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More Indigenous Doctors Aim To Close Australia's Health Gap

By Neena Bhandari

SYDNEY (IDN) - Vinka Barunga was born in the Worrara tribe of the Mowanjurn Aboriginal community in the remote town of Derby in Western Australia. As a child, she witnessed disease and suicide amongst her people, which made her resolve to one day become a doctor and help break this cycle of suffering. She is one of six, the largest cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students, to graduate in Medicine/Surgery from the University of Western Australia this year.

Australia has fewer than 300 Aboriginal doctors, but things are gradually changing. Vinka is determined to be the first full time doctor in the town of her birth, situated around 2,400 kilometres north of the state capital Perth in the Kimberley region. It is the gateway to the state's resource rich north, surrounded by mudflats on three sides, with two distinct seasons.

Tropical and non-communicable diseases, kidney ailments, skin and ear infections are common here. "There is also a long history of introduced diseases. Derby had a leprosarium so there were a lot Aboriginal people that had leprosy living here," says Vinka, who observes that alcohol and high sugar diets have significantly impacted on her people's health.

The Derby Aboriginal Health Service (DABS) provides walk-in access to General Practitioners and conducts outreach programmes in remote communities along the 670km-long Gibb River road. There are nurses that tend to small community clinics and doctors visit as often as they can.

"Aboriginal people of this region are largely nomadic and the remoteness of communities makes providing 24/7 health service difficult. Even when services are available, people often don't use them because they might be going to the same clinic, but they are seeing the fifth doctor. It is hard to build trust and that can be quite devastating for people's health," says Vinka, who lost her non-Indigenous mother to glioblastoma (brain tumour) at the age of 18 and her father to a long struggle with illness exacerbated by alcohol abuse when she was in her fifth year of medicine.

During her 10-month placement at Derby's Rural Clinical School, she noticed young children looking up to her for inspiration and the elders brimming with pride for what she had achieved. Many Aboriginal patients address her and her other Indigenous colleagues as aunty or uncle or niece or nephew, even though they are not related.

"I think, everyone unconsciously becomes a part of your large extended family. One really can't put a price on what Aboriginal doctors will bring to an Indigenous patient's experience of hospital, of their illness and of healing. A bit of social and emotional support can work wonders. Having more Aboriginal doctors is definitely going to have a positive impact on Aboriginal and Australian Health", says Vinka, who at 27 is hopeful that despite the challenges, the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will reduce during her lifetime.

“We have to see the positives, where we can and I definitely want to contribute and be part of those positive changes. The big positive for me has been to see how the women in the Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley got alcohol restrictions imposed and that has made huge progress in the diagnosis, management and therapy programmes for children and families with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum disorders”, Vinka told IDN.

Aboriginal people make up just 3 percent of the country’s 24 million population, but they suffer from significantly poorer health, suicides, higher rates of drug and alcohol consumption, imprisonment, homelessness and poverty.

The [Prime Minister’s 2016 Closing the Gap report](#) states that the target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018 is on track and immunisation rates for Indigenous children are high. But even though total Indigenous mortality rates have declined by 16 per cent since 1998, the target to close the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is not on track. Indigenous people live on an average 10 years less than non-Indigenous Australians.

Romlie Mokak, Chief Executive Officer of the Melbourne-based Lowitja Institute, Australia’s national institute for ATSI health research, attributes the simple reason for Indigenous people trailing behind in health outcomes to the circumstances that have been a continuing legacy of colonisation.

He says, “The policies that came out of colonisation had a basis in racism essentially, the superiority of the colonisers and the dehumanisation of the first peoples – taking culture, language, removing people from their traditional lands, forcibly removing children from their families was hugely problematic. We still talk about inter-generational trauma to this day”.

When the British landed in Australia in the 1700s, they did so by declaring it *terra nullius*, ignoring the original inhabitants who had lived on the continent for nearly 70,000 years. Between 1900 and 1970 under the Government Assimilation Policies to “breed out” Aborigine blood and supposedly give them a better life, the government forcibly removed tens and thousands of ATSI children from their families. Many were sent to institutions where they were abused and neglected.

“This continuing disruption and destruction of family and culture is ever present. We also have to deal with the ubiquity of racism in its overt as well as well as systemic or institutionalised form, which many studies have shown to have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing”, says Mokak, a Djugun man and member of the Yawuru people from Western Australia.

Secondly, he adds, it is the question of equity in services or nation’s resources and policy making, intrinsic in that is how power is exacted. “We continue to be invisible in the corridors of power. The portrayal of our people is largely negative and most people’s understanding of Indigenous people is through a fairly narrow lens as they don’t have any real or intimate contact with Aboriginal people”, says Mokak

Indigenous policy needs to be an inverted pyramid, whereby the grassroots Indigenous communities are at the top of policy making, he adds. There has been

some improvement in more Indigenous children completing year 12 and university, especially in the medical field.

Katarina Keller is the first person in her family to get a Bachelor of Nursing Degree. Growing up in Ceduna, gateway to the treeless Nullarbor Plains in far west South Australia, she enjoyed the fresh seafood and marvelled at traditional bush medicines used in her Kokatha Indigenous community. But she was also distressed to see people in her community die at a young age due to comorbidity.

She is determined to work in making her people live longer and healthier lives. “Coming from similar cultural background, it is easy for me to connect with indigenous patients. They are comfortable sharing their problems and I can better respond to their needs. If the health gap between the indigenous and non-indigenous people has to be closed, we would need many more health workers, who are aware of indigenous history and culture”, Katarina told IDN. [IDN- InDepthNews – 27 December 2016]

Nepal Youths Make Sexual Health Services More Accessible

By Stella Paul

KATHMANDU (IDN) – 21-year old Pabitra Bhattarai is a shy young woman with a soft voice and a ready smile. But, ask her about sexual health services and the shyness vanishes in an instant as she speaks passionately of how youths of her country must have rights to such services.

