run, they can live sustainably”.

He also added that even though, the isolation and treatment ended, the farming in Khok Nong Na is still going on.

The villagers’ children who work in Bangkok and want to come back home in the future have shown interest in learning about farming in Khok Nong Na. Phramaha *Hansa* keeps inspiring the villagers’ children through his Facebook and Line application.

From this month, some of them will come back and learn farming for them to live a sustainable life in the long term as COVID-19 has taught them the impermanence of life—a basic component of Buddhist—and self-immunity philosophy is designed to cushion its negative impacts.

Malinee, a former Tha Khoi Nang village head has joined in several activities initiated by Phramaha *Hansa*. “Venerable’s works allowed me to work closely with villagers, sub-district and district authorities as such I was able to gain cooperation from them all. Phramaha *Hansa* addressed the root cause of the village’s problem by applying sufficient economic philosophy.

Khok Nong Na reduces expenses while increasing household income. His Peace Park also brings villagers to meditate from 5-6 p.m. every day, from there, villagers learn to live together harmoniously,” she told IDN.

The Thailand’s local development foundation suggests that the relocation to hometown rarely affects food security in the household because people could access natural resources and agricultural products.

However, 76% of Thai agricultural households have relied on non-farm income. The wave of urban migrant workers returning to villages during the COVID-19 pandemic is also an opportunity to create change in the agricultural sector, the backbone of Thailand’s economy and lifestyle.

Khok Nong Na that Phramaha *Hansa* Dhammaso is implementing has set two foundations for urban migrant workers and villagers to live sustainably to maintain physical needs together with fulfilling the mind with Dhamma (Buddhist teachings).

His model reflects pragmatic application of spiritual teachings to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs).

“Dhamma does not exist anywhere else; it is in paddy fields and farms. Wherever we decide to do farming, Dhamma appears and reveals for us to learn. Thus, we come to realize that our body composes of soil, water, fire and wind elements,” argues Phramaha *Hansa*.

“While working on the farms, we must be mindful and concentrate on what we are doing including seeking ways to manage land for living (sustainably) even though it is hard, we have to be patient”.

The energetic monk, who speaks fluent English and is a well-known Buddhist scholar in Thailand, acknowledge that the village farmers may not know Dhamma terminologies that well.

“Dhamma (law of nature) exists (everywhere) and it includes (the practice of) patience, mindfulness, wisdom, concentration and endeavours,” says Phramaha *Hansa* Dhammaso. [IDN-InDepthNews – 02 November 2021]

**“The first issue in the village is poverty (and) we need to create sustainable occupations (to address it). If people are still poor, how can we develop peace in the village?”**

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Climate Change: How This Crisis Will Impact the Achievement of The SDGs?

Viewpoint by Fernando Rosales\*



*Image credit: UNFCCC | Web Pixabay*

GENEVA (IDN) — The [SDGs \(Sustainable Development Goals\)](#) adopted in 2015 reflect the multilateral consensus to deal with the most crucial problems humanity is facing nowadays. The 17 goals are multidimensional and are interlinked with each other. At the same time, climate change crisis is the most serious threat to human life itself and it has deepened in the last 30 years. Even though, SDG 13 specifically relates to “Climate Action”, it is very likely that the climate crisis is also going to affect the achievement of many other SDGs.

Over 40 years ago, during the First World Climate Conference, the international community based on scientific findings expressed “...serious concern that the continued expansion of man's activities on Earth may cause significant extended regional and even global changes of climate”.

Since then, concerns and climate problems continued to grow around the world, leading the international community to adopt the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)) in 1992 during the Earth Summit.

The UNFCCC established the basic principles for international cooperation with provisions about the responsibilities of developed and developing countries. Historically, developed countries counted for around 70% of global carbon

emissions, even though they have represented only 20% of the world's population. The UNFCCC recognized that the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developed countries. Therefore, these countries have to face their responsibilities and it is expected that they take the lead to fight the climate crisis and support developing countries, including by providing financial support to the latter to comply with their obligations under the Convention.

This convention in turn, gave birth to the Paris Agreement (PA) in 2015 which establishes a global goal to “Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change”. Since then, countries have adopted National Determined Contributions (NDCs) establishing their own targets to achieve the goal mentioned above. The PA states that the NDCs are going to be reviewed after every five years with the hope of having more ambitious targets in each review.

Despite these advances in international cooperation, it remains insufficient to fight against the climate crisis. Global warming continues at an unprecedented rate. The last IPCC report on climate change, issued in August



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

2021, examined five scenarios about the likelihood to reach 1.5°C global warming in the next 30 years.

The analyses of this scientific body found that in each of the five scenarios, the 1.5°C global warming is exceeded sometime in the next 20 years (2021-2040).

Unfortunately, any increase in global warming is going to impact negatively on human life. According to the IPCC 2018, the effects of climate change are going to have negative impacts on almost every human activity.

This is the case of health for example where some vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever will increase. Heat waves will be more frequent causing more droughts and floods, making farming more difficult, lowering crop yields, and causing food shortages.

Rising seas will clearly impact people living in coastal regions, which may be submerged in the coming decades. Small island nations are particularly vulnerable in this regard. The Arctic is already close to having a summer with no ice. Once it happens, it will likely happen every year, which has not happened in at least two million years. Many species of insects, plants, and vertebrates will be at risk of extinction. The consequences will be far worse if the 2°C threshold is reached.

The situation does not look very promising. 2020 was already one of the three warmest years on record—the global average temperature was 1.2°C above the pre-industrial baseline and with just this temperature the world has witnessed serious flooding in western Europe, Japan, China, droughts in Iraq, extreme heat and wildfires in North America, South America, Australia and so on.

In May 2021, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) warned that there is about a 40% chance of the annual average global temperature temporarily reaching 1.5°C above the pre-industrial level in at least one of the next five years. In this context, the outcome of the UNFCCC Conference of Parties N° 26 (COP26) from October 31 to November 12, 2021 for more ambitious NDCs for 2030 to keep 1.5°C within

reach, is important for Global Goal on Adaptation, climate finance including the need for setting the new collective quantified (post-2025) goal and finalizing Article 6 in the Paris Rulebook.

The issues mentioned above are of critical importance for developing countries. One of the crucial issues that may enable developing countries to contribute better to the fight against climate change is climate finance. Governments in developing countries, are struggling with their socio-economic needs and increasing external debt. The COVID 19 pandemic has made the situation even more challenging.

Without the appropriate means of implementation these countries may not be able to achieve the PA goals. This is something that the international community, in particular developed countries, have to consider for taking decisive actions, in line with their international commitments, to support developing countries to fight the climate crisis.

One thing is clear, if the humanity is unsuccessful in stopping the climate crisis, it is going to be very challenging to achieve many SDGs by the 2030 timeframe. As explained above health will be affected, as well as food security, access to clean water and sanitation.

Climate change also is going to stress inequalities, since those who suffer the most during environmental crisis are vulnerable populations. [IDN-InDepthNews – 29 October 2021]

*\*The author is Coordinator of the Sustainable Development and Climate Change Programme (SDCC) of the South Centre.*



## Youth Group Fights to Save Indigenous Land on The Palawan Island in the Philippines

By Nena Palagi



Photo: Cleopatra's Needle, Sitio (district) Kalakasan, Gateway to Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH) site. Credit: Julian Plack

PUERTO PRINCESA, Palawan, Philippines (IDN) — It is a feat unimaginable by any modern standard. Six young people from this remote island of Palawan, in the Philippines, have taken on the goliaths of land ownership, and won. They got over 40,000 hectares of land legally declared as protected habitat with the direct endorsement from the Indigenous custodians.

The small non-profit [Centre for Sustainability PH \(CS\)](#) had been spearheading the campaign, helping local Indigenous Batak people since 2014. How did they do it? CS Co-founder and Advisor, Karina May (KM) Reyes, says it is through sheer grit and “resilience day in day out”, for the last seven years. They implement their mission through Land Conservation, Reforestation and Citizen Science.

They recently took their story to the global stage, to the [International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#). And next, will be the big world forum of COP 26 in Glasgow starting on October 31, which Reyes is attending.

At COP 26, Reyes will be embarking on a new role with world NGO, *One Tree Planted*. Carrying advocacy for the climate change agenda in the ASEAN (Southeast Asian) region, their story from Palawan Island and the Philippines, is going global.

The leadership of CS six-member youth team ranged from the ages of 17 to 28 years, when they first started out lobbying for the protection of Palawan’s rainforests. Most have grown up swimming in the pristine rivers and lakes of Palawan Island, which earned the title as the “Best Island in the World” (Travel and Leisure Magazine).

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Reyes—KM as she is affectionately called by Indigenous people—was born in Australia to Filipino heritage. When she visited Palawan a decade ago, she fell in love with the island and never left. Now, committed as ever to long-term sustainable environmental development and protection, she is determined to take their story to as far as the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People (HAC) international alliance, which represents at least 70 countries.

In preparation, CS recently held an online forum attended by a massive 740 young people in the Philippines, with a keynote address from Ambassador Mr. Zakri Abdul Hamid. Mr. Hamid is the Ambassador and Science Advisor for the Campaign for Nature, a global expert in the [UN Convention for Biodiversity](#), which was first launched at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

CS's project in Palawan, titled *CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE CRITICAL HABITAT (CNCH)* garnered support from local and national governments and international and commercial bodies, which allowed them to get to where they are now.

The significance of winning the protection of 'Cleopatra's Needle' in 2016<sup>[1]</sup>, as a critical habitat cannot be underestimated. It is the Philippines' biggest critical habitat and the ancestral domain of the disappearing Batak tribes in the island. It is home to 61 Palawan animal and plant species found nowhere else in the world, and 31 globally threatened species.

"We are guarding our forests and land because it is the source of our livelihood and key to our survival. We the Bataks live in the forest. And we have a tradition that we move from one part of the forest to another. It is part of our cultural practice to hold rituals and sacred gatherings," Teodorico Villarica, former Tribal Chieftain from Sitio (district) Kalakwasan, told IDN.

"For example, for the good harvest of Almaciga (sacred tree) resin and honey, we offer rituals before we use and collect forest products. In our forests there are many sacred animals and plant species that are also essential to our future survival. Many Indigenous communities among us rely on the forest for our food and also our

fresh water source," he added. Kalakwasan is the gateway to Cleopatra's Needle Forest.

The Philippines along with Indonesia and Malaysia is one of the only countries in Asia among 17 in the world that boasts having the most mega-diverse forests, oceans and wetlands. CNCH's western border is with Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, considered as one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature, and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

CS's work for the vast 41,350 hectares of protected land at Cleopatra's Needle contains the Philippine's last remaining pristine forest near the island's capital Puerto Princesa. In addition to Chieftain Villarica's community, CNCH is also saddled by six other significant districts. However, the mainly hunter-gatherer Batak tribes living in the forest, are fast dwindling down to just 200 members. Hence, there's a sense of urgency among the youth team to protect the last swathes of rainforest land left in Palawan.

Before Spanish colonization, 90-95 per cent of the Philippines Islands were forest cover. There's merely 3 per cent of forest left in the whole country at present, mostly in Palawan. The forest coverings have been heavily depleted by open pit mines, extreme agricultural land use, wildlife poaching and logging.

CS's guiding values in their work is about starting from the community and going back to the community for everything that they do. KM believes that without communities, environmental development is not sustainable.

"For us to reach a goal of saving at least 30 percent of our planet by 2030, we need to invest in Indigenous peoples and local communities. We need to be able to recognize and defend Indigenous tenurial (land) rights and Indigenous and community conserved areas," Reyes told IDN. "We also need to be able to provide for simple cash transfers to Indigenous communities to spearhead conservation measures so they can perform their roles since time immemorial," she adds.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Reyes points out that Indigenous peoples represent 5 per cent of the global population yet protect 80 per cent of global biodiversity. Also, that Indigenous lands represent 37 per cent of the world's natural lands and store 25 percent of the world's remaining above-ground carbon.

"As Indigenous people we've directly witnessed the harm done by overharvesting the Almaciga tree over our livelihood. Our sacred resources such as the Almaciga tree, rattan wood and honey, we the Bataks are careful that we do not abuse its use. We think that in the future there'll be nothing left if we abuse its use," says Villarica.

He argues that their harvesting practices will benefit future generations. "We apply in our practise the right time to plant and harvest, to make sure that the Almaciga tree is mature before harvesting. We only tap its resin when it is ready to do so," explains the former chieftain. He added that along with CS they have planted 3000 trees to avoid soil erosion and regenerated 10,000 seedlings for their "precious tree which takes a lifetime to grow."

"Indigenous communities only spend 16 to 23 percent of the budget of global conservation institutions with the same outcomes," says Reyes. Because of her unrelenting work, KM has been awarded a National Geographic Explorer grant since 2018. While with CS, she was also awarded the Ten Accomplished Youth Organizations of the Philippines (TAYO) Award.

Reyes, whose background is in peace and international studies with a degree from Australia's University of New England, believes the Indigenous peoples are the best custodians of sustainable development over their land. And this is what she continues to lobby for to whoever is willing to listen and become their partner.

"For the first time the Indigenous Bataks have a legal paper which says as the land's custodians they have first rights to the area through the Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat declaration," points out Reyes. "We break barriers by telling

our decision makers that because of Indigenous people's original expertise from time immemorial, we continue to preserve our last pristine forests. And that they must tap into this Indigenous expertise and invest in it."

"KM and her CS team have been working patiently to understand our Indigenous culture. So, we really appreciate what they've done for us," says Villarica. "CS had been with us from the beginning (of the campaign) and when finally, Cleopatra's Needle was declared legally as a critical habitat, it was one of our greatest achievements together."

CS has trained many Bataks as wildlife enforcers and they are now gearing up for more battles to save other indigenous land in Palawan Island. CS continues to navigate wildlife poaching, illegal logging, land grabbing, large-scale mining and now encroachment from developers.

