



2021 Joint Media Project Report



STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

CREDITS

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Global Coordinator | Editor-in-Charge: Ramesh Jaura

Project Director: Katsuhiro Asagiri, President International Press Syndicate (INPS) Japan Ichimura bldg. 4F, 3-2 Kanda Ogawa-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan 101-0052

Layout: Jaya Ramachandran.

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**Soka Gakkai
International**



STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

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PREFACE

By Ramesh Jaura

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

This Report of the 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, is a compilation of independent and in-depth news and analyses by IDN from April 2020 to March 2021.

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

2020-2021 is the fifth 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 sixth 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 Kakha Shengelia, President of International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), President of Caucasus University (CU), to write a Foreword, and Mr Nobuyuki Asai, Director for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), for sending his message. □

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FOREWORD

The Role of Academia and Universities in Fostering Awareness of SDGs

*By Dr. Kakha Shengelia, President of International Association of University Presidents (IAUP),
President of Caucasus University (CU)*

It was in the year 2015 when the world convened and defined 17 concrete objectives to achieve till 2030 that would improve everyone's lot around the globe. Touching on every aspect of human existence, from social inequalities to the planet we live on. But the realization that such common problems existed, the expertise required to define them and knowledge to plan for their resolution had been a result of centuries of work, realization and knowledge accumulation.

It has been that long in a historical sense when we could understand enough to realize the importance of sustainability, A pressing need to adjust our society in such a way as to care for both people and the environment we live in. A difficult, yet necessary act of our continual success as a species. It would not have been possible without what may be called the education industry—academics, universities and other knowledge centres around the world. From general, to very specific, there are many ways in which academia is involved in SDGs on a fundamental level.

The education industry, in its many forms, is responsible for training, researching and consolidating the technological and technical know-how required to operate the scientific and industrial apparatus the world over. This includes consolidation and analysis of data required for the evaluation of SDGs and development of scientific methods for their achievements through research universities and academia. In this context, I would like to further underline the importance of communication channels between the public and the universities.

Channels like IDN–InDepth News, as the Flagship Agency of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate, providing a crucial platform for the flow of information between stakeholders since 2009. IDN is an important player of the industry, providing key service in this age of information.

Furthermore, quite a few SDGs directly correspond to the education industry. Namely, "SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Quality of Education is a direct responsibility of the Educational Institutions throughout the world. Both private and governmental institutions strive to deliver the best possible results day and night.

In later years, change had been building momentum with the advancement of E-education and online technologies driving down the cost of learning and dramatically increasing the accessibility of knowledge the world over. While some countries had been slower than others in adopting e-learning, the Covid-19 crisis has clearly demonstrated what the future of education is going to be. The education industry has been one of the few to be able to function under this duress thanks to the online teaching methods, seeing many universities and educational centres adopt it at breakneck speed.



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Beyond SDG 4, for which the education industry is directly responsible, the other SDGs also involve education in one measure or another. As formalized education has become an ubiquitous feature of our everyday lives the world over, the provision of information, skills and know-how has become a responsibility of schools and universities. Not to forget, often universities and academics also cooperate with industry and statistical agencies, monitoring SDG development and designing the ways to achieve them. For example:

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages directly depends on healthcare education and the medical college industry. The education of doctors and nurses, as well as a significant part of research and development rests on the shoulders of medical universities and academics.

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all draws from innovations and developments in engineering and technology, as well as specialized water management education courses.

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all draws from the fields of electrical engineering, chemistry, physics and other fields of science both toughed and researched at universities.

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. While business universities have become a backbone for developing countries, like Caucasus School of Business in post-soviet Georgia, innovative business incubators like C10 incubator at the CU foster new ideas and young entrepreneurs.

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation directly depends on Architectural and Engineering education for the correct design and technologies used. Not to mention the byzantine supply chain and construction work managed by university trained professionals.

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns which is ensured through correct supply chain designs, environmental research and numerous agricultural, ecology, business and engineering universities that conduct appropriate research and train professionals.

SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Climate Change measurement and monitoring in large part depend on the research universities and academics from around the globe.

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels relates among others to a direct responsibility of the Law schools and colleges, Governance universities and peace centres, all of which we host at the CU, to maintain and develop.

In conclusion, universities and academia hold a crucial role in achieving SDGs globally. Whatever the goals may be, it depends on education and research to have reliable information and trained professionals. Universities are the lifeblood of knowledge industry and bedrock on which any intellectual labour base rests. Not to mention the titanic, yet often underappreciated task of raising awareness and directing the attention of youth undertaking by the Universities and Colleges the world over. □

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MESSAGE

*From Nobuyuki Asai, Director for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Affairs,
Soka Gakkai International (SGI)*

The world faced the COVID-19 pandemic this past year. The good news is that, at this time, vaccinations are available, however, we still do not know when the spread of the virus can be stopped.

The COVID pandemic poses two obstacles in achieving the SDGs. First, the pandemic itself is worsening situations such as poverty and the number of children who are unable to attend school, unemployment and the economic inequality. Second, the large amount of funds being used to fight the pandemic is decreasing the budget available for achieving the SDGs, and we still do not know the extent of those costs.

Within this context, the people being affected the most are those who are the most vulnerable or who are the most difficult for society to see. This is precisely why the international community must abide by the SDG principle "Leave no one behind."

Approaching pandemic measures based on this principle will help make society more resilient and will promote greater harmony between humans and the environment. Fortunately, we see such efforts being made.

For example, as a result of the pandemic, the importance of essential workers has become apparent. Ensuring proper compensation and work conditions reduces the number of people who are poor. The pandemic has also produced an environment for online learning, providing educational opportunities for children who are currently out of school for various reasons. In terms of economic recovery, it is also hopeful that the "Green recovery" approach has been adopted and is underway.

Given such circumstances, the significance of the "SDGs for All" media project, which introduces efforts being made globally to promote the SDGs, is even greater. We, civil society, are determined to continue speaking out in the hope that the leaders of the international community will learn about our efforts and incorporate what they have learned into their decision-making.

In his 2021 peace proposal, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda writes, "I am confident that humanity possesses the ability to transform challenges into the energy to create positive value." In accord with this sentiment, I would like to focus on reconstruction efforts based on the conviction that humankind will soon be able to overcome this pandemic. □



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Covid-19 Pushes Millions Into Destitution

By Jaya Ramachandran



Source: Malay Mail.

GENEVA (IDN) — A once-in-a-century crisis—a Great Disruption unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic—hit the world *economy* in 2020. The pandemic has reached every corner of the globe. Meanwhile, more than 120 million have been infected and close to 2.7 million people killed worldwide.

High unemployment and loss of income have pushed millions into destitution during the pandemic. The total number of people living in poverty is expected to have increased by 131 million in 2020 alone. As many as 797 million people will still be trapped in extreme poverty in 2030, representing a poverty headcount ratio of over 9 per cent.

"The cardinal Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030 will likely be missed by a large margin. Poverty will remain pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa and many landlocked countries," warns the United Nations'. "Other SDGs will suffer collateral damages as a consequence of rising poverty." Africa has been experiencing an unprecedented economic downturn with major adverse impacts on the long-term development of the continent. East Asia saw a sharp deceleration in economic growth in 2020, marking the region's weakest expansion since the Asian financial crisis.

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The pandemic and the global economic crisis have left deep marks on South Asia, turning this former growth champion into the worst-performing region in 2020. Without exception, all economies in the region have been badly hit by the crisis, whose impact has been amplified and accelerated by existing vulnerabilities.

In Western Asia, the