“Our country runs on the shoulders of young people. So, we can’t risk having a country full of young people with HIV. We must have full access to sexual and reproductive health services (SRHR),” she says, suddenly sounding far more mature than her age.

Yet, rhetoric alone doesn’t define Bhattarai who is already counseling and making aware hundreds of youths – most of them high school students – in SRHR. “I have been to over 20 schools in Bhaktapur, Kirtipur and Lalitpur,” she says.

Youths for youths

On a late October morning, IDN catches up with Bhattarai and two other youths as they set out for a school to a government-run high school. The youths, trained and supported by [Marie Stopes International \(MSI\)](#) – a global organization working on SRHR – are part of a 10-member group called ‘Rocket and Space’ that aims to educate in and give access to SRHR to every youth of their city and region.

The youths try to flag down a taxi in Putali Sadak - a busy marketplace of Kathmandu. But soon they learn that there is a taxi strike in the city and the only vehicle available to them is a newspaper delivery van with no seats. This however fails to dampen their spirits as they readily sit on the floor of the van and start, ready for an hour-long drive to a government-run high school in Baudha neighborhood.

They have been invited by the principal of the school, Bhattarai reveals, to speak with the students in 11th and 12th grade about sexual health and hygiene. “They think we can do it better (than them),” she says with a tinge of pride in her voice.

An hour later, the three youths tumble out of the van and enter a fortress-like building of the government-run school. Sitting in two semi-dark rooms of the 3 stories building are about a hundred adolescent boys and girls. While her male colleague Suraj meets the boys, Bhattarai and her female colleague Deepali Pradhan head for the girls room.

The school authorities have specially requested the volunteers to tell the girl students about menstrual hygiene, Pradhan informs. So, for next 45 minutes, the young women explain to their audience the process of menstruation: they start a conversation by asking the students what changes when they have their first periods.

The students typically look at each other and smile nervously. The youth workers encourage them to speak, saying, “Look, I am just like you, I am like your elder

sister". Slowly, a girl stands up and says "sprouting of breasts". Bhattarai asks everyone to clap for student. With that, the ice begins to melt.

For the next 45 minutes, Bhattarai and Pradhan touch upon all aspects of menstruation: the expected physical changes, the cramps, the menstrual cycle and how to count it and the importance of maintaining hygiene during this cycle. "Their family members and their teachers feel embarrassed to talk about these things. And the girls also feel shy to ask. But when we talk, they listen. They think, we are their friends," Pradhan says.

In the boys' room, Suraj Khadka, the young Rocket and Space member, talks about adolescence, physical attraction to the opposite sex, masturbation, condoms and the importance of safe sex.

Dan Bahadur is 19 years old and physically challenged. Since May this year, he has been educating fellow youths with disability in his city on SRHR.

There are 3 million people with disability in Nepal today, says Bahadur, and nearly half of them young. Not long ago, they were socially ostracized, he says: "People looked down upon the disabled. They were seen as people who brought bad luck to others." Today, however, there are special facilities for people with disability, including quota in educational institutions and government jobs.

Yet, when it comes to sexual health, the disabled people, especially youths are normally forgotten. Bahadur wants to change that, but so far, the goal has remained a big challenge. "People laugh at me when I talk of SRHR. Some think it is weird and even ask me, "do disabled people have normal sexual needs?"

There are, however, a lot of people who give him support. Many of them are from people with disability themselves, including players from the national Wheelchair Basketball Association – an institution promoting and campaigning for sportspersons with disability. Bahadur has met several players, made them aware of their SRHR rights, including contraception, abortion, counseling on sexual health and hygiene.

Nilima Raut, MSI's Youth project manager explains, "The main slogan of the UN of [Sustainable Development Goals](#) itself is 'Leaving No One Behind' and in reaching out to disabled youths we are making an effort to achieve that."

Here are, however, challenges galore as Nepali society is largely conservative where premarital sex is a taboo. Vinuka Basnet, a 20-year old college student says that her parents were shocked when they came to know she was working as a sexual health worker. "They were embarrassed and afraid that now everyone would point at me and say "she talks of sex". It took a long time for her to pursue her parents, she recalls.

Suraj Khadka says that since the school syllabus does not include sex education, students do not see his lessons as important enough. "They laugh and ask me questions that are irrelevant." He, however, has a solution: "Let them laugh, but encourage them to ask what's relevant to them."

Others like Dan Bahadur often find communicating sexual health in their local language very challenging: “Take ‘nightfall’ for example. There are no synonyms for that in Nepali. Disabled youths who have spinal injury will have nightfall, but cannot feel it as they are paralyzed down the waist. It’s important for them, as well as for those who care for them to know this, so they can maintain cleanliness. But when I try to explain this, I am at loss of words,”

But, since success of the youth SRHR educators depends on their communication with their fellow youths, they have formulated innovative ways to overcome the communication barriers.

Vinuka Basnet shows off some of the tools that include coloured pictures of male and female anatomy and reproductive organs, posters, brightly colored T-shirts and bracelets with slogans such as “No condom, no sex” and “I am a rock star”.

They carry these tools with them at every meeting. While the posters and the pictures are used to educate the youths, the shorts and the bracelets are distributed among the attendees for positive and enthusiastic response.

Nepal legalized abortion in 2002 to achieve the MDG 5, the [Millennium Development Goal 5](#) (to decrease maternal mortality by 134/10,000 by 2015). During the MDGs era (2000-2015), the country made significant progress and the mortality rate decreased from 581/10,000 live births to 281/10,000 live births (National Demographic health survey, 2011).