"It's really a race against time for many of us young people. We are very conscious that Indigenous Palawenyos, affected by climate change, can't even participate in world debates directly affecting them," notes Reyes, adding, "our island Palawan is situated on a geo-political hotspot".

Palawan islands borders the disputed South China Sea and the Philippines government had officially designated this very area as part of the country's exclusive economic zone. "(This area) is now included among the contested area by China. This makes our work in this beloved Island even more urgent," concludes KM Reyes. [IDN-InDepthNews – 29 October 2021]



*Photo (right above): The young members of the Centre for Sustainability (CS) team with co-founder and advisor K.M Reyes in extreme left. Credit: J.R Lapuz*

## Without Tourists Thailand's Famous Massage Industry on The Brink of Collapse

By Pattama Vilailert



*Collage of pictures: (left) Shuttered massage parlours in Pratunam area and Rachanee: With massage business down, Rachanee sells BBQ pork in the pavement outside her apartment. Credit: Pattama Vilailert.*

BANGKOK (IDN) — Thailand's famous tourist industry has been synonymous with its traditional massage parlours and treatment centres. But the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns are having a serious impact on the industry and may force foreign takeovers. The continuous lockdowns have impacted savagely on the spa and massage business.

The [Thai Spa Association](#) president Krod Rojanastien revealed in an interview with the *Manager* Newspaper here, that since the pandemic's first wave last year, when tourism traffic came almost to a halt, over 80% of spa and Thai massage businesses have been closed in line with the lockdown orders with job losses of over 200,000.

Ratchanee is a single mother of two girls. She was a Spa Manager in Pratunam in the Central Bangkok area. Before the outbreak, she earned over \$1,000 a month from her fixed salary and massage services which she also provided to customers when there were not enough masseurs to cater to the influx of foreign tourist clients.

"My life has turned upside down from the closure of my spa business," Ratchanee told IDN. "We have been closed since early 2020, (and) even at the end of the two earlier waves when the

government allowed massage and spa business to open for the locals that didn't help me to make a living."

The main customers of her spa were tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, and India among others. With no international tourists coming into Thailand, her spa remains closed. Now, she must change her career path and leave the job she loves the most. She is forced to sell grilled pork on the sidewalk near her rented apartment in a Bangkok suburb. She is still waiting to receive some money from the government stimulus package.

Thai massage has gained popularity around the world. It is believed that it has been practiced in the kingdom for around 2,500–7,000 years. Thai massage has its unique characteristic of the combination of yoga and Thai medicine, which works with the body's energetic pathways. Another distinguished feature of Thai massage is during the massage, customers will lie down on the floor, not on the table and they would be fully clothed.

Thai traditional massage or Nuad Thai is regarded as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare and in 2019 UNESCO placed Thai massage on the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

In 2019, Thai tourism revenue accounted for \$62 billion, while the spa and massage business earned around \$900 million with a promising annual growth rate of 8%. [Global Wellness Institute](#) has estimated that Thailand is a destination for over 12.5 million tourists coming for health and wellness tourism each year. The government has introduced a policy to promote Thailand as a Spa Capital of Asia. Currently, there are over 8,600 spa and massage places all over Thailand, but how many of these would survive the pandemic is a big question.

During the series of lockdowns, some local small business owners received subsidies of 5,000 Baht (about \$150) for 3 months during the first wave lockdown. But many of the spa businesses are also owned by foreigners.

To judge the impact of the pandemic on the spa/massage industry, one just needs to go to the Pratunam area adjacent to the famous shopping centres in Bangkok, which are normally crowded with tourists. Most have been closed permanently since the first wave hit Bangkok in the first quarter of 2020.

The following sums up the situation.

The smaller operators and locally owned massage shops have adapted themselves by offering massage at home service or temporary shifting to other small businesses so that they can survive. Frustrated with prolonging lockdowns from COVID-19, the massage and spa operators filed a lawsuit against the Thai government in August this year. They demanded 200-million-baht (\$5.9 million) compensation. They claim that the government did not have any plans for them to continue their livelihood.

In a recent interview with *Biznews*, Rojanastien expressed concerns that most local operators may not be able to survive the current crisis, and with the Chinese constituting the biggest tourism market, Chinese businesspeople with deep pockets may take over these spa businesses. He claimed that he's already noted such movements with Chinese learning to do Thai massage.

In a bid to keep the spa industry afloat, the government has allowed spa and massage places to reopen from September 1, but only to serve the local customer. Sky, who is a masseur at a massage place in Makkasan, near Pratunam says her major customers were foreign tourists from India, Malaysia, and Singapore who came shopping in Pratunam. "I have been doing massage for 12 years and earned around 500 dollars monthly before the outbreak," she told IDN.

During three waves of COVID-19 where there were no foreign customers, she neither went back to her hometown in the northeast nor shifted her career path. She just stayed over at the shop since the Thai owner provided accommodation and some food for staff. She has relied on government stimulus packages, which have been given to those out of jobs resulting from COVID-19. She sometimes had to borrow money from loan sharks to survive. "Since this month, I can do massage again, but there are only a few customers daily. There's less demand because local Thais also earn less during the pandemic. I may have to go back to settle in my village," she says sadly.

Wesda owns a Thai massage shop on a small road opposite to Indra Hotel, the main shopping area of Bangkok. Her main customers were tourists from Korea, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India. Before the outbreak, she used to earn around \$3,000 a month. During the three waves of lockdowns, in the beginning, she made a living from interpreting the Thai language for some Vietnamese living in Pratunam. However, for the 2nd and 3rd waves lockdown, the Vietnamese had gone home.

"I used to have 17 masseurs, 7 permanent and 10 part-time ones. When the pandemic came most of my masseurs went back to their hometowns. Three part-time masseurs are working with me, right now," she says. "Even though my business has suffered tremendously, I still have to pay the rent of 25,000 Bhat (\$740) monthly, after the landlord gave me a 50 per cent discount along with electricity and water bills." [IDN-InDepthNews – 02 October 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Security Challenges We Face Are Climate and Disease, World Leaders Need to Rise Up

By Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama\*



*Photo: Prime Minister of Fiji addressing the UN General Assembly virtually on September 25, 2021. Source: PM's official Website.*

SUVA (IDN) — The United Nations report to the UN General Assembly this year is titled “Our multilateral challenges: UN 2:0” a Common Agenda the blueprint for a future that is better, greener, and safer—and I would humbly add, “bluer”.

We want that future for Fiji. We want islands inhabited by citizens who stand with nature and not against it. We want sustainable economic growth that is powered by clean energy and protected from the impacts of climate change.

We want robust and resilient health systems, and we want good jobs and income supported by a green and blue economy. To succeed, our vision must become the vision of humanity, because our fate is the world's fate.

The world's present course leads nowhere near the future we want for ourselves. A deadly pathogen is burning through humanity like a bushfire—and inequity is fanning the flames. This year alone, climate-driven floods, heatwaves, fires, and cyclones have killed hundreds and inflicted unsustainable economic damage. We humans are the cause, but we are refusing to become the solution.

The UN Secretary General's recommendations in “Our Common Agenda” are spot on. We must meet this moment with a new UN—a new energy, new resources, and new bonds of trust with the people this institution serves.

A new UN that empowers those on the margins of society—particularly women and girls—and brings them into the centre of global decision-making.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

In the past year, it has become clearer that we face two pandemics—one that is ending for the wealthy nations and one that is worsening across much of the developing world. That widening chasm can be measured in lives lost and in years of economic progress undone.

Across the Global South, what the world once branded as “sustainable development” is unravelling before our eyes. Hundreds of millions of jobs have been lost, hundreds of millions of people cannot access adequate food, and an entire generation has had their education disrupted. The wounds of this crisis will cripple us for years if left untreated.

Fiji’s experience shows how an equitable recovery can begin. It starts by getting jabs in arms, fast. After one full year with zero local COVID cases, the insidious Delta variant crept into our country and sparked a deadly second outbreak. After a slow start while we scrambled to acquire enough vaccines, we are winning the battle.

Over 98% of adults across our 110 populated islands have one jab of the vaccine, and more than 67% are fully vaccinated. We thank India, Australia, New Zealand and the United States for helping us secure the doses we needed.

Our mission now is to recover the more than 100,000 jobs lost to the pandemic and to recoup a 50% loss in Government revenues. Soon, Fiji will reopen to tourism and to regional and international business. We will look to accelerate investment trends, like increased digitization, that will modernize our economy and help it recover.

But Fiji’s victory over the virus will be short-lived unless the global community can accelerate vaccinations everywhere. It is appalling that wealthier countries are already considering third doses or boosters for their citizens while millions of people—including frontline healthcare workers—in the developing world cannot access a single dose. Globally, thousands of lives are still being lost every day to the virus. The majority represent our collective failure to make vaccines available to developing countries.

Vaccine nationalism must end. The G7, G20, and multilateral financial institutions have failed to stop it. Only the UN can fill this void of leadership. I join other leaders in calling on the UN to convene an urgent special meeting of Leaders to agree to a time bound, costed, and detailed plan for the full vaccination of developing countries.

Vaccine inequity is a symptom of a much larger injustice, one that is inherent to the international economic system. This injustice is the unequal distribution of finance, or access to finance, that can fuel a recovery.

While wealthy nations have propped up their economies by printing and investing trillions at near zero interest rates, developing nation—particularly small states—have had to borrow at punitive rates to simply keep our people alive, fed, and healthy.

Through the pandemic, my government rolled out the largest cash transfer program in our history—providing hundreds of millions of dollars in unemployment benefits to nearly one-third of Fiji’s adult population. We even expanded some of our social protection programs, including pensions for the elderly, and financial support for the differently abled and other vulnerable communities.

The alternative was mass destitution, which we would not accept. But to pay for it, we had to take on debt, precipitated by massive reduction in Government revenue.

We need a more innovative framework for development finance that recognises the unique needs of SIDS (Small Island Developing States). And we must adopt a more sophisticated framework of assessing debt sustainability that incorporates the urgency of building resilience and breaks free of the norms of the 20th century.

This pandemic has been a painful lesson about where unilateral action can lead and where our multilateral institutions are unwilling to go. We must find new frontiers of co-operation if we stand any chance of averting future pandemics—or staving off the worst of climate change. If small States are to build back



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

greener, bluer, and better, we will need an equal voice about and vote on decisions that determine our future. Small States need our interests heard, understood, and acted upon.

Despite all the talk we hear of saving the planet, the world's collective commitments are paltry. Akin to spitting into the strengthening winds of climate-fuelled super-storms.

The climate is on track for 2.7 degrees Celsius of global warming, which would ensure the loss of entire low-lying nations in the Pacific and huge chunks of global coastlines. It guarantees frequent devastation from floods, cyclones, coastal inundations, and wildfires. It spells climate-driven conflict, mass migration, and the collapse of food systems and ecosystems. It is appalling. It is unimaginable. But it is where we are headed.

Since March 2020, Fiji has experienced three cyclones—two of which approached Category Five intensity. Fijians are strong people. We endured much, and we will endure more still. But I am tired of applauding my people's resilience. True resilience is not just defined by a nation's grit but by our access to financial resources.

Today, SIDS are able to access less than 2 per cent of the available climate finance. To build a truly resilient Fiji, we need access to fast-deploying targeted grants, long-term concessionary financing and financial tools and instruments established through public-private collaboration and partnership.

The Fijian economy depends on a healthy ocean and so we are taking bold strides to reverse its current decline. We have committed to 100 per cent sustainable management of EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) and 30 per cent declared as marine protected areas by 2030. We are expanding investments in sustainable aquaculture, seaweed farming, and high-value processed fish.

But we cannot do this alone. We look to the global system to stop illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. We look to UN member states to agree to a new treaty to preserve marine in waters beyond national jurisdictions.

In one month, we meet in Scotland for a hugely consequential COP. The Pacific's mission in Glasgow is clear: we must keep the 1.5 target alive.

This demands drastic emissions cuts by 2030 that put large nations on a path towards net-zero emissions before 2050.

Leaders who cannot summon the courage to unveil these commitments and policy packages at COP26 should not bother booking a flight to Glasgow. Instead, they—and the selfish interests they stand for—should face consequences that match the severity of what they are unleashing on our planet.

We do not tolerate war between States. So, how can we tolerate war waged against the planet, on the life it sustains, and on future generations? That is the firm red line Pacific nations will draw in Glasgow. We are demanding net-zero emissions and accepting zero excuses.

At COP26, the global north must finally deliver on \$100 Billion per year in climate finance and agree to a pathway to increase financing commitments to at least \$750 Billion per year from 2025 forward.

If we can spend trillions on missiles, drones, and submarines, we can fund climate action. It is criminal that vulnerable Pacific Small Island Developing States can access a mere 0.05% of the climate finance currently available to protect ourselves from an existential crisis we did not cause.

These are the challenges we face, and we must find the courage to face them squarely. The consequences of not doing so are simply unthinkable. [IDN-InDepthNews — 28 September 2021]

*\*Fiji Islands Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama is the current Chair of the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum. Addressing the UN General Assembly virtually on September 25, he called on the global community to embrace Fiji's vision of a better, greener, bluer and safer future for humanity.*

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Tackling Global Hunger at Its Roots

Viewpoint by Bhikkhu Bodhist

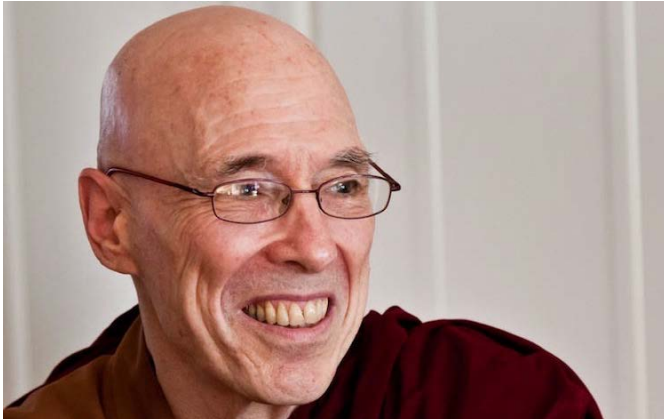


Photo: Bhikkhu Bodhi. Source: Buddhistdoor

Bhikkhu Bodhi is founder of [Buddhist Global Relief](#). Born Jeffrey Block in 1944, he is an American Theravada Buddhist monk, ordained in Sri Lanka and currently teaching in the New York and New Jersey area.