Yet, latest statistics show that Nepal (27.5%) still has a very high unmet need for contraception in the Asia region. In terms of unmet need indicator, at least 14% and 12% of married or in-union women of reproductive age, in Southern Asia and South-Eastern Asia want to delay or avoid a pregnancy and are not able to do. Also, almost half the population is unaware that abortion is legal in the country.

This is where the youth health volunteers are making a big contribution, taking SRHR to the most vulnerable and needy sections of the society: migrant workers, slum dwellers and young women whose husbands have gone abroad to work as migrant workers.

23-year old Kavita Chulagani is a young mother whose husband works in the Middle East as a driver. Kavita uses vaginal implants as a contraceptive, which she received for free at a clinic run by Marie Stopes. It would have been very difficult for me to access this,” says the young mother who lives in a slum in the city outskirts, “but the youth workers directed me to this place. Now I am telling women of my neighborhood to come here too,” she says.

According to Raut, there has been over 100% increase in the demand for SRHR services since the youth project started. “There are still a lot of people to reach, but the increasing demand gives us hope,” she concludes. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 November 2016]

People Key to Ecuador's Sustainable Development Goals

Viewpoint by Nelsy Lizarazo

QUITO (IDN) - I visited to San Pablo 15 years ago and it was clearly the poorest neighbourhood of Portoviejo, the regional capital of Manabí Province.

Then, there was no drinking water. Families could not even imagine the possibility of free basic education for all, and secondary education even less. You could not walk on the streets after 5 in the evening and the health centre had neither sufficient medical staff nor medicine to cover the neighbourhood's needs.

I returned to San Pablo at the beginning of September this year.

There I met Monica, a 29-year-old single mother of an 8-year-old daughter. Six months earlier – and against all macho traditions – she won the presidency of the neighbourhood council. Today she is Madam President and works tirelessly day in and day out for her neighbours.

With total conviction, she told me: “Without the progress over the last ten years, we wouldn't have achieved access to education for our boys and girls, we wouldn't have the medical attention that we have, we wouldn't have obtained drinking water for the entire area, or the attention and opportunities for the disabled that they deserve.

“I don't have to tell you that our lives have changed: you only have to come to San Pablo to see for yourself.”

Monica knows that her life and that of the large majority of her neighbours has changed. Maybe she does not know that behind these changes there have been clear decisions to prioritise social policies, particularly in the fields of health and education.

She probably does not know either that these social policies were linked to the Millennium Development Goals – the MDGs – that were adopted by Ecuador and integrated over the last 12 years into the bigger picture for the country's public policy strategy: the National Good Living Plan.

It is thanks to that political decision, reflected in social investment, concrete programmes and action that Ecuador managed to present indicators that more than surpassed the goals in 20 of the 21 MDGs “ahead of time and to a standard greater than agreed”, in the words of President Rafael Correa during his speech to the Sustainable Development Summit convened by the United Nations in September 2015.

Likewise, the government committed itself to achieving 68 percent of the only goal not yet achieved – reduction in maternal mortality – by the end of the year.

Monica certainly does not know all these details, but she is experiencing what these achievements means to her people every day.

That Rafael Correa's government can present such positive results with regard to the MDGs would seem to be a paradox. This is the same government that in Correa's presidential acceptance speech in 2007 strongly criticised these objectives, affirming that there had been no discussion at all of the enormous and historical, social and economic asymmetry on the planet.

This point was repeated time and time again in different international fora and by different official government spokespersons of the so-called "Citizen's Revolution".

One of these was Pabel Muñoz, who was National Secretary for Planning until very recently. He is on record as saying the MDGs "were set as targets by the North for the South and did not involve local stakeholders, be they governments, civil society organisations or citizens of the country's regions".

Today this critical position on the MDGs has turned into acceptance and optimism regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to official government representatives, a clear regard for action linked to the redistribution of income and wealth have now been incorporated into these goals. Indeed, speaking at the Sustainable Development Summit, the same Pabel Muñoz said that the SDGs and their aims "are consistent with our [Ecuadorian] development plan."

In fact, the SDGs incorporate issues and goals that have been contemplated and served as key to the country's National Good Living Plan for 2013-2017: poverty reduction, gender equality and climate change, for example.

For her part, the former minister for social development coordination, Cecilia Vaca Jones, has explained how nine of the 17 SDGs are directly related to social policy and, unlike the MDGs, are closely related to the achievement of equality and equity, which she understands as meaning a closer focus on the development proposal that underpins the country's public policy.

On defining the country's priorities with regard to the SDGs and clearly reflecting them in the budget for 2016, Vaca Jones said that every effort aimed at guaranteeing quality education (SDG 4) will be maintained and deepened to ensure the criteria of inclusion and equity.

Moreover, as has been shown in previous years, a central issue is the eradication of poverty in all its forms (SDG 1) and this will continue to be an issue for the current government. In addition, the already-started task of ensuring sustainable consumption and production, as set out in SDG 12, will continue.

In several official speeches, government spokespersons have highlighted the country's interest in progressing towards the achievement of all goals linked to the environment, in line with the country's Constitution and recognition of the "rights of nature".

How the country will advance towards achievement of the SDGs is an interesting question and the answer can be built around four central elements which are those

that were applied in the last decade to obtain the results that have already been achieved.

Firstly, a firm and clear fiscal policy. Social contracts are not possible without fiscal contracts and a large part of the social investment that has been done in the country has been possible thanks to the collection of taxes.

This policy must be sustained and deepened, working continuously to raise public awareness. It is essential that the people understand clearly that the payment of taxes is positively reflected in reduction of the gaps and inequity that still exists in the country.

Secondly, so-called anti-cyclic policies. In critical moments of the economic cycle, social investment should not be reduced. This policies is based on the principle that the greater the social investment, the greater the possibility for productivity, growth and exit from the crisis.

Thirdly, the strengthening of work in local areas and working directly with groups that have been historically excluded and with groups in need of priority attention.

Finally, a concept that has guided public administration over the last decade: namely, supporting human beings and their capacities as the primary and main resource for development.

The key to achieve the aims proposed in the SDGs lies in supporting the capacities of people like Monica, the residents of San Pablo, and communities across the country. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 September 2016]

Fight Against HIV/AIDS Brings Hope to Lesotho

By Sechaba Mokhethi

QACHA'S NEK, Lesotho (IDN) – Mampiti Mohapi, a local chief of very remote Ha Nkoko village, travels ten kilometres every month to receive her antiretroviral therapy (ART) medication to counter human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

She was diagnosed with HIV in 2006 at the age of 62 but was not started on ART treatment immediately because at the time such treatment was not administered to people unless they had a CD4 count of 500 or less, which was not her case.

A CD4 count reports the number of cells in a cubic millimetre of blood, and a normal CD4 count ranges from 500 to 1,500 cells per cubic millimetre.

However, a few months after Mohapi was diagnosed with HIV, she became bedridden, her CD4 count dropped to 29 and she was introduced to ART treatment, which she has now been receiving for ten years.

Convinced that it was the test for HIV that saved her life, and that her health is the living testimony that people can still live longer after testing HIV-positive if they adhere to treatment prescriptions, Mohapi says: "I have seen younger people succumbing to this pandemic just because of their failure to take treatment as prescribed."

She admits that being diagnosed with HIV is not easy to live with, recalling that "villagers used to call me names and often said I was a curse to the village as their chief," and says that the stress caused by her situation haunts her when she is idle.

For that reason, she recommends that work like gardening, laundering and cleaning at health centres be given to HIV patients to keep them busy and help relieve this stress, and applauds the introduction of an "HIV test and treat" strategy which, she says, has saved many lives.

Through this strategy, patients start receiving treatment before their immune system weakens, helping to avoid potential stigma because people receive assistance before communities become aware of their symptoms.

However, Mohapi complains that health workers have turned sluggish in examining levels of CD4 counts every three months as they should, thus reducing the possibility of detecting rising or dwindling patterns of CD4 counts.

After Swaziland (26 percent), Lesotho is the country with the second highest level of HIV prevalence globally (25%), and became the first African country to introduce the "test and treat" approach in April 2016.

The new approach has removed the practice of giving ART treatment to HIV-positive people only when their CD4 count is below 500 or they are very sick, as per World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, and for selected populations.

In addition, all those who were tested before and their CD4 count exceeded 500 are being advised to return to their health facilities to be initiated on treatment if necessary.

“HIV is not a death sentence,” said Minister of Police and Public Safety Monyane Moleleki. “Knowing your status will help alleviate the spread of HIV/AIDS. I have been very sick for a very long time, I even thought otherwise but I have recovered, this is simply showing that any HIV-positive person can recover and live longer.”

Notwithstanding efforts to combat the deadly pandemic, Lesotho still has a high HIV/TB co-infection rate of 74 percent. The country is experiencing increasing AIDS-related deaths and new HIV infections and, because of the huge impact of the HIV/AIDS, the average life expectancy in Lesotho is just 48.7 years.

Some of these deaths are attributed to low treatment coverage, with only 40 percent of eligible adults accessing ART and 33 percent of eligible children accessing treatment, according to the Ministry of Health.

In 2014, HIV-related deaths in Lesotho were recorded to have left more than 220,000 children as orphans, with children often becoming the heads of families, caring for siblings and grandparents and in some cases leaving school to seek employment.

The country has dismally failed to combat TB, HIV/AIDS as one of the MDGs, which were targeted to be achieved by 2015. According to the 2013 MDG Status Report, the country’s failure to meet any of the goals was attributed to the high prevalence of HIV and AIDS.

In view of the declining global records as revealed by the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) Report 2016](#), Lesotho has now extended the health challenge to achieving Goal 3 of the SDGs to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages by 2030.

According to Minister of Health ‘Molotsi Monyamane, the government is committed to fighting this epidemic and has earmarked one percent of the current fiscal year’s recurrent budget for resuscitation of the National AIDS Commission which is entrusted with developing and coordinating programmes to combat HIV and AIDS.

A further one percent has been allocated for the purchase of more ARTs to feed the increasing demand stimulated by implementation of the “test and treat” strategy.

The Ministry of Health has also sought to revitalise HIV prevention through intensive efforts, including district-level HIV symposiums to strengthen HIV prevention and ART services.

Lesotho is also emphasising condom promotion and distribution as a part of its prevention strategy in combating HIV, which is guided by WHO standards, and launched door-to-door HIV testing and counselling between August 2015 and April 2016.

According to HIV/AIDS Communications Officer Baroane Phenethi, the aim was to target people who were unable to visit health facilities for testing because of busy schedules or those who were reluctant because of fear of the unknown.

Efforts are also being geared towards achieving the “90-90-90” targets set by UNAIDS – 90 percent of all people living with HIV knowing their status, 90 percent of those diagnosed with infection receiving ART treatment, and 90 percent of those receiving antiretroviral (ARV) drugs achieving viral suppression by 2020. [IDN-InDepthNews – 08 September 2016]

Reforestation in Oxapampa: Peru's Challenges and Priorities

By Fernando Torres Morán

LIMA (IDN) – Oxapampa is a province in the Pasco Region, in the high jungle area of Peru, which is home to the Oxapampa-Asháninka-Yanesha Biosphere Reserve that was recognised by UNESCO in 2010.