NEW YORK (IDN) — The Buddha teaches that to effectively solve any problem we have to remove its underlying causes. While the Buddha himself applies this principle to the ending of existential suffering, the same method can be used to deal with many of the challenges we face in the social and economic dimensions of our lives.

Whether it be racial injustice, economic disparities, or climate disruption, to resolve these problems we have to dig beneath the surface and extricate the roots from which they spring.

A recent media report from Oxfam International, *The Hunger Virus Multiplies*, adopts just such an approach to global hunger. While the COVID pandemic has driven world hunger to the outer margins of our awareness, the report points out that more people are actually dying each day from hunger than from the virus. The death rate from COVID is estimated at 7 lives per minute, but hunger claims 11 lives per minute.

Since its arrival, however, the coronavirus has pushed the mortality rate from hunger even higher than under pre-pandemic conditions. Over the past year, according to the report, the pandemic has driven 20 million more people to

extreme levels of food insecurity, while the number living in famine-like conditions has risen sixfold, to more than 520,000.

The report traces the death rate from acute hunger to three deep causes, which it calls “the lethal Cs”: conflict, COVID, and the climate crisis. *Conflict* is the single most potent driver of global hunger, pushing nearly 100 million people in 23 countries to crisis levels of food insecurity and even to famine.

Conflict not only disrupts agricultural production and blocks access to food, but in a war of attrition it is common for the hostile parties to use starvation as a deliberate weapon to crush their opponents. They may block humanitarian relief, bomb local markets, set fields ablaze, or kill livestock—thereby depriving people, especially hapless civilians, of access to food and water.

*Economic hardship*, the second major factor driving global hunger, has been exacerbated over the past two years by the COVID pandemic. The pandemic has forced lockdowns around the globe, driving up poverty levels and causing sharp spikes in hunger. Last year, poverty increased by 16% and over 40 million people in 17 countries faced severe hunger. As food production has declined, food prices around the world rose last year by almost 40 percent, the highest rise in over a decade.

This has made food, even when available, unaffordable for many people. Those hit hardest have been women, displaced populations, and informal workers.

At the same time, the corporate elite have turned the pandemic into a windfall, reaping unprecedented profits.

In 2020, the wealth of the ten richest people increased by \$413 billion, and the trend toward increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the privileged few continues this year as well.

The third driver of global hunger is *the climate crisis*. This past year extreme weather events

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

related to climate change have caused unprecedented damage. According to the report, climate disasters—storms, floods, and droughts—pushed nearly 16 million people in 15 countries to crisis levels of hunger. Each climate disaster, the report states, leads us downward into deepening poverty and hunger. Tragically, the countries hit hardest by climate shocks are those with the lowest levels of fossil fuel consumption.

Looking at the crisis of global hunger from a Buddhist point of view, I would hold that beneath the three causes of hunger outlined in the Oxfam report there lies a deeper web of causation that ultimately stems from the human mind. At the base of conflict and war, extreme economic inequality, and ever more deadly climate devastation we would find the “three root defilements”—greed, hatred, and delusion—along with their many offshoots.

Although we cannot expect that these dark dispositions of the human mind will ever be extirpated on a global scale, if we are to solve the interwoven problems of hunger and poverty, we must mitigate, at least to a sufficient extent, their collective manifestations.

Ultimately, the persistence of hunger in our world is a moral failure as much as a sign of flawed policies. To significantly reduce global hunger we need not only wise policies—as critical as these may be—but a fundamental reorientation in our values that cuts at the roots of economic injustice, militarism, and environmental destruction. Without such inner changes, policy changes will inevitably be limited in impact and diluted by those opposed to them.

I would posit two internal changes as most crucial to our efforts to eliminate poverty and hunger. One is *a widening of our sense of empathy*, a willingness to embrace in solidarity all those who daily face the harsh struggle to subsist. The other is *an intelligent grasp of our long-range good*, the wisdom to see that our real common good extends far beyond narrow economic indicators, that we all flourish when we create the conditions for everyone to flourish.

We already have at our disposal the means of tackling each of the drivers of global hunger identified in the Oxfam report. What we need is the foresight, the compassion, and the moral courage to enact them and promote them on a sufficiently wide scale.

Empathy is indispensable, and for this we need to expand our sense of identity, to learn to regard those facing daily hardships not as mere abstractions—as statistics or distant “others”—but as human beings fully endowed with inherent dignity. We must see them as essentially like ourselves, sharing our basic desire to live, thrive, and contribute to their communities. We must see that their lives matter to them—and to those who love them—as much as our lives matter to each of us.

But empathy on its own is not enough. We also need a clear insight into our true long-term good as a species sharing a common planet. This means we must look beyond profits and stock values as our criteria of success, taking other standards than rapid economic growth and returns on investments as the ends of global policy. Instead, we must give priority to the values critical to social solidarity and planetary sustainability.

These should include, at minimum, providing economic security to all, pursuing racial and gender equality, and protecting the natural environment from reckless exploitation and destruction by commercial interests.

Certainly, we should continue to advocate for the policies and programs offered as antidotes to world hunger. But behind such policies and programs we need changes in our views and attitudes: a right understanding of the human good and a broad commitment to the well-being of all who share this planet with us.

By widening our vision, we would see that we can only fully flourish when we establish the conditions for everyone to flourish. With a wide sense of empathy, we’ll strive to create a world in which no one has to go hungry. [IDN-InDepthNews — 19 September 2021]

## Pakistan's Islamic Community Development Pioneer Bags Alternative Nobel Prize

By Kalinga Seneviratne

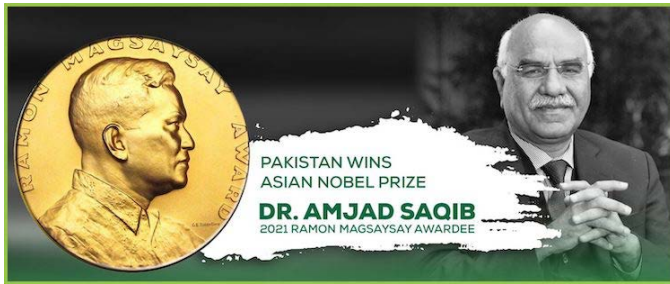


Photo: Muhammad Amjad Saquib. Credit: Akhuwat.

SYDNEY (IDN) — One of the five winners of this year's Ramon Magsaysay Awards—known as Asia's Nobel Prizes—is Dr Muhammad Amjad Saquib the founder of Pakistan's biggest community development network Akhuwat that is based on Islamic principles of sharing and brotherhood.

Launched in 2001, hundreds of thousands of poor families have been supported through Akhuwat's interest-free microfinance loans. Islamic law prohibits interest on loans, but Islamic teachings that encourage followers to set aside a portion of one's wealth to help the needy assist to finance this model.

"It is definitely an Islamic development model," argues Fatimah Shah, a Pakistani international development professional. "Akhuwat's no-interest financial model, where lending is based on trust and encourages options for group lending to foster a sense of community; is fundamentally rooted in core Islamic values."

Akhuwat's core program, [Akhuwat Islamic Microfinance \(AIM\)](#), provides interest-free loans to the underprivileged to enable them in creating sustainable pathways out of poverty. With 800 plus branches in over 400 cities across Pakistan, AIM is the largest interest-free microfinance program in the world.

Dr Saquib was intellectually and professionally well prepared for the role when he embarked on setting up Akhuwat. After graduating from King Edward Medical College in Lahore, he completed a Masters's degree in Public Administration from American University Washington through a Hubert Humphries Fellowship. From 1985 to

2003 he served in the civil service of Pakistan during which he realized that government programs were not designed to help the poor, especially the women—even when they claim to do so.

Akhuwat has "adopted" hundreds of neglected and non-functioning public schools and established four residential colleges (one of them for women), and soon a university, for poor and deserving students. Established in 2015, Akhuwat College is a residential college that caters to students from low-income households who despite their talent and desire to pursue education, are unable to do so due to financial constraints. Their Learning Hubs provide education and vocational training to children of unknown parentage, who are often found in alleys plagued by drugs, prostitution, and violence.

The organization encourages the education of women, and Akhuwat College for Women and their website says that its philosophy is based on "the firm belief that no nation can progress without investing in the education of women". Located in Chakwal, the Akhuwat College for Women is a residential campus, housing women from all over the country with young women who receive merit-based admissions.

Akhuwat runs a health services program, helping hundreds of thousands of patients; a "clothes bank" that has distributed more than three million clothes for the needy; and a program of economic, health, and psycho-social services for the discriminated khwajasira (transgender) community.

In nominating Dr Saquib to receive the 2021 Ramon Magsaysay Award, the board of trustees said in the citation that they "recognize the intelligence and compassion that enabled him to create the largest microfinance institution in Pakistan; his inspiring belief that human goodness and solidarity will find ways to eradicate poverty; and his determination to stay with a mission that has already helped millions of Pakistani families".

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Dr Saqib dedicated this award to the poor beneficiaries of Akhuwat and to the Pakistani nation. He said this award is an endorsement of Akhuwat, interest-free lending model, and a tribute to the compassion and integrity of his nation. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan in a tweet congratulated Dr Saqib for winning "Asia's highest honour" and he added: "We are proud of his achievement as we move forward in creating a welfare state based on Riyasat-e-Madina Model."

"Akhuwat in its entirety—its name, its central philosophy, its slogan of Iman-Ihsan-Ikhlas (faith-kindness-sincerity), and its financial approach is designed on Islamic social and financial principles. Akhuwat is derived from Mawakhaa't which means Brotherhood; a principle that defined the way the Prophet catalyzed the integration of immigrants from Makkah into the social and financial fabric of Yathrib (Medina)," Fatimah explained to IDN in an interview.

Akhuwat's success is another example of how the global banking model based on interest payments fuelling the system is not serving the poor. "It is a phenomenal story even in sheer numbers; starting with a single loan of less than 200,000 Pakistani Rupees (approximately, 3000 USD) in 2001, to over 140 billion Pakistani Rupees worth of interest-free loans that continue to help over 20 million people." Amjad Saqib has successfully managed to manifest his empathy and selflessness into a cyclic social endeavour. His philosophy is not just to do good himself, but to encourage and help others in joining hands to help" Fatimah adds.

Akhuwat uses places of worship for loan disbursements, saving on costs, and also promotes volunteerism among staff and clients. It aims at transforming borrowers into donors. Akhuwat model is sometimes compared to the famous Grameen Bank model of Professor Muhammad Yunus from fellow South Asian predominantly Muslim nation of Bangladesh. But the Grameen model does charge interest on its micro-loans. There are similarities in the two models, says Dr Faiz Shah, Director of Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology in

Bangkok. "Primary function of both organizations is to provide access to finance through social capital and social collateral," he adds, "loaning to the unbankable, that is the similarity".

Dr Faiz points out that Professor Yunus has never claimed that Grameen Bank is an Islamic model. "It's simply a loan program that is sometimes seen as savings and loan program. It is driven by a commitment to social development. The Grameen principle is that anyone who subscribes to a Grameen programme would contribute to a community building or nation-building program," he explained to IDN. "Akhuwat is simply driven by a motivation to tap into a reservoir of Islamic welfare funding. Which is enunciated in the principles of the Islamic faith... motivated by the principle of brotherhood in Islam."

Today, Akhuwat is the largest microfinance institution in Pakistan, offering a package of loans for the poor. It has distributed 4.8 million interest-free loans amounting to the equivalent of USD 900 million, helping three million families, with a remarkable 99.9% loan repayment rate. In the Covid-19 pandemic, Akhuwat responded with emergency loans and grants, food relief, and other assistance in over a hundred cities in Pakistan.

Dr Faiz, who is a Pakistani, points out that it's important to underscore the fact that one of the tenants on the five pillars of Islam is charity, in which one-fortieth of whatever one earns has to be spent in a way to helping another human being through a difficult time. "The state can administer this, but it's also a personal obligation on Muslims," he says.

"Muslims can do it in a variety of ways, and this percentage has to be deducted from any holding that a Muslim has and be spent for community development or helping people in need" explains Dr Faiz. "You could say that the inspiration of Akhuwat is very firmly rooted in the Islamic development model, (adopted to) modern times, in its modern implementation or its modern interpretation of the application." [IDN-InDepthNews — 15 September 2021]

## Amid Widespread Military Conflicts & Civil Wars, UN Promotes the Culture of Peace

By Thalif Deen



*Image credit: United Nations*

NEW YORK (IDN)— Since its creation 76 years ago, the United Nations has been preoccupied with one of its primary mandates, namely, maintaining international peace and security.

But over the years, that mandate has been extended to include peacekeeping, peace-building, nuclear disarmament, preventive diplomacy, and more recently, a culture of peace.

A former UN Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan, provided a classic definition when he said: “Over the years, we have come to realize that it is not enough to send peacekeeping forces to separate warring parties.

It is not enough to engage in peace-building efforts after societies have been ravaged by conflict. It is not enough to conduct preventive diplomacy’

“All of this is essential work,” he said, “but we want enduring results. We need, in short, the culture of peace.”

UN Secretary General António Guterres told delegates at the virtual High-Level Forum on the Culture of Peace on September 7: “Not since the United Nations was founded have we faced such a complex and multidimensional threat to global peace and security”.

In the face of this grave danger, he stressed, it is more important than ever to work for a culture of peace, as the essential foundation for global cooperation and action.

The concept of a culture of peace, he said, has its genesis in an initiative put forward more than 20 years ago by Anwarul K. Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi diplomat and former senior UN official.

Ambassadors have met annually since 2012 to uphold their commitment to the [Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace](#), which the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus and without reservation on September 13, 1999, said Guterres.

The keynote speech at the high-level forum was delivered by Dr. Beatrice Fihn, Executive Director of Nobel Peace Prize winning organization, International Coalition for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons ([ICAN](#)). She is the Sixth Nobel Peace laureate as the keynote speaker at the Culture of Peace Forums. She said she was honoured to say proudly that all of them are distinguished women Nobel laureates.

Ambassador Chowdhury, the initiator of that historic 1997 General Assembly resolution, told delegates that many treat peace and culture of peace synonymously. But there is a subtle difference between peace as generally understood and the culture of peace, he pointed out.

“Actually, when we speak of peace we expect others, namely politicians, diplomats or other practitioners to take the initiative while when we speak of the culture of peace, we know that initial action begins with each one of us”, said Ambassador Chowdhury, founder of [The Global Movement of the Culture of Peace \(GMCoP\)](#) and former UN Under-Secretary-General.

For more than two decades, Ambassador Chowdhury has helped advance the culture of peace “which aims at making peace and non-violence a part of our own self, our own personality—a part of our existence as a human being.”

In 1997, he took the lead in proposing, along with other Ambassadors, in a letter to the newly-elected Secretary-General Kofi Annan to include

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

a specific, self-standing agenda item of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on culture of peace.

A new agenda item was thus agreed upon after considerable negotiating hurdles and the new item was allocated to the plenary of the General Assembly for discussion on an annual basis.

The General Assembly also adopted a resolution to declare the year 2000 the "International Year for the Culture of Peace", and in 1998, a resolution to declare the period from 2001 to 2010 as the "[International Decade for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World](#)".

On September 13, 1999, the United Nations adopted the Declaration and Programme of Action on the Culture of Peace, a monumental document that transcends boundaries, cultures, societies and nations.

"It was an honour for me to Chair the nine-month long negotiations that led to the adoption of this historic norm-setting document by consensus," said Ambassador Chowdhury.

Asked to assess the progress made so far, he told IDN: "At this year's annual UN High Level Forum on The Culture of Peace on September 7, as the Chair of its Panel Discussion, I repeated my concern that unfortunately, the Culture of Peace has yet to attain its worth and its due recognition at global as well as at national levels as a universal mandate for the humanity to attain sustainable peace in the true sense."

Asked about the prospects for the future and any plans to advance the concept in the UN system, he said the Declaration and Programme of Action on Culture of Peace adopted in 1999 by consensus without any reservation is a landmark document of United Nations.

"The Organization should own it and internalize its implementation throughout the UN system. There seems to be lethargy in that direction because, I believe, the Secretary-General needs to make the culture of peace a part of his leadership agenda. We should get that attention and engagement from him."

Also, he said, the UN entities, at least most of them, are preoccupied with what is known as

"active agenda" which is a kind of daily problem-solving or problem-shelving.

"That means no opportunities to focus on longer term, farsighted objective of sustainable peace with a workable tool that UN possess in the culture of peace programme adopted by itself. It is like a person who needs a car to go to work and has a car... but with a minimal interest in knowing how to drive it," he declared.

Meanwhile, according to a concept note, this year's theme for the High-Level Forum was expected "to provide a platform to explore and discuss multiple ways and means for empowering all segments of the society, towards a resilient recovery, including by ensuring vaccine equity, bridging digital divide, ensuring equality and empowerment of women and harnessing the power of youth, among others".

Over the years the scope of the Culture of Peace has expanded and became more relevant than ever. The concept now embraces a wide range of related issues and multiple resolutions are now adopted under this agenda item.

This year's high-level forum took place at a time when the international community is still facing the enormous challenge presented by the all-embracing and debilitating impact of the apparently never-ending COVID-19 pandemic.

While the recovery efforts are ongoing, a large part of the world is still engaged in a life-or-death battle with the virus and its variants. Inequality and violations of human rights is widening in multiple forms and dimensions.

Hate speech, extremism and xenophobia manifested in most cases with violence, are on the rise. On top of all these, the emerging "vaccine nationalism" threatens to undermine the efforts to end the pandemic globally.

It is, therefore, an imperative to inculcate the values of the Culture of Peace among nations, societies and communities, with particular attention to the younger generation, through promotion of compassion, tolerance, inclusion, global citizenship and empowerment of all people, the note declares. [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 September 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Leading Athletes Stress the Role of Sport in Building a Better World for All

By J Nastranis



*Photo: Kabul skyline, displaying both historical and contemporary buildings. CC BY-SA 3.0*

NEW YORK (IDN) — The United Nations is convinced that sport promotes values such as diversity, tolerance and respect and contributes to the empowerment of women and young people, individuals and communities, as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.

With this in view, the UN Department of Global Communication's office at the country level has initiated SDG Zone at Tokyo, titled "Teaming Up through Sport to Advance the SDGs".

The first three Zone sessions with the themes "sport for development and peace", "sport for sustainability and climate action", and "reflecting on diversity from gender and sport", were held from July 28-30. "How Para-athletes see 'Sport and Possibilities'", "designing society through the evolution of sport", and "a legacy for the next generation beyond Tokyo 2020" will be the themes of six sessions of the SDG Zone at Tokyo from August 25-27, 2021.

SDG ZONE sessions are produced in collaboration with the Asahi Shimbun Company. Explaining the rationale behind of the SDG Zone, the UN says: In this first of the SDG Media Zone series organized fully by the UN Department of Global Communication's office at the country level, athletes are joined by influencers and innovators from the civil society, business sector, academia, national and local governments, and the UN system from a wide

range of regions to discuss how the power of sport contributes in solving global issues.

In UN-led online discussions held to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics from July 23 to August 8, 2021, leading athletes, influencers and innovators have been sharing their thoughts on the role that sport can play in building a better world for all.

"Sport becomes something that can change the life of refugees who are living in refugee camps. Because they can achieve something, they can overcome anything that they pass through...and it gives them a platform", said Pur Biel, a member of the first-ever Olympic Refugee Team at the 2016 Rio Olympics, and a Goodwill Ambassador for the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#).

Mr. Biel, a participant in the UN's [SDG Zone](#) at Tokyo series of online talks until August 8, explained how sport had helped him to live through traumatic experiences in his home country, South Sudan.

The athlete's experience was echoed by many other speakers, who shared a common message; that sport can bring about positive



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

transformation in the world, from bringing hope to refugees, to encouraging climate action, and building societies where everyone can excel, regardless of their background.

Tsuyoshi Kitazawa, a former member of Japan's national football team, stressed the role of sport in building bridges: "whatever you feel in the Games is made possible because the world is playing as one team", he said. Izumi Nakamitsu, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, added that the values sport promotes, such as mutual respect, teamwork, equality, and fair play, are very similar to those that help to promote the development of peace.

In the video focusing on sustainability and climate action, Hannah Mills, an Olympic sailor and founder of the Big Plastic Pledge movement to end single plastic use, noted that athletes can have a positive influence over the businesses and brands that support them as sponsors.

Ms. Mills was joined by Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi, who returned from his third space flight in May, and Archana Soreng, a member of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. They agreed that cooperation among different groups, who often have different interests, must come together to save the Earth.

Speaking during the video focusing on diversity in sport, Aya Medany, an former Olympian who represented Egypt in the modern pentathlon, and Etsuko Ogasawara, Executive Director of the Japanese Center for Research on Women in Sport at Juntendo University, described how women are under-represented, particularly as coaches, and other roles supporting athletes.

Fumino Sugiyama, Co-Chair of Tokyo Rainbow Pride, an event that celebrates the city's LGBT community, shared his own struggle to continue his career as an athlete, whilst revealing his transgender identity. "If the world of sport can move in a direction where anyone can truly participate without fear", he said, "it will help create a society where no one is left behind."

"Sport is close to people's lives, bringing joy and inspiration", noted Kaoru Nemoto, head of the UN Information Centre in Tokyo. "Sport provides us with courage and determination, which are needed more than ever to go through this difficult time of the [COVID-19](#) pandemic. Through these conversations, we hope to highlight the ways that sport serves as an enabler to advance the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), for a greener, more equal, inclusive, and sustainable world for all". [IDN-InDepthNews — 15 August 2021]



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

### Australia and New Zealand React To IPCC Report With Rhetoric Rather Than Action

By Kalinga Seneviratne



Source: IPCC 2022 Report.

SYDNEY (IDN) — The most comprehensive report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has issued a dire warning to countries in the Pacific region where rising sea levels and increasing temperatures could wipe out island nations and make dry habitats uninhabitable. But the two major powers in the region—Australia and New Zealand—have reacted to the report with defensive rhetoric rather than moving to implement immediate action to save the region.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison under pressure from the growing environmental movement to take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions responded by saying: "I will not be signing a blank cheque on behalf of Australians to targets (to reduce greenhouse

emissions) without a plan". He indicated that Australia's response will be with new technology to address the problem. An argument some observers believe is a strategy to buy time until Australia could make a killing on selling new green technology to the world.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, scientists criticized the government's stated action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as a target set "two governments ago", for which Prime Minister Jacinta Arden reacted by arguing that such criticism is unfair, as her government is in the process of responding to the report's findings by planning "our emission reductions and our carbon budgets".

"It would be unfair to judge New Zealand based

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

on what essentially were targets that were set some time ago when we are now undertaking an incredibly heavy piece of work to lift our ambition and lift our emissions reductions," Arden argued, pointing out that New Zealand has already decided to bring agriculture into the emission trading scheme "which no other country has done".

Emissions trading is a market-based approach to controlling pollution by providing economic incentives for reducing the emissions of pollutants.

Nick Golledge, a professor of Glaciology at the Victoria University of Wellington, one of the lead writers of the IPCC report's chapter on oceans, writing in '[The Conversation](#)' explained that whether or not the worst-case scenario plays out or not remains uncertain, but what is increasingly beyond doubt is that global mean sea level will continue to rise for centuries to come.

"The magnitude of this depends very much on the extent to which we are able, collectively, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions right now," he argues. "The underlying message remains the same. The longer we wait, the more devastating the consequences."

For some time, the small island nations of the South Pacific, such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, have been worried about their nation getting submerged with seawater before the end of the century, and have been making plans to relocate their populations.

In October 2017, the new Labour government led by Arden announced that they would issue an experimental humanitarian visa to bring in 100 environmental refugees from Pacific Island countries to New Zealand each year. But, New Zealand dropped the idea when Pacific Islanders didn't want it, and instead, they asked Wellington to institute approaches to reduce emissions and support adaptation measures, and provide legal migration pathways and not refugee status.

The Secretary-General of the 18-nation [Pacific Islands Forum](#) Henry Puna warns that the world is on the brink of a climate catastrophe, with just

a narrow window for action to reverse global processes predicted to cause devastating effects in the Pacific and worldwide. The Pacific Islanders have been alarmed by the findings in the report that says extreme sea-level events that happened once in 100 years could happen every year before the end of this century.

Puna feels that governments, big businesses, and other major emitters of the world should listen to the voices of those already enduring the unfolding environmental crisis. "They can no longer choose rhetoric over action. There are simply no more excuses to be had. Our actions today will have consequences now and into the future for all of us to bear," he told Radio New Zealand (RNZ). "The factors affecting climate change could be turned around if people acted now."

[The latest IPCC report](#) has taken into account environmental changes that have taken place around the world in the seven years since the last report and stressed the need for rapid emission reductions in the coming years to avoid the worse climatic disasters that will come with more than 1.5 degrees C warming. Australian emission reduction targets are consistent with warming reductions that will deliver 2-3 degrees C of warming, which would result in cascading natural disasters the IPCC report warns.

Just over a year ago, Australia had the worst forest fires in a century that cost an estimated 34 lives and burnt 18.6 million hectares, and cost billions of dollars in damages to farm property and communities. Earlier this year, after concerted lobbying, Australia succeeded in avoiding the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier reef been designated as "in danger" by UNESCO.

Meanwhile, the Indian-owned Adani company, which operates as Bravus Mining and Resources in Australia, and has faced a fierce community-based opposition across the country to its mining project in Queensland, announced in June that they have started coal mining operations at their Carmichael mine and the first shipments to India will begin later this year. It has already secured markets to export 10 million tonnes of coal a year, which they claim are high-grade coal that gives a "clean energy" mix. "India gets the

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

energy they need and Australia gets the jobs and economic benefits in the process," says Bravus CEO David Boshoff on its website.

Even before the IPCC report was released, the Morrison government's stance has been that it will not put an additional burden on Australian taxpayers to save the world, and countries like India and China need to play a greater role in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions.

A commentary published by the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) from Andrew McConville, chief executive of the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association, reflected the Morrison government's standpoint. He argued that his industry could be part of delivering what he calls a "clean energy mix" and you cannot simply ban hydrocarbons and hope for the best.

"For too long, the climatic change conversation has been a simple good-v-evil debate," he notes. "Either give up your Hilux, stop international travel, change the way you work, cook and heat your home—and put the entire resources industry under a bus—or fail to achieve net-zero emissions."

McConville says that if the industry folds up the government will lose \$66 billion of royalties they pay "that build hospitals, police stations, roads, and schools", the \$450 million of investments they pour into rural communities, and the 80,000 direct and indirect jobs they provide.