The reserve houses a number of protected natural areas such as the Yanachaga Chemillen National Park, with an area of 122 thousand hectares (spread over the districts of Huancabamba, Oxapampa, Villa Rica and Pozuzo) and the San Matías-San Carlos Protection Forest, with an area of 145,818 hectares (spread over the districts of Palcazu, Puerto Bermudez and Villa Rica).

Over the decades, the area has suffered forest depredation, and Peru's non-governmental [Pronaturaleza](#) foundation for the conservation of nature has recently condemned the illegal felling of trees in the Yanachaga Chemillen National Park, including the extraction of one hundred thousand planks of wood from trees such as thyme, cedar and fig.

Due to poverty in the area, members of the indigenous population engage in the extraction process attracted by the offer of small sums of money from unscrupulous loggers in return for permission to fell trees in the zones that they have been allocated.

The history of deforestation in the area, which is rich in biodiversity, dates back to the middle of the last century when timber started to be extracted for export to other countries. The first working timber yards were set up some 60 years ago.

With the passage of time, lumberjacks began encroaching on out-of-bounds sectors, giving rise to unrestricted and unsupervised tree-felling under successive governments. The Oxapampa Mountains, previously full of forest life, turned into areas of less vegetation.

This was aggravated by growing farming activity in which hectares of land were turned over to the production of fruit or were used for grazing purposes to feed cattle. The result was a rise in the phenomenon of migratory activity in which land, once exhausted, was abandoned and new land was sought for farming, with no attempt to rehabilitate the exhausted land.

According to Ivo Bozovich, General Manager of [Maderera Bozovich](#), one of the oldest lumber businesses in the Oxapampa area, agriculture and livestock are the activities that generate 87 percent of deforestation, "because they lead to the felling and burning of trees". When this happens, after three years the land is no good, adds Bozovich.

Even if it is true, as some environmentalists note, that a number of timber yards are developing their activities sustainably, felling only mature trees and leaving younger trees in place (a kind of pruning), there are also those who

indiscriminately exploit areas, leaving large swathes of previously tree-covered land empty.

Today, the situation appears to be changing for the good. Peru, as a member of the United Nations and committed to its [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), has implemented a National Forest Conservation Programme for the Mitigation of Climate Change, which includes a satellite monitoring system and specific rules for intervention and prosecution of illegal tree felling under a Ministry of Environment Plan.

The programme includes a planning strategy that envisions 11 axes for prevention, control and prosecution of deforestation and illegal logging.

Moreover, today there is a [National Strategy for Forests and Climate Change](#), the objective of which is “to reduce deforestation and degradation of our forests and thereby reduce emissions of greenhouse gases” and which has engaged the participation of both the public and the private sector.

One example is the work of Pronaturaleza which is working with 14 communities in different zones, including Oxapampa, and in which sustainable land management is being established.

Similar efforts are necessary to achieve SDG 15 (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss).

One of the objectives that the government has set is to achieve reforestation of at least two million hectares by the year 2030 and communities themselves can contribute to this objective through small actions.

Such is the case of the Ana Mogas Education Institute in the town of Quillazu, Oxapampa, which has shown that sustainable development and profit can go hand in hand. A decade ago, the institute had 3300 eucalyptus trees on three hectares. Eight years later, it was able to sell the wood, allowing it to purchase 15 computers for educational purposes.

With the planting of the trees made possible through donations and contributions from the parents of students, this is a clear example of a reforestation and sustainable development project which can also benefit a group of people who became aware of the possibilities that controlled tree-felling and commerce brings.

Nevertheless, more government efforts are needed. In the Yanachaga Chemillen National Park. For example, there are only 20 forest rangers due to a lack of funds, a number which is insufficient for covering the park. In the Oxapampa Forestry and Fauna Technical Administration Office, there are only two officers who are dedicated to administrative work, making it impossible for them to inspect the park.

The Peruvian government clearly needs to invest more in this area, one of the biggest parks in Peru. The Yanachaga Chemillen National Park contains archaeological remains from the Inca and Yanesha cultures. It also contains a

global record in flora with 2584 species and the fauna that inhabits the park numbers 59 kinds of mammals, 427 types of birds, 16 of reptiles and 31 of fish.

The native communities that have lived there for centuries have the natural means to live a dignified life. All that is necessary is to dedicate more energy and resources, giving them the tools and the knowledge so that they themselves, and not just the big businesses (and definitely not the illegal loggers), are those that see the benefits from controlled exploitation of the area's resources.

The Peruvian government has taken important steps in the direction of developing a long-term plan for conservation and reforestation of the country's vast forest lands. Nevertheless, a bigger budget and more attention to resolving the specific problems of each area are necessary. [IDN-InDepthNews – 20 July 2016]

Zimbabwe Makes Headway in Achieving Gender Equality

By Jeffrey Moyo

HARARE (IDN) - Despite the hurdles women continue to face in Zimbabwe, this country has made significant headway in achieving gender equality in line with Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be attained by 2030.

There is improved women parliamentary representation and increased numbers of girls in university than their male counterparts now – and this as more women have also taken up once male-dominated jobs.

According to UN Women, the United Nations organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, women's representation in Zimbabwe's Parliament more than doubled from 17 per cent following the 2008 general elections, to 35 per cent in the elections on July 31, 2013.

Zimbabwe has joined the ranks of the more than 30 countries the world over that have used a special electoral quota system to increase women's representation in Parliament to at least 30 per cent, based on assessments by the UN Women.

As a result, there are now 124 female parliamentarians out of the 350 legislators in Zimbabwe's new Parliament which also includes 86 women in the National Assembly, with 60 in the reserved seats and 26 directly elected to the 210 constituency seats.

In the country's army too, women have of late been elevated to top positions, not the least because of the support by UN Women Zimbabwe country office, which has been assisting government by focusing on the development, empowerment, political participation and safety of women here.

"Zimbabwe has prioritised 10 SDGs including SDG5. Most of the prioritised goals are gender inclusive," Jelda Nhliziyo, Strategic Advisor Specialist of the UN Women in Zimbabwe, told IDN.

Zimbabwe is a signatory to the ratified international and regional instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Southern Africa Development Community Gender and Development Protocol (SADC Gender Protocol), among others.

The Southern African nation in 2013 also adopted a new Constitution that is characterised by strong gender equality and women's rights provisions, according to the country's Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender, Gender and Community Development.

"Our government has demonstrated its commitment to the advancement of gender equality and women's rights through a strong legal and policy framework, and we can safely say we are moving in the right direction in promoting gender equity here," Nyasha Chikwinya, Zimbabwe's Minister of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, told IDN.

Two years ago, in a milestone for the United Nations in Zimbabwe, the UN Women, ILO, UNDP, and UNFPA launched the country's first joint programme to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Initiated with the support of the Government of Sweden, the programme is being implemented in collaboration with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development – this as the Southern African nation is party to international and regional instruments for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

As headway towards attaining gender equality, Zimbabwe presently holds about 25 percent representation in public service institutions, with remarkable improvements seen in the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, where women now occupy important positions.

Consequently, for women in the army like Ellen Chiweshe, whose title was group captain and was recently promoted to become the country's first female air commodore, which is the number three post in the air force of this country, the sky is the limit.

"The sky is the limit. There is nothing that can stop women from attaining high posts," Air Marshal *Perence Shiri*, the commander of the Air Force of Zimbabwe, told the state-run Herald newspaper earlier this year.

UN Women Zimbabwe is working closely with the government and civil society to ensure commitments made by the government in Harare are supported and advanced through policy reforms, identification of resource shortfalls that impede women's development and inclusion.

UN Women here is also on record supporting civil society to empower women politicians and government officials to identify and respond to the needs of Zimbabwe's downtrodden women in order to enable them access education.

This, according to UN Women, has ensured Zimbabwean women develop at par with their male counterparts, at a time when the African Union is also prioritising the SDGs at both national and regional levels, with gender equality as a cross cutting goal.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has also been up for the match to ensure gender equality is fulfilled in Africa as a whole and Zimbabwe in particular.

"SDG Goal 5 on gender equality goes much further than its predecessor MDG 3, with a much stronger emphasis on voice, choice and control," noted the Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance in its note to the SADC Gender Ministers meeting held in Harare in May.

But a top women rights activist here, Catherine Mukwapati, director of the Youth Dialogue Action Network, a democracy lobby group, feels gender equity as per the UNSDG5 continues to be under threat in the country's remote areas.

“Poverty among rural households remains a hurdle amidst economic migration affecting women and children here, with the women continuing to face political, social and economic inequalities, which have also been aggravated by the gender-specific results of HIV and AIDS,” Mukwapati told IDN.

“Indigenous cultures and traditions still held in high esteem in the countryside have also continued to render all matters related to gender equity an anathema and therefore unrecognised as rural women remain downtrodden in many aspects of life,” added Mukwapati.

Nonetheless, two years ago, the United Nations in Zimbabwe launched the country’s first Joint Programme on Gender Equality, which saw the Swedish International Development Agency contributing over US \$5 million intended to accelerate advancement towards women’s empowerment.

Within the same period, Zimbabwe also became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Southern Africa Development Community Gender and Development Protocol (SADC Gender Protocol).

Mildred Chauke – an 18-year old girl now doing her Advanced Level of Education in Harare, the Zimbabwean capital – says she is a living testimony to the government’s strides to achieve the UN gender equality goal after she received government support to pursue Science education as a female student.

The Advanced Level of Education popularly known as ‘A’ Level in Zimbabwe, is the highest secondary level of education prior to university or college entry.

According to latest figures, released by the country’s Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development, as of March 11, 2016, the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics initiative had benefitted 3,404 students across the country’s 10 provinces, with 55 percent of these being females. [IDN-InDepthNews – 5 June 2016]

Bangladesh Taking Action to Mitigate Potentially 'Catastrophic' Climate Change

Analysis by Naimul Haq

BHOLA (IDN) - Bangladesh is one of the world's countries worst affected by the global warming impact of climate change caused by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – extreme weather events such tropical cyclones, severe floods, rainstorms and river erosion, extreme heat waves and unexpected droughts on vast stretches of land are on the rise.

The country's coastal regions face a rising sea level, higher tides and saline water intrusion which is already encroaching further inland and destroying agricultural opportunities.

The effect of greenhouse gas emissions along Bangladesh's coast is already evident and experts predict it could be "catastrophic" if appropriate action is not taken now.

Despite efforts to increase resilience, climate challenges continue to result in large economic losses, reducing economic growth and slowing progress in reducing poverty.

The bright side is that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in cooperation with the Bangladesh government have been tackling the crisis, in particular by addressing food security which is the number one threat in coastal areas.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPPC](#)), it is estimated that by 2050 rice production in Bangladesh will have declined by 8 percent and wheat by 32 percent compared with 1990 production levels. Both crops are staple food in Bangladesh.