Hinting at diversifying their operations to benefit from greenhouse emission reduction technology industry, he says their industry is making billions of investments in emission reduction technologies because "we need to do more, especially in the major emission-intensive

economies of China and India if we want to make a dent in reducing emissions".

University of Canterbury's Professor Bronwyn Harward who was a member of the IPCC report's core writing team, says that developed countries are under pressure to act now, and it is not enough just to make a nice speech at the 'Paris Accord' conference in Glasgow in November. "If the rest of the world did what we (New Zealand) do we will be 3 degrees warmer," she argues, adding that what is needed is social action such as providing free public transport in cities and introducing traffic congestion charges and creating new carbon-neutral jobs.

"So bring the thinking together, bring our Ministry of Social Development in with our Ministry for the Environment start thinking what does a new lower carbon economy actually look like that works for the people?" argues Prof Harward.

Coral Pasisi, a senior adviser at the regional science agency, the Pacific Community, told RNZ that the next 10 years were critical for the region. "All of the assessments done to date suggest that anything above 1.5-degree warming is going to be dire. And up until recently, even with the best commitments made by countries, within the next 10 years we're likely to exceed the 2.5 degrees in warming," she noted.

"We know that above 2 degrees (we will see) up to 99 percent coral reef death rates which affect the whole ecosystem on which Pacific populations depend for their food security." [IDN-InDepthNews — 12 August 2021]



Image: Three of the major groups of islands in the Pacific Ocean: Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Photo: Ms. Shefali Ghosh from Savar, near Dhaka, teaches her daughter in the kitchen. Credit: The World Bank

## Clean Cooking Technology Important To Achieving Sustainable Energy Access

By Kalinga Seneviratne

SYDNEY (IDN) — In the Asia-Pacific region which is home to about 60 percent of the global population, some 1.6 billion people primarily rely on open fires or simple stoves fueled by kerosene, coal, or biomass such as wood, dung and agricultural residues for their daily cooking needs, that impacts on climatic change and health hazards.

"Burning biomass in these inefficient stoves contributes to atmospheric warming and forest depletion while inhaling the fine particulates emitted causes a range of serious health impacts," says Olivia Baldy, Energy Access Consultant, at the Bangkok-based [UNESCAP](#) (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific). "In 2016, poor indoor air quality contributed to an estimated 2.2 million premature deaths in Asia and the Pacific," she adds.

As the region recovers from the economic devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic, making clean cooking fuels affordable for low-income families will be a great challenge to providing energy access, which is crucial for the

achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 7.

With rural populations and the urban poor increasingly getting access to the electricity grid, and solar power technology providing cooking fuel alternatives, the challenge is for the governments and the non-profit sector to make available the financing to assist the poor to cut both their cooking fuel costs and the carbon footprint.

While cleaner cooking solutions have the potential to generate a variety of social, economic, and environmental benefits, yet, the clean cooking sector remains hugely underfinanced.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

An 'Energy Finance Landscape 2020' report By the Climate Policy Initiative CPI), argues that the Covid-19 pandemic should be seen as a wake-up call to accelerate attempts to realized SDG 7 that calls for access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all by 2030.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the severe implications that a lack of reliable energy access can have on healthcare systems, water and sanitation services, clean cooking, and communication and IT services," the report notes, adding that, despite significant advances over the last decade, electricity and clean cooking access continue to elude more than 789 million across the region.

The CPI report points out that except for Bangladesh, investments in giving access to the poor for clean cooking technology are lacking in the region and they argue that "green recovery" is crucial to developing sustainable economic recovery models.

With the upcoming negotiations under the 'Paris Agreement' on national carbon markets, this could be a source of funding for providing clean cooking alternatives for the poor using solar power and "green" electricity. According to the CPI report, only \$ 21 million of investments under this facility is estimated to have taken place in 2018.

For rural households connected to mini-grid and solar home systems, the cost of cooking with electricity is now within the cost-competitiveness range of other cooking alternatives, according to a World Future Council and Hivos report in 2019. In addition to the decreasing cost of electric cooking devices, potential synergies between electrification and clean cooking are significant and yet not fully explored, it notes.

But, adds that, for example, Nepal's Ministry of Energy, Water Resource and Irrigation has stated last year that the government plan to reach the goal of an "electric stove in every house" through strengthening the country's distribution networks, discussing the possible adjusting of electricity tariffs to favour electric cooking.

Bangladesh imports about 60 percent of its LPG needs and offers significant subsidies for LPG cylinders and fuel. CPI report points out that almost 74 percent of the rural population relies primarily on biomass fuels for cooking, which includes straw, husk, bran, jute stick, wood, and bamboo; while over 95 percent of the population and more than 80 percent of the rural populace in the country has electricity access which can be leveraged to establish a supply chain for efficient electricity-based cooking solutions in the most remote areas. Between 2013-2017 through funding from a World Bank program, the Bangladesh government has helped poor households to install Improved Cookstoves (ICS) in 1 million households and it was expected to increase to 5 million by the end of 2021. CPI believes that there is a need to steadily redesign the existing policy and financing framework if Bangladesh is to achieve zero biomass use by 2030.

India's 'Surya Project' is aiming to steadily replace the highly polluting cookstoves used in India's rural households with clean energy stoves with funding sourced from carbon offsetting programs. In its first phase, Project Surya will target three rural areas in the Himalayas, Indo-Gangetic plains, Andhra region in South India to enable 5,000 households in each region to switch to cleaner-burning technologies such as solar cookers and other efficient stove technologies. They are introducing parabolic solar dish cookers of about 1.4 m diameter popularly referred to as SK14 and cost about \$100. They are advertised as able to cook rice for a family of up to ten people in about 30 minutes. They are also using the mobile phone to measure climatic mitigation and health outcomes.

They are working with partners at the Center for Embedded Network Sensing at UCLA and Nexleaf Analysis in the U.S, to bringing together climate scientists, epidemiologists, computer scientists, energy technologists, economists, and rural economic development experts, to find solutions to three of the most pressing challenges facing Asia today - climate change, public health, and economic development. [IDN-InDepthNews — 07 August 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE



### Dreams Have Come True As the University of Central Asia Graduates its Inaugural Cohort

By Nisar Keshvani

SINGAPORE (IDN) — Imagine. The most remote of mountains. Two thousand metres above sea level. On the Silk Road, and 240 km away from China. In secondary cities with populations going up to 150,000. Therein, majestically stands a fully-residential university, delivering a world-class education for the next generation of Central Asian learners—regardless of their financial position.

On June 19, [the University of Central Asia \(UCA\)](#) made history. Its inaugural cohort of 57

students will graduate in Computer Science; Communications and Media; Economics and Earth and Environmental Science. UCA's university campuses are in Naryn, Kyrgyz Republic; Khorog, Tajikistan, with a third in development in Tekeli, Kazakhstan.

This institution began as a concept in 1997. After the collapse of the Soviet Union—high quality international standard education was much needed for progress in Central Asia. Sounds like a simple idea, but some would say it has made the impossible, possible.

In 2000, a treaty was signed and ratified in the United Nations between the Aga Khan Development Network and the Governments of Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, and thus the journey began. An unprecedented endeavour with every step taken, no doubt against the grain. Arriving with its challenges, surmounted only by the resilience of its people. In its heart, lies innovation.

Over the past two decades, at least a thousand if not more, have contributed to make this vision a reality. Most significantly, many native citizens learnt, grew and returned home to play an instrumental hand.

It began with relocating townfolk from campus grounds to new homes across the road, refurbishing roads, laying water, electricity and internet lines, unearthing and preserving archaeological finds, climate-sensitive construction plans, completing international standard university living and learning facilities.

How did my path cross such an institution?

A deep unexplained desire to contribute to Central Asia surfaced in my final university year. I first heard of the University when completing an assignment at the [Aga Khan Foundation's](#) European office. A decade later, an opportunity arose to take a teaching sabbatical.

I volunteered with the University to support its communications, which led to a full-time assignment founding its communications function over the next eight years. And then continued for another two as a remote volunteer reviewing their media curriculum.

The University facilitated the transformation of its host city with the best early childhood education, modern healthcare facilities, life-long schooling, civic education and park spaces.

During this journey, jobs were created, businesses flourished, quality of life improved, and the future became amazingly promising. Research into mountain climates and communities ensued resulting in top-tier publications advancing knowledge in the field.

I was privileged to engage with multi-faceted stakeholders from the potential student, their parent, to university partners, researchers, educators, government, and media from the most advanced countries to the remotest village.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Often in Russian, and Central Asian languages, unbeknownst to me.

Ask a communications professional what's their role—and the response will be multi-coloured—sending and receiving information; crafting messages, changing perceptions, creatively engaging and building audiences. The list goes on ....

But for me, it has always been about building institutions; long-lasting ones just like UCA.

As buildings are constructed, staff were hired, and initiatives delivered. Just as important is communications.

Every written word, visual, speech is carefully crafted. Every individual from c-suite to ancillary staff plays an ambassadorial function. Every building signage forms the institution's identity.

At the back of my mind always, were the profound words of the Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan from 1983.

"There are those ... who enter the world in such poverty that they are deprived of both the means and the motivation to improve their lot. Unless these unfortunates can be touched with the spark which ignites the spirit of individual enterprise and determination, they will only sink back into renewed apathy, degradation and despair. It is for us, who are more fortunate, to provide that spark."

And thereafter, at the University's 2016 inauguration he said, "It is important to know that what we are doing here will be a valuable example of international cooperation for the future not only here in the region, but also for people far beyond the region."

The University was created to be a catalyst for social and economic development in the region's mountain societies with its academic curriculum developed in partnership with a number of

universities from Canada, the UK, Russia, Sweden and Australia.

For me, the proudest moment was when students first arrived at the residential campus. From diverse ethnicities, backgrounds and geographies—some travelled by foot, horse, and bus, over days. But once they entered, they were all united in their educational pursuit. Full of hope, passion and the desire to learn.

I was privileged to get acquainted with each one of them. Bearing witness with full confidence a dream had become reality for each one of them. These youth have now successfully graduated (pandemic notwithstanding) – prepared to bring change for themselves, their families, their countries for the foreseeable future. Just as their dreams were coming true, so had mine.

A friend once asked me what is privilege?

Inherited financial security for some, an Ivy League education for others, or being blessed with supportive family and friends. For me it is a tad more than that – it is the opportunity to have played a minute role in the birthing of a legacy institution. Knowing deep down and having the faith that not one but many lives for the generations to come will and continue to change, forever. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 June 2021]

*\* Singaporean Nisar Keshvani is a global citizen who has lived and worked across five continents before returning home to Singapore. He spent eight years in Central Asia and currently he leads communications for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. The reflections expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the organisations he works for. Connect with him on LinkedIn <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/keshvani>>.*

Photo: Nisar Keshvani (third from left) at the UCA campus in Naryn during its launch





## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE



Photo: Women planting an olive tree in the Marrakech-Safi region of Morocco (High Atlas Foundation, 2021)

### Decentralisation Vital to Achieving the UN's Global Goals

Viewpoint by Yossef Ben-Meir

*The writer is a former Peace Corps Volunteer and president of the [High Atlas Foundation](#).*

MARRAKECH (IDN) — The United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) are aspirationally universal, addressing globally relevant issues with earnest objectives. Despite the profound good that they represent, fundamental problems exist with the Goals. They lack prescriptiveness, even to the extent of not explicitly aligning with what we know is indelible to sustainability: local people's participation.

Relatedly, the process of how the 17 SDGs were conceived was not based upon the totality of needs expressed by local communities worldwide. As a result, the people whose lives the Goals are meant to improve remain largely unaware of them while, at the same time, they need to feel vested in order to utilize the 17 as helpful guides for action.

Part of the Goals' character is their global applicability in a vast diversity of contexts, including that of a pandemic. Given our endless cultural variation, it is difficult to prescribe an approach that can be appropriate and effective in all situations. However, without some instruction for means of accomplishment, the Goals might seem detached visions rather than actionable objectives.

To advance implementation, nations need to identify approaches that transcend localities and individual Goals. While they are global and universal, the Goals are to be carried out at the community level. Therefore, decentralizing decision-making and management to the beneficiaries promotes the primary cross-cultural factor that leads to sustainable development—being people's participation.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

The Goals should be adapted to the conditions of localities involving locally-led research and data gathering that allow for variation in culture, politics, environments, etc. Such ethnographic methodologies and participatory research help illuminate local conditions from the people's own perspectives. Through this group analytic process, community members are in an improved position to identify viable projects that extend directly from their self-described needs.

The Goals' universality is generally positive: people can see themselves reflected in the Goals because they touch all aspects of life and reflect commonly-held ideals. However, that does not then completely equate to people's willingness to accept the Goals as motivational or as an actionable framework. The inspiration for their investment in implementing the Goals is tied to the degree to which they participated in the Goals' design and development.

In short, the breadth of the Goals is commonly adopted to a degree because some people can see their own principles reflected in them. For others, however, the means of conception matter; a lack of emotional connection to the Goals can hinder their use as an applied benchmark. The Goals are most deeply absorbed when local participation delivers its conception, or even now 'reconception', if it may be helpful for the sake of wider global public incorporation.

Another guide that the UN may promote that will assist nations' fulfilment of the SDGs is the encouragement of multiple Goals being realized by single development initiatives. We find the following example in Morocco, but it is also indicative of socioeconomic and environmental conditions of life around the world.

In many societies and cultures, fruit tree agriculture is traditionally within the male's domain of production. Unfortunately, evaluations have shown that when agricultural projects are implemented without the full integration of women, the revenue and benefits generated typically stay within men's control, and the indirect benefits such as the promotion of women's literacy and their growth opportunities remain unfulfilled.