One of the leading NGOs in Bangladesh – the Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust ([COAST](#)) – which has over 35 years of experiences of working mostly in the coastal areas, has been in the forefront of supporting the livelihoods of marginalised people.

Md Jahirul Islam, a senior COAST official in Char Fasson, a remote coastal region barely 30 cm above sea level in the coastal district of Bhola, told IDN-INPS that "ancestral agricultural practices here are threatened, largely due to salt water intrusion. High salinity is toxic to many plants and we are now forced to seek alternative ways of growing crops."

However, the Coastal Integrated Technology Extension Programme ([CITEP](#)) being implemented by COAST in Char Fasson has been helping farmers since 2003 with alternative farming practices to improve crop production in the face of climate change.

As part of its capacity-building programmes, CITEP encourages farmers to use long raised rows of soil about one metre wide and 90 cm high for cultivating varieties of vegetables. The trenches between the rows are filled with water into

which various types of fish are released for maturing. The water for irrigating the plants comes from nearby lakes filled with freshwater drawn from the Meghna River.

The advantage of using this technique is that it protects the crop land from inundation during storm surges, tidal waves and flash flooding and avoids high salinity.

Mizanur Rahman, CITEP project coordinator in Char Fasson, told IDN-INPS that “these low lands, about 30 km from the sea at the confluence of the Bay of Bengal, are prone to tidal waves and storm surges. So the new farming technique has been designed to protect them.”

According to Aktar Hossain, a local farmer who is already benefitting from this alternative farming practice, “indigenous farming practices on flat land show that they are no longer reliable because saline water intrusion damages crops ... the new farming technique has not only proved that it is risk-free from hazardous weather but also offers opportunities for fish farming which gives individual farmers extra earnings.”

The new farming practice has turned out to be very popular in Char Fasson, where over 9,000 farmers are now using it. Many farmers have also formed self-help groups where members benefit from sharing each others’ experiences, while the government has been supporting adaptive measures such as fishing which fetches extra income.

Manzurul Islam, a local official of the government's agriculture department in Char Fasson, told IDN-INPS that “at the beginning, the challenges were huge because farmers refused to adapt to the new technique but, now that they have realised the benefits, farmers are convinced.”

Losses of crops on flat lands are disastrous. Sadir Ahmad recalls three years ago “when crops on about 5,570 hectares of flat land were damaged from four months of sea water inundation. Early this year in Razapur and Katiya, I witnessed huge chunks of land devoured by river erosion. Agriculture on huge areas suffered badly.”

Sea level rise is already evident in coastal Bangladesh. Estimations and projections show that 97.1 percent of coastal areas and over 35 million people living in coastal Bangladesh are vulnerable and exposed to multiple climate change hazards.

The Climate Change Vulnerability Index ([CCVI](#)) for 2014, which evaluated the sensitivity of populations, the physical exposure of countries, and governmental capacity to adapt to climate change over the following 30 years, ranks Bangladesh as the number one economy in the world at risk to climate change. Globally, emissions of carbon dioxide and chlorofluorocarbons into the atmosphere are growing at a rate of 5 percent annually, according to a joint [publication](#) by COAST and the Equity and Justice Working Group ([EJWG](#)) on 'Climate Change Impact and Disaster Vulnerabilities in the Coastal Areas of Bangladesh'.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, Executive Director of COAST Trust and one of the authors of the joint publication, told IDN-INPS that “climate change is a serious issue for Bangladesh and there is no time for hypothetical analysis. We have already witnessed the damages and the ‘slow poison’ could prove catastrophic.”

“In preparing for the worst situation,” Karim continued, “we are placing the emphasis on building the capacities of the local community so that internal migration does not put pressure on an already overwhelmed urban economy. These capacities include promoting salt tolerant crops, creating jobs through the establishment of new industries and increasing activities that reduce disaster vulnerabilities.”

Dr Jiban Krishna Biswas, Director-General of the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute ([BRRI](#)), told IDN-INPS that the institute “is already in the process of developing varieties of practices adaptable to fragile environments. With the changing frequency and intensity of climate-related events, we are now focusing on adapting to more modern technology in agriculture to confront the challenges.”

Speaking to IDN-INPS, Dr Atiq Rahman, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies ([BCAS](#)) said that “sea level rise in Bangladesh is already evident and various adaptive measures are clear signs of it.” Dr Rahman, who is well-known globally for his pioneering role and contributions to the environment, nature conservation and the climate change debate, added that “it is presumed that by now about 20-28 cm of sea level rise has already taken place.”

He noted that the IPCC has predicted an 86 cm sea level rise by the end of the century, “but more recent data shows that Antarctica is melting very fast, which is obviously of great concern. This new data adds to the previous predictions. We anticipate it would be more than one metre by the end of the century. And this rise is not necessarily linear over time for every place.”

Asked about the impacts of climate change in Bangladesh's coastal regions, eminent environmentalist Professor Ainun Nishat disagreed with those experts who claim that internal migration may have already started due to the effects of climate change.

He told IDN-INPS that “the land protection embankment at Char Fasson is 14 feet (over 4 metres) high [Bangladesh has similar embankments across its 700 km stretch of coastal zone], while the threat of storm surge or tidal waves is about 3 feet (90 cm). So, it is quite absurd that people would migrate in fear.”

However, he added, “I agree that Bhola is an area which is definitely impacted by climate change. By the turn of the century, the global temperature is predicted to increase by 0.8 degree Celsius. The impact of climate change has just started and there are indications of sea level rise in many parts of coastal Bangladesh.”