Therefore, the integration of women from the outset including building their capacities—such as confidence, self-belief, and their own agricultural ideas for change—results not only in greater gender equality (SDG 5), but also enhanced food security (SDG 2), adaptable water and environmental management systems (SDG 6), education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and reducing poverty (SDG 1).

In fact, sustainable development is significantly a function of the extent to which multiple needs and interests are met, proportionately encouraging the initiatives to endure and benefit the people.

The UN should therefore regularly endorse multifaceted development to accomplish wide-ranging outcomes by any one local community or regional project, and in so doing fulfil not only the Goals but also the very basis for success.

Just as the 17 SDGs are fully relevant across societies and nations on Earth, so too are guiding principles for their implementation. People's participation in development should be emphasized whenever the fulfilment of SDGs is espoused. The populace of the world decides the path of growth, and therefore decentralization is necessary for most all places, in some form and degree.

Finally, if partnerships to meet community needs enhance success, more beneficial outcomes emerge, and more groups will remain steadfast to see them continue. The SDGs and their emblem or preamble ought to say as much. In doing so, they will not just be an embodiment of where we collectively need to go, but also how all of us may consider how to get there, thus being fully indicative of or commensurate with the SDGs themselves.

The where and what are not enough, and unto their own, are not as energizing as they can be without the how that is defined in a manner relevant to each collective of people. [IDN-InDepthNews – 14 June 2021]



Photo: Screenshot of EEPA Webinar on May 25.

## Call for Referring Conflict-related Sexual Violence to International Criminal Court

By Reinhard Jacobsen

BRUSSELS (IDN) — The scale and brutality of crimes of conflict-related sexual violence against women committed in Tigray have drawn widespread condemnation from around the world.

It was no surprise that the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) focussed on that theme in the Webinar organised on May 25. EEPA is a Belgium-based centre of expertise with in-depth knowledge, publications, and networks, specialised in issues of peacebuilding, refugee protection, and resilience in the Horn of Africa.

The importance of the Webinar also lies in the fact that there is massive underreporting of sexual violence against women. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated in April that 22,500 women would require support as a consequence of conflict-related sexual violence.

The shame and fear associated with the violence and perpetrators acting with impunity and the destruction of local administration and hospitals compound the problem of underreporting. In fact, whatever little is being reported is only the tip of the iceberg.

Many have described conflict-related sexual violence as a weapon of war used against the civilian population, and committed, in part, with genocidal intent.

The perpetrators are said to be the Eritrean troops with a heavy presence in Tigray under the

so-called National Service, a form of nation-wide indefinite slavery, which the UN Special Commission of Inquiry has defined as crimes against humanity.

The Commission has recommended the practice to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The other perpetrators mentioned are the Amhara and Ethiopian National Defence.

After months of denial, Nobel laureate Prime Minister Abiy has meanwhile admitted that Eritrean troops are present and identified these as potential perpetrators of sexual violence against Tigrayan women and girls.

The Webinar meeting was chaired by Julia Duncan-Cassell, former Minister of Gender in Liberia. In her concluding remarks, she asked all African women in leadership to step up their voice to stop the harrowing perpetration of rape as a weapon of war in Tigray.

Duncan-Cassell told the Tigray women who gave their testimony in the webinar that African women were sharing their pain and asked Africa and the world to end the violence against women.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

She said that former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, now African Union Envoy to the Horn, is following the situation closely and closely working with US UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield to address it.

Duncan-Cassell closed the webinar by stating that "The perpetration of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence has not diminished and is spreading across the Horn. There must be concerted and coordinated international pressure and targeted sanctions. These atrocities must come to an end, and soldiers and their commanders must be prosecuted."

She called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Tigray, particularly those from Eritrea, the referral of the deployment by Eritrea of National Service in a foreign jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court, and all parties in Tigray to end with immediate effect the impunity of the use of Rape as a Weapon of War.

In an opening keynote address, a Member of the European Parliament said that girls and women being raped in the Tigray region are reportedly aged between 8 and 72. The rapes are being carried out in front of family, husbands, and children. The rapes can last for days, and often inflict life-threatening injuries.

She referred to Sir Mark Andrew Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, describing the attacks in Eritrea, "as a means to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation."

"I have said many times, it is beyond comprehension that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, has overseen such destruction, tyranny and deprivation," she added.

Sometimes the world views war as the theatre of men. But it is often women that pay an equal or greater price behind the scenes: Loss of economic empowerment, rape, forced prostitution, starvation, backsteps in social equality, she added.

"Sexual violence against women and girls has been used as a weapon of war for centuries. The

lasting damage clear to see. We saw it with the women of Rwanda, South Korea, Yugoslavia; and these are just the examples of the last century.

"But the inaction of the international community makes it seem as though we have learned nothing. President Biden, the G7, the UN, and the EU have all condemned and expressed concern over what is happening.

"But words are not enough to make the suffering of women stop. Condemnation is important, but it's not enough to make families sleep soundly tonight in Tigray.

"There must be concerted and coordinated international pressure and targeted sanctions. These atrocities must come to an end, and soldiers and their commanders must be prosecuted."

In the Webinar, women from Tigray presented their harrowing ordeal, a third of rapes executed as gang rapes, over multiple days, in public, in front of family members including their children, their genitals burned or filled with foreign objects including burning sticks and relatives forced to perpetrate rape on Tigray women.

The testimonies said that witnesses of the crimes committed and the children including babies of the rape victims were killed in the violence.

Selam Kidane, an Eritrean human rights advocate, told the conference that Eritrea is committing troops in Tigray that have suffered under the plight of National Service, a form of slavery, which has been qualified as a Crime against

Humanity and she begged the international community to refer Eritrea to the ICC for the crimes committed by Eritrea on foreign soil in Tigray.

Mariam Basajja presented the Africa Women for Peace in the Horn Initiative expressing those young women from the entire continent stood by the women in Tigray

Tigray Human Rights advocate, Meaza Gidey, called the rape against women in Tigray a genocide. [IDN-InDepthNews – 27 May 2021]



*Photo: Crematoriums in India overwhelmed. Source: USA Today.*

## **Covid-ravaged India Hard Put to Cope with the Crisis**

By Shastri Ramachandaran

*The author, a senior journalist based in New Delhi, is Editorial Consultant-WION TV and Senior Editorial Consultant of IDN.*

NEW DELHI (IDN) — The tsunami of Covid-19 infections and deaths in India continues unabated as people and governments at the Centre and states continue to battle the shortage of hospital beds, medicines, ventilators and much else that is required to overcome this crisis. The horrifying deaths and the plight of the dying have also created a climate of fear with people not knowing when it may strike, where and whom in what form; and, how they would cope if they or their near and dear ones are stricken.

As a journalist, I am in several message groups—work-related, where messages keep flowing like a ticker-tape, about 100 or more in an hour, from my newsroom, the ministries, peer groups etc. Almost every item is about Covid, the toll it is taking in India and worldwide and medical relief supplies from scores of countries that have been stirred to help India—in what, perhaps, is the country's darkest period of mass deaths since Partition in 1947.

I live in a complex of 1350 flats and in the several community WhatsApp groups, all messages are Covid-related: someone is dead, dying, desperately seeking oxygen, an oxygen concentrator, a hospital bed with or without a ventilator in or outside an ICU; or seeking an ambulance; a particular medicine; or survival support by way of food, money, physical assistance, medicines, an oximeter or hands to carry a body to the crematorium.

All the WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal and such OTT groups, be they professional, social, cultural, of a club, community, organisation or workgroup I

am part of are flooded with heart-breaking news, urgent appeals and frantic requests of individuals, families, groups, NGOs, service gigs and institutions immersed in the battle to survive the unrelenting onslaught of Covid. Social media like Twitter are also swamped with SOS messages and offers of help.

This is life in confinement, under lockdown or curfew, where it is a relief when the person at the door has come to deliver groceries, dairy, fruits, vegetables or other essentials. Mercifully, it is not one of your neighbours, whom you haven't seen for days if not weeks whereas you run into them a few times daily when life is normal. Not seeing any neighbour or friend at the door means there is no news, which is good news.

Glimpses of the outside world can be direct, during fleeting escapades on an errand for something essential; or through newspapers, TV, the countless videos and photographs that flood social media and my phone. Life in this pandemic is far worse than anything I've read or seen in

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

films of Europe's plague, last century's Spanish Flu epidemic or India's Partition deaths in 1947.

"How did we sleepwalk into a disaster of such magnitude, the worst India has faced since the partition in India", asks former diplomat Rakesh Sood, who was the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Disarmament and Non-proliferation in 2013. Hundreds of thousands perished in the bloodbath that followed India's partition in 1947 with the creation of Pakistan.

Many might wince at this comparison of an epidemic with the Partition riots; one being a natural calamity and the other a man-made conflict. However, common to situations of mass death is the failure of the government and state institutions, which have compounded the devastation and exacerbated the collapse of order, thereby swelling the fatalities. As India is being ravaged by Covid's second wave, it is hard to say whether the mounting toll of death is caused by the infection or negligence; or, mass deprivation of critical medical attention, life-saving support like oxygen or simply a hospital bed that comes with some medication.

In Delhi, people are dying all around, at least 10-15, if not more, every hour. The whole city is a dystopia of dead and the dying, an extension of the mortuaries and crematoria where scores of pyres burn endlessly and extend beyond its boundaries to the pavements, and even roads. TV, social media and newspapers bring home similar nightmares that people are living through in other Indian cities, big and small. The cremations are unending, 24x7; the dense clouds of smoke rising from the pyres and spreading like a pall over the cities; the steel pipes, through which the smoke passes, often melting in the heat.

There are long lines of bodies outside every crematorium in Delhi as well as other cities. The figures of the dead given by the crematoria in every city far exceed the official numbers, which are grim enough. On May 5, India accounted for half the Covid deaths worldwide—close to 4000 in 24 hours—and the number of those infected was 382,000. Medical experts say that the actual deaths and infections could be five to ten times the official numbers. Britain's *Financial Times* had

published an authoritative estimate of deaths and infections being eight times the official figure. Beyond a point, figures do not matter, for they do not tell the felt truth of loss, of family, friends and people turning into statistics by the hour.

The hospital scene is as bad as the sight at any crematorium. People are thronging hospitals and there are scores, if not hundreds, of ambulances and vehicles waiting with patients desperate for a bed, oxygen and emergency relief; which are beyond the capacity of most hospitals and their staff to provide in this crisis. In the first wave of Covid, which began last year, the largest number of those who died were doctors, nurses and healthcare workers.

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being squarely blamed for this situation, resulting in large measure from its unpreparedness; but also caused by Modi's hubris, negligence of public health as a priority and contempt for those who had warned of a second wave. Only days before India began reeling under the second wave, Modi and his health minister had declared victory in the war against Covid-19. With much bombast, Modi told the World Economic Forum that India was an example to the world for its success in the battle against Covid. With great fanfare, the Covid vaccine made by the world's largest vaccine manufacturer in India was exported to many countries amidst ringing declarations of India being the "world's pharmacy".

In keeping with this projection, India returned to business as usual with malls, movie houses, clubs, bars, hotels, restaurants, public transport, workplaces and all being thrown open with Covid precautions being actually ignored while being reiterated as a matter of form. So confident was the Prime Minister and his government of having put the pandemic behind, that Modi, his ministers and top party functionaries plunged into election campaigning with great gusto. Public health precautions and priorities were not only shunned but abandoned. The efforts initiated for oxygen, bed and hospital capacities that are so necessary to cope with a Covid outbreak were jettisoned. Forgotten was the need to keep making

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

ventilators, building capacity for oxygen and concentrators. Instead of hospitals and bed capacity being increased and expanded, the makeshift ones put up in the first instance were dismantled.

The government also allowed the Kumbha Mela, a religious festival on the banks of the Ganga, to be held in March-April, and it was attended by some five to seven million people without any Covid protocol whatsoever being observed. It is now feared that the super-spread of infection flowing from the Kumbh Mela may take months to run its course. Amidst this scenario, the government has warned of a third wave, for which no time period has been specified. And, at this juncture while makeshift hospitals are coming up rapidly in Delhi (and other cities), these are sorely short of doctors, healthcare staff and medical equipment and supplies. Even the relief material received from across the world were, for reasons not given, sitting uncleared at the airports.

Ashish Jha, Professor and Dean at Brown University School of Public Health and a leading expert on global health said, in an interview to *The Wire*, that the Modi government's refusal to accept advice from its own scientists is one of the main causes of India's current Covid-19 crisis.

Just as hospitals no longer mean a lifeline for survival, insurance is of no practical use especially for frontline workers including journalists. Even those covered, if they contract the infection in Delhi (or another Covid hotspot), there is no place to go and nothing to be done, but to just lie down and die; because there are no medical supplies, healthcare staff, hospital beds and facilities, oxygen and the required medicines available for the treatment of all those who need it. At least 52 journalists have died in Delhi and more than 100 in India.

The second surge has forced the Central Government to hasten with vaccinations, but most states did not have the stocks to begin the process on the day, May 1, it was to begin. Official claims are at variance with reality. Even though India is the world's largest vaccine-producing nation, only 141.60 million people have received at least one vaccine dose, which is

about ten per cent of its population of 1.35 billion, according to health ministry data. The country has fully vaccinated just over 40 million people or 2.9 per cent of its population. At this rate, it could take two years to inoculate the whole population, especially when even vaccine supplies are expected only after August, closer to December. By which time, Covid may be far away or at least its second surge would have run its course of devastation and death.

The so-called plan for mass vaccination is in a mess as is the management of the epidemic, the medical supplies, the infrastructure, lines of treatment; and, all of these are far short of the demand. Besides massive mismanagement, the governments at the Centre and states are also accused of not sharing the actual figures of deaths, stonewalling enquiries, resisting suggestions from scientists and medical experts and generally being far less responsive than required during such a crisis.

This is underscored by the resignation, on May 16, of senior virologist Shahid Jameel from a forum of scientific advisers set up by the government to detect variants of the coronavirus. His resignation comes days after he questioned the authorities' handling of the pandemic. Dr Jameel had recently written a piece in *The New York Times* in which he had said that scientists in India are facing a "stubborn response to evidence-based policymaking." He had drawn attention to the issues with India's Covid-19 management, especially the lower testing, slow pace of vaccination, vaccine shortage and the need for a bigger healthcare workforce. "All of these measures have wide support among my fellow scientists in India. But they are facing stubborn resistance to evidence-based policymaking," he wrote.

There is no dearth of novels and films that conjure up images of a dystopia. The reality in India though is indescribably grimmer than anything imagined or picturised in fiction or films. Not even the most authentic and devastating accounts of the plague and Spanish flu in Europe can prepare one to cope with the nightmare that Covid's second surge has turned out to be in India. [IDN-InDepthNews – 17 May 2021]

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE



Photo: View of Santo Domingo streets. Credit: Adobe Stock

### Latin America and the Caribbean Boost Chances of Success at Climate Conference

By Caroline Mwanga

NEW YORK | SANTO DOMINGO (IDN) — The three-day Virtual Thematic Sessions of the Latin America and the Caribbean Climate Week 2021 (LACCW2021), which wrapped up on May 14, hosted by the Government of the Dominican Republic, are reported to have provided important momentum for a successful [UN Climate Change Conference COP26](#) from November 1 to November 12 in Glasgow.

The primary aim of regional climate weeks, organized every year in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Middle East, and North Africa, is to bring together diverse stakeholders from the public and private sectors to address climate issues under one umbrella and unity of purpose.

Impetus from the sessions came from more than 5,000 registered attendees joining in the conversation, including from the host Government of the Dominican Republic, governments at all levels, private sector leaders, academic experts, and engaged stakeholders.

About 300 speakers, in collaboration with more than 30 global and regional organizations took part in 83 events in virtual sessions and close to 100 hours of live presentations and discussions.

At the opening of the sessions, the Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources of the Dominican Republic, Orlando Jorge Mera, said: "Ahead of COP26 we are going to increase the ambition of our national climate action plan and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 27%

and progress towards climate neutrality in line with the Paris Agreement's goals. (...) For us climate action is not just about mitigation, we need to prepare for what is coming ahead."

The four-day virtual sessions managed to catalyze commitments in three key areas: integration of climate action into national planning; adaptation to climate risks; and transformative opportunities towards carbon neutrality. Subsequently, the region came "one step closer" to consolidating strong positions for COP26 in Glasgow.

Dr. Max Puig, Executive Vice President of the National Council on Climate Change of the Dominican Republic, said: "Amid the complex and conflicted situation that humanity is living in, there are also grounds for optimism. Some of the most belligerent deniers of the scientific evidence of climate change have lost and continue to lose ground. On the other hand, there is a growing awareness of the dangers that lie ahead. Global citizenship is gaining momentum as more and more leaders in more and more countries recognize the need for vigorous climate action as a means of securing humanity's common destiny."

Chile's Environment Minister and President of the UN Climate Change Conference COP25, Carolina Schmidt, said: "The countries of the region must be united on the way to COP26, to promote the greatest possible ambition with a common goal:



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

carbon neutrality and resilience by 2050 at the latest.”

LACCW2021 provided a major platform to boost regional as well as global climate ambition. The wide array of regional stakeholders will showcase climate action to date and track progress on the submission of stronger national climate plans—Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)—under the Paris Agreement ahead of COP26.

A further focus of LACCW2021 was to provide information on the UN’s Race to Zero and Race to Resilience campaigns, and to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard in the multilateral climate process.

“Ambitiously updating NDCs is more important than ever. NDCs can truly be a beacon that, together with the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), guide the sustainable and clean recovery after the COVID crisis with a clear vision of how to improve people’s quality of life,” Chile’s Environment Minister Schmidt said.

Ms. Schmidt and COP26 President Alok Sharma have meanwhile called on all countries to either follow through on commitments made under the Climate Ambition Alliance or to join its efforts. Launched by the Chilean Presidency at COP25 in Madrid, the Alliance brings together countries, businesses, investors, cities and regions which are working towards achieving net-zero CO2 emissions by 2050, as well as countries committed to updating their NDCs.

Underlining the critical importance of success at COP26, UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa, said: “COP26 is nothing less than a credibility test for our collective efforts to address climate change, implement the Paris Agreement and continue building climate ambition.”

“2021 must be the year of tough decisions and significant progress by nations. Yet it also offers an unprecedented opportunity, as nations build forward from COVID-19 to structure resilient, sustainable and green post-recovery economies aligned with the Paris Agreement.”

LACCW2021 focussed on three key areas: A) Integrating ambitious action in key economic

sectors into national planning; B) Adapting to climate risks and building resilience; and C) Seizing transformational opportunities to put the region on a low-emission and highly resilient development pathway.

Around 4,000 people registered for the virtual thematic sessions of LACCW2021, including government ministers and senior representatives of multilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations, as well as civil society, including indigenous leaders and youth.

“The fruitful sessions held over the last four days here in Latin America and the Caribbean demonstrate that the climate urgency is well recognized,” agreed UN Climate Change Deputy Executive Secretary Ovais Sarmad.

He said he was impressed, how LAC countries are working on climate action whilst battling the COVID-19 pandemic. “With only six months to go to COP26, we are at a crucial moment.”

Indeed. Many nations are right now developing new or updated Nationally Determined Contributions—national climate action plans under the Paris Agreement—and this is the year we determine if we can get on track to meet the Paris Agreement goals. LACCW 2021 gives us optimism for success at COP 26 because of the momentum we see now, and the potential for more in the future.”

Over three days, core organizing partners led discussions on themes that are crucial to meeting the world’s common climate challenge:

The World Bank examined national actions and economy-wide approaches, seeking synergies and shaping national planning for a sustainable, green recovery.

UNDP led sessions on integrated approaches for climate-resilient development, looking at how both climate risk and climate solutions are reshaping different sectors. The UN Environment Programme led discussions on seizing transformation opportunities that explore a reimagined future and the behaviours, technologies, and financing needed to get there. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 May 2021]

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*Photo credit: Pexels | Harry Cunningham @harry.digital*

### **Renewables Are the Building Blocks of Global Energy Transition**

By J W Jackie

RENO, Nevada, USA (IDN) — The latest International Renewable Energy Agency [IRENA](#) analysis reveals that by 2050, variable renewables like wind and solar PV will dominate the global total power supply. The insights from IRENA's [World Energy Transitions Outlook](#) were released on March 16-17, 2021, at the Berlin Energy Transitions Dialogue.

With 163 Members, IRENA plays a leading role in the energy transformation as a centre of excellence for knowledge and innovation, a global voice for renewables, a network hub and a source of advice and support for countries.

As a part of its contribution to the Climate Investment Platform, IRENA invites financial institutions, development organisations and private investors prepared to support the realisation of projects and projects in need of support to register their interest.

Decarbonizing energy demand and supply by 2050 is necessary to address climate change. This move will significantly affect energy transition globally, making electricity the critical vector in decarbonizing the energy sector.

Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all is Goal 7. Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts is Goal 13 of the [UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals](#), which the international community endorsed in September 2015 for achieving by the year 2030.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Although alternatives are available for deep decarbonization, it's evident clean energy [is set to grow in 2021](#) and beyond. Ideally, renewables, electrification, and energy efficiency are at the center of energy transformation. Below are three insights into factors that could accelerate the energy transition.

### **Sustainability and socio-economic balance**

As odd as it may seem, the energy-economic growth link poses profound challenges in countries ranking high in the energy transition index (ETI). In fact, of the 115 countries benchmarked for the energy transition progress, less than half increased their transition index score and improved their economic growth. Moreover, concerns about energy affordability have been rising, with advanced economies facing many challenges.

Over the past decade, households in developed countries saw an increase of 25 percent in electricity tariff. During the same period, less than 40 percent of developing countries progressed in economic growth, environmental sustainability, and development.

Leaders should understand that achieving a balanced energy transformation requires improved security, energy access, economic development, and sustainability management. This is because focusing on one driver of the energy transition is the leading cause of global inequality and failure to meet climate change goals.

### **Share learnings**

When it comes to clean energy, European and Nordic countries remain top performers, thanks to political commitment, integrated power markets, and strong sustainability regulatory policies. Regulatory frameworks in these countries also focus on the adoption of [innovative tech that transforms energy](#). Interestingly, emerging markets from China, India, and Brazil are making efforts to scale up renewable energy resources, reducing energy intensity, and expanding global energy access programs.

However, there is still a massive gap in the energy transition progress. To cross this gap quickly, collaboration among nations should be a top priority. Countries with high transition index scores should also share critical insights into regulations and innovations with emerging markets.

At the regional level, governments can transition to clean energy by involving local communities in sustainable projects. For instance, [educating the younger generation about clean energy](#) helps nurture an interest in utilizing solar, geothermal, and wind energy and creates room for innovating new systems.

### **Resilient throughout transition**

In the last decade, energy transition progress has been uneven, with only 13 countries out of 115 making significant strides in improving their ETI scores. The debt crisis and systemic shocks caused by the coronavirus pandemic are key factors affecting energy transition roadmaps.

Countries should root transition commitments and roadmaps in economic, political, and social practices to promote irreversible progress and manage potential risks. In doing so, they can accelerate the adoption of renewables, reduce carbon fuels, and improve regulatory frameworks.

While the journey to global transition has just started, policymakers, investors, consumers, and innovators alike are being called upon to do what is required to achieve sustainability goals.

Countries can accelerate the global energy transition by improving socio-economic and sustainability balance and sharing learnings on regulatory policies and innovations. Governments should also be resilient and encourage collaboration across ecosystems and sectors. [IDN-InDepthNews – 08 May 2021]



Photo Credit: SHE Investments Cambodia

## COVID-19 Accelerates Digitization of Economies and Societies

Viewpoint by Kaveh Zahedi \*

*A defining feature of the post-COVID world will be the digital transformation of the world, though it might also widen gaps in economic and social development within and between countries. The digital transformation has gone hand in hand with the rise of digital technologies, writes Kaveh Zahedi, the Deputy Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific ([ESCAP](#)).*

BANGKOK (IDN) — We are living through a decisive moment. The COVID-19 pandemic's devastating impact is reaching every corner of the world. As we look back at this period, we will see history divided into a pre-COVID and a post-COVID world.

And a defining feature of the post-COVID world will be the digital transformation that has permeated every aspect of our lives. Chief Technology Officers can say that the pandemic has done their job for them, accelerating the digitalization of economies and societies at an unimaginable pace.

The digital transformation has gone hand in hand with the rise of digital technologies. These technologies have supported governments to

implement social protection schemes at pace and scale. They have enabled e-health and online education, and they are helping businesses continue to operate and trade through digital finance and e-commerce.

However, ensuring that the digital transformation happening all around us does not become another facet of the deep inequalities of the countries in Asia and the Pacific is probably one of the greatest challenges we face as countries start to rebuild.

That is why inclusion must be at the heart of digital transformation if the promise to "leave no one behind" is to be met. In particular, we need to embed inclusive objectives in the four core foundations of the digital economy: Internet

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

access, digital skills, digital financing and e-commerce.

Chances are you are reading this on your laptop or mobile phone, giving you access to the digital world. It is hard for most of us to imagine what life would be like during the pandemic if we didn't. Sadly, this is a reality for over 2 billion people in the Asia-Pacific region.

And among those two billion are some of the most vulnerable groups. For example, some 20 per cent of students in East Asia and the Pacific and almost 40 per cent of students in South and West Asia could not access remote learning this past year. This will have lasting effects that perpetuate inter-generational inequality and poverty.

To address the digital divide, our [Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway initiative](#) focuses on four interrelated pillars: infrastructure connectivity, efficient Internet traffic and network management, e-resilience, and affordable broadband access for all.

However, Internet access alone is not enough. There is a persistent and still expanding digital skills gap in the Asia-Pacific region.

Among the top ten most digitally advanced economies in Asia and the Pacific, around 90 per cent of their populations use the Internet. At the beginning of the century, this share stood at around 25 per cent. By contrast, for the bottom ten economies, Internet users have grown from around 1 per cent in 2000 to only 20 per cent today.

In response, our [Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development](#) is equipping policymakers and women and youth with digital skills by conducting demand-driven training programmes.

On digital finance, while the percentage of digital payment users has increased over recent years, the gap between men and women users persists. Additionally, in East Asia and the Pacific, there is a US\$1.3 trillion formal financing gap for women-led enterprises.

And while the Asia-Pacific region is emerging as a leading force in the global e-commerce market—with more than 40 per cent of the global e-commerce transactions—these gains have been led by just a few markets.

As a response, our [Catalyzing Women's Entrepreneurship project](#) addresses the challenges women-owned enterprises face by developing innovative digital financing and e-commerce solutions to support women entrepreneurs, who have been hit harder than most during the pandemic. We have supported a range of digital finance and e-commerce solutions through this initiative—such as a [digital bookkeeping](#) app and an [agritech solution](#)—providing more inclusive options for women entrepreneurs to thrive. To date, the project has supported over 7,000 women to access financing and leveraged over US\$50 million in private capital for women entrepreneurs.

Inclusion is undoubtedly central to the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (ESCAP) technology and innovation work that focuses on addressing the core foundations of an inclusive digital economy.

The recent ESCAP, ADB and UNDP report on "[Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind](#)" underlined the key role digital technologies played during the pandemic and how they can also play a critical role in building back better. However, the report shows that digitalization can also widen gaps in economic and social development within and between countries, unless countries can provide affordable and reliable Internet for all and make access to the core foundations of the digital economy central to building back better.