According to Professor Nishat, “at the moment, Bangladesh is 85 years ahead of the impacts that we are predicting. During the last two years, greenhouse gas emission is under control and Bangladesh is well prepared. What we need now are more funds and technology to improve our climate change strategies.” [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 May 2016]

Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh Defend Right to Learning

News Feature by Naimul Haq

COX'S BAZAR | Bangladesh (IDN) - Many young girls drop out from schools in Bangladesh largely due to poverty and poverty related causes. But strong motivations for continuing education have changed the scenario over the past few years.

Despite the practices of patriarchy and traditional beliefs against girls' education and employment in mostly poor families in the rural areas, adolescent girls in many regions of Bangladesh have demonstrated how defying such traditions can actually benefit their lives.

Shonglap – or dialogue that calls for capacity building or developing occupational skills and offers livelihood opportunities for marginalised groups of people in the society – has made a positive impact encouraging them to learn.

Ummey Salma, who quit school in 2011 due to extreme poverty, has joined Shonglap in South Delpara of Khurushkul in coastal Cox's Bazar district. In a group of 29 adolescent girls, Ummey, who lost her father in 2009, has been playing a leading role among the girls who meet six-days a week in the Shonglap session held at a rented thatched home in suburb Delpara.

Youngest of the 7, Ummey, who wishes to be a lawyer, told IDN, "I had to drop out of school because my widow mother needed me to contribute to family earning. So I gave up lessons in grade 9 and joined her helping in domestic chores."

With Ummey assisting, her mother earns as little as US\$ 31 a month which is barely enough to support the eight-member family – although her small income is also supplemented by her elder brothers fishing in the deep sea.

Ummey continued: "After about a year working as helping hand in a furniture factory I realized that if I had completed my education I would surely earn more than what the entire family contributes. So, with that in mind I decided to go back to school and also acquired life skill knowledge to earn while continuing education."

Ummey is one of about 3,000 adolescents in Cox's Bazaar who returned to schools after the informal coaching on basic school lessons and life skills training like stitching, repairing electronic goods, rearing domestic animals, running small tea shops, pottery, wood works and many such activities that generate income.

Jahangir Alam, Programme Manager of Shonglap Programme of COAST that executes the programme in Cox's Bazar told IDN, "Those who graduate are also supported with interest free loans to start business – and so far over 1,500 such girls are regular earning members supporting their families."

Ruksana Aktar, peer leader of the group in Delpara said: "Shonglap is basically a platform for less privileged adolescent girls to unite and gather strength through

common dialogues. Such chemistry for 12 months gives them the moral strength to regain on the lost hope they once thought was the only way.”

Twelve-year-old Rozina Aktar had never been to school. She joined the group of girls in Shonglap in Delpara and after five months of her union with the group she was convinced that education and training on income generation were the energy behind life.

In tears the orphan girl told IDN, “I could not attend school because my uncle, who I live with, is too poor to afford my school uniform and pay registration fees (US\$12 for each child during admission). But Shonglap has arranged my admission to a state run school – Shikhon – where they charge nothing at entry.”

According to a study titled, '[School Drop Out in Bangladesh: New Insights from Longitudinal Evidence](#)' carried out by Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity or CREATE, an estimated 45 percent girls in the secondary schools drop out despite high rates of enrolment of nearly 97 percent.

The CREATE study during 2007-2009 showed that apart from the common reasons like poor health, poor sanitation, teacher absenteeism, lack of appropriate care, repetitions in classes and distance from home, poverty remained on the top of the list.

Rashed K Chowdhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education ([CAMPE](#)), Bangladesh's leading think-tank advocating for children's education told IDN, “Educational exclusion for girls is a major problem, especially in socio-cultural context in Bangladesh. Girls are still married early despite stringent laws against such punishable acts. Adolescent girls are encouraged to stay home after puberty to ensure 'security' and the most common reason is girls are used as earning members to supplement family income.”

Rasheda also said, "I believe such an approach of building opportunities for youth entrepreneurship to poor girls (for income generating activities) who wish to continue education, can considerably change their lives."

Rozina is one of over 116,000 adolescents who have successfully returned to school since 2006 after several years or in some cases, months of break. “Shonglap gives me a new life,” said the shy little girl who recently graduated from stitching lessons for income.

Shonglap is designed to customize the needs of individual participants. Those returning to school attend in a prefixed life skill course of 9 months and then go on to learn income generating activities (IGA) for three months, facilitated by the peer leaders of her group. Such life skill 2-hourly-sessions are held six days a week.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, Executive Director of COAST, told IDN, “The journey at the beginning was not so smooth as because Cox's Bazar is a highly religious society that restricts adolescent girls in public. So, assembling dropped out girls from schools was not an easy task.”

Rezaul continued, “Our challenge was to convince the parents and religious leaders who had literally opposed our approach but later realized that empowering adolescent girls had great benefits.”

Each Shonglap centre has a Shonglap Support Team (SST) comprising of parents, local leaders and local government bodies.

At the community level, SSTs and adolescent girls play a key role as they take the lead in social actions, such as protesting against child marriage and dowry payment. Due to the involvement of community people they can understand the potentials of the beneficiaries (girls) and become active to support and protect the girls even in a conservative society.

Mizanur Rahman, Head of Programmes, [Stromme Foundation](#) in Bangladesh told IDN, “Shonglap helps them to be more enlightened with knowledge and information to challenge the social odds specially violence against girls and all forms of discrimination against women. Not surprisingly, many rigid parents give more support in delaying girls’ marriage and protecting children from abuse and violence.”

Shonglap, spread over 33 districts in Bangladesh through a network of over 4,600 such groups, aims to give voices to the neglected girls and enable them to negotiate their own rights for life. The programme is being implemented by COAST and other NGOs with funding from [Stromme Foundation](#) of Norway. [IDN- InDepthNews – 29 April 2016]

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