While digital transformation is certain, its direction is not. Governments, civil society and the private sector must work together to ensure that digital technologies benefit not only the economy but society and the environment, and have inclusion at their heart. Only then do we stand a chance of realizing the transformative potential of digital technologies to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. [IDN-InDepthNews – 06 May 2021]



*Image credit: World Bank*

## **World Bank-IMF Pledge Support for Pandemic Affected Countries**

By Caroline Mwanga

WASHINGTON (IDN) — While planning to rebuild economies after the COVID-19 pandemic, countries would do well to lay the foundation for a green, resilient, and inclusive future. This was the message of the [World Bank-International Monetary Fund](#) (IMF) virtual Spring Meetings from April 5 to 11, 2021. [World Bank Group President David Malpass](#) outlined the major challenges facing the world, including COVID, climate change, rising poverty and inequality, and growing fragility and violence as a part of the focus on [Economic Recovery: Toward a Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Future](#).

[U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen](#) encouraged developed economies to continue to support a global recovery. She also highlighted the importance of helping developing countries meet their climate goals along with their development objectives, adding that the availability of green finance will be critical.

[IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva](#) was also part of the conversation with Malpass and Yellen, pointing out that climate risks are a growing threat to the world's macroeconomic and financial stability.

Other speakers at the event, discussing themes of sustainability, innovation, and inclusion, were ministers from Cambodia and Egypt, youth, business owners, and civil society representatives. Melinda Gates issued a call to put women and girls at the centre of the recovery, and Grammy-nominated singer Somi ended the event with a song, "Changing Inspiration."

The World Bank Group President Malpass said, inequality is most apparent in the direct effects of pandemic that hits informal workers and the vulnerable the most. The inequality extends well beyond that to vaccinations, the concentration in wealth, the unequal impact of the fiscal stimulus and asset purchases, and the imbalance in debtor/creditor relationships particularly for people in the poorest countries.

"The World Bank Group is leaning forward as much as possible to face these challenges," Malpass assured. In response to COVID-19, the World Bank took broad, fast action, and quickly achieved over 100 active operations of support for developing countries. Commitments rose 65% in 2020 from 2019.

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Even before vaccines were available, working closely with GAVI, WHO, and UNICEF, the World Bank Group conducted over 100 capacity assessments. Now the Bank is passing several specific country vaccine financing operations each week through the board with already 10 approved, ten more scheduled in April, and around 30 more expected in May and June for a total of around four billion dollars in 50 countries.

There are major challenges for the countries in securing deliveries from COVAX and manufacturers. Many developing countries entered the pandemic with unsustainable debt levels. The World Bank has worked to achieve a debt service suspension initiative and increased transparency in debt contracts, said Malpaas.

Apparently, both steps are helping. For example, the World Bank has increased grants and loans to the DSSI (Debt Service Suspension Initiative) countries with a view to maximizing resources available to people.

Also, the World Bank and IMF are working in close collaboration to support the G20's implementation of the "Common Framework for Debt Treatments beyond the DSSI", a new instrument for dealing with sovereign debt vulnerabilities. "We're pushing forward together on Chad and the World Bank hopes to be able to put in substantial fast dispersing resources."

Malpass said, the Bank is finalizing a new climate change action plan, which includes a big step up in financing, building on its record climate financing over the past two years. It includes new analytical support to countries as part of integrated climate and development programs.

The plan identifies key priorities for action with a focus on both adaptation and mitigation. It also includes a strong focus on a just transition from coal. The Bank is also working toward aligning its financial flows with the objectives of the [Paris Agreement](#), a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted by 196 Parties at COP 21 in Paris, on December 12, 2015, and entered into force on November 4, 2016. Its goal is to limit global warming to well

below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Yellen expressed the hope that what the US is domestically doing is helpful to the entire global community. "Stronger growth in the US is going to spill over positively to the entire global outlook. And we're going to be careful to learn the lessons of the financial crisis, which is don't withdraw support too quickly."

Besides, the US would encourage all those developed countries that have the capacity, using fiscal policy and monetary policy, to continue to support a global recovery for the sake of the growth in the entire global economy, Yellen emphasized.

IMF managing director Georgieva assured that actions taken by the United States to boost prospects for recovery in the US are helping the whole world. While IMF is upgrading its projections for the year, economic fortunes within countries and across countries are diverging dangerously.

"And this is why in these meetings, we are focusing on giving everyone a fair shot. A fair shot in the arm everywhere, so we can bring the pandemic to a durable end, to underpin sustainable recovery. But also a fair shot to a chance for a better life for vulnerable people and for vulnerable countries."

As the 2021 World Bank Group-IMF Spring Meetings were coming to a close, the World Bank chief said he was "very pleased" with strong support from all shareholders, the G7, G20, and Development Committee for the World Bank's actions on climate, debt, vaccines, and other development priorities.

The World Bank-IMF Development Committee Communiqué commended the Bank's "scale-up of climate finance over the past two years, its continuing role as the largest multilateral source of climate investments in developing countries, its emphasis on biodiversity, and its technical and financial support for adaptation, mitigation, and resilience". [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 April 2021]



Photo: Dr Wim Naudé, Professor of Economics at the Department of Economics with the Cork University Business School in Ireland with the image of AfCFTA from African Union website.

## African Free Trade Area Expected to Lift Millions out of Extreme Poverty

By Busani Bafana

BULAWAYO, Zimbabwe (IDN) — The long-awaited African Continental Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#))— set to be the world’s biggest free-trade zone by size—which entered into force on January 1, 2021, promises a new era for African trade.

An Africa-wide free-trade pact could bolster the region’s income by \$450 billion and lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty by 2035, if accompanied by significant policy reforms and trade-facilitation measures, according to the World Bank. When fully operational, the Free Trade area will create a market of 1.2 billion and drive a combined GDP of \$2.5 trillion.

Dr Wim Naudé, Professor of Economics at the Department of Economics with the [Cork University Business School](#) in Ireland, explains: Trade is one of the great engines of economic growth and prosperity as it allows countries to specialize in the production and diversify in consumption.

Specialization in production allows for learning, innovation and higher productivity. Exchanging this for goods from elsewhere leads to higher

consumption and welfare than what a country would be able to achieve in economic independence.

“The free trade area will strengthen all of these effects as there will be fewer barriers to access markets, larger markets, more choice for consumers, more competition to pressurize firms to be more productive,” Naudé tells IDN in an Email interview. Here important excerpts:

*Question: Given the differences in economies across Africa, not to mention different trade policies, and in many cases barriers that exist in Africa, how do you see this free trade area harmonizing trade in Africa?*

Wim Naudé: The free trade area will stimulate investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The AfCFTA is therefore good news and a



## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

historical opportunity for African countries. The fact that countries' economies differ is no issue—in fact precisely because economies are different, trade is even more important to achieve gains in welfare.

Remember, most African countries are relatively small, and also, Africa has more landlocked countries than any continent on Earth—so removing trade barriers is even more important in Africa than for instance in large coastal countries.

*Q: What opportunities does the African Continental Free Trade Area offer industrialization in Africa?*

WN: Many African countries have since around 2000 been on a trajectory of industrial (manufacturing) growth, albeit from a small base. The trends are positive. In a [IZA paper](#), I describe three varieties of African Industrialization taking place.

I expect that the AfCFTA will reinforce this: so it will allow (i) countries where advanced manufacturing (based e.g. on additive manufacturing, IoT, digitization) has taken place to scale this up (e.g. South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria) (ii) countries where basic labour-intensive manufacturing exist (e.g. furniture manufacturing) to be able to remain competitive for a longer time than without the AfCFTA (because of economies to scale) (e.g. Tanzania, Ethiopia) and (iii) countries where highly productive service-sectors, necessary for manufacturing, are becoming prominent—such as business services, logistics and transport (e.g. Mauritius, Botswana)—to be even more efficient in this and specialize more, as they can now provide these services across borders to manufacturers in other African countries much more easily.

*Q: How can African countries achieve rapid economic growth through environmentally conscious industrialization and diversification while taking advantage of digitalization?*

WN: The Paris Agreement of 2015 and subsequent COP (Conference of Parties) meetings have emphasized the need for rich countries to create an international funding

mechanism to facilitate adaptation to and mitigation of climate change in developing countries.

Substantial funding is available for this. Africa, as a block, should intensify efforts to access and utilize this pot of funding to support investments in the industry. In terms of the TRIPS agreement (on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) as well, advanced economies committed themselves to the transfer of technology to developing countries. But this is not happening very fast or effectively—again, Africa as a block should demand adherence to this, for accelerated access to climate technologies.

Finally, one of the most important requirements for industrial development is access to cheap energy/electricity. We need to see the massive roll-out of electricity across the continent. For this, investment in nuclear energy plants will be needed across the continent to ensure reliable energy without increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Digital technologies are central to support all of these investments.

*Q: How can Africa manage its debt and promote innovative finance for fiscal sustainability?*

WN: In principle, African countries should borrow! The Continent should build up debt, and it can because it has a growing population (who will pay tax in future to serve debt), and investment opportunities that can offer high returns, given relative low stocks of capital. The only requirement is that borrowed money should be invested and spent wisely: spent on increasing production capacity. Then, countries fiscal position will be sustainable.

I am no great fan of so-called “innovative finance”—recall the global financial crisis with its destructive financial innovations such as CDOs (collateralized debt obligations)? Simple economic principles still offer the best advice—borrow, allocate these funds to productive activities (not to rent-seeking big businesses, or to bureaucrats in business and their families!) and sustain the debt through the increases in growth that these investments result in. [IDN-InDepthNews — 6 April 2021]



Photo: Food systems in Africa have been adversely impacted by climate-induced shocks, conflicts and most recently, COVID-19. © FAO/Petterik Wiggers

## Global Pandemic Hits the World's Poorest the Hardest

By J Natranis

NEW YORK (IDN) — The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a deeply troubling situation in the world's poorest countries. It threatens to push the achievement of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) another ten years further into the future, warns the [Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2021](#) by more than 60 United Nations Agencies and international organizations. Because of the pandemic, the global economy has experienced the worst recession in 90 years.

This, in turn, is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable segments of societies. An estimated 114 million jobs have been lost, and about 120 million people have been plunged back into extreme poverty.

"What this pandemic has proven beyond all doubt is that we ignore global interdependence at our peril. Disasters do not respect national boundaries," UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed said. "A diverging world is a catastrophe for all of us. It is both morally right and in everyone's economic self-interest to help developing countries overcome this crisis."

The highly uneven response to the pandemic has widened the already yawning disparities and inequities within and between countries and peoples. A historic US\$16 trillion in stimulus and recovery funds helped to stave off the worst effects but spent less than 20 per cent of that

sum in developing countries. By January this year, all but 9 of the 38 countries rolling out vaccines were developed countries, notes the report released on March 25, 2021.

It adds that nearly half of the least developed and other low-income countries were at high risk of or in debt distress before COVID-19, and, with falling tax revenues, the pandemic has sent debt levels soaring. Therefore, The following measures are necessary without any delay:

Reject vaccine nationalism and step up contributions to the [Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator](#) to close the remaining funding gap of over \$20 billion for 2021;

Meet the 0.7% [Official Development Assistance \(ODA\)](#) commitment and provide fresh concessional financing for developing countries, especially LDCs;

## STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

Avert debt distress by providing liquidity and debt relief support so developing countries can fight COVID-19 and its economic and social fallout.

“The growing gap between rich and poor countries is troublingly retrogressive and requires an immediate course correction,” said UN Under-Secretary-General Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which produced the report.

“Countries must be helped to not only stay afloat financially but to invest in their own development. To rebuild better, both the public and private sectors must invest in human capital, social protection, and sustainable infrastructure and technology.”

Sustainable and smart investment, for example, in infrastructure, would reduce risks and make the world more resilient to future shocks. It would create growth; allow a better life for millions, and combat climate change.

For example, says the report, it is estimated that spending US\$ 70-120 billion over the next two years, and US\$ 20-40 billion annually thereafter, would significantly reduce the likelihood of another pandemic—contrasted with trillions of dollars of economic damages already from COVID-19.

However, unlike their developed counterparts, most developing countries do not have the fiscal space for such investment.

The report recommends ways to address this challenge, including:

- Provide ultra-long-term financing [e.g., over 50 years] to developing countries, at fixed interest rates, to take advantage of current historically low-interest rates;
- Better use public development banks as a tool for sustainable development investment;

Reorient capital markets toward aligning with sustainable development by removing short-term incentives along the investment chain and mitigating the risk of SDG-washing.

The report further emphasizes that development that is not risk-informed will not be sustainable and presents the crisis's response as an opportunity to reset and ‘future-proof’ global systems.

While gaps in the international financial architecture or inadequate policies often undermine financing for development, during the COVID-19 crisis, previous safeguards meant some systems held—notably the financial and banking systems, in part due to reforms after the 2008 banking failures. Lessons learned from today’s crisis can allow reforms to be put in place now to create future resilience.

The report also advises to:

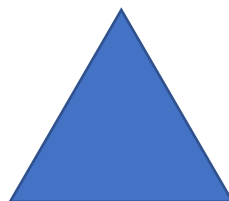
- Find a global solution for taxation of the digital economy to combat corporate tax avoidance, reduce harmful tax competition, and better use technology to combat illicit financial flows.

- Create a global reporting framework to hold companies accountable for their social and environmental impact and incorporate climate risks into financial regulation.

- Review regulatory frameworks, such as antitrust regulations, to reduce the market power of large digital platforms.

- Modernize labour market and fiscal policies to reflect the reality of a changing global economy, including an increasingly digitalized world.

“To change trajectory, we need to change the rules of the game,” the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed said. “Relying on the pre-crisis rules will lead to the same pitfalls that have been revealed over the past year.” [IDN- InDepthNews – 01 April 2021]



# **Striving for People, Planet and Peace**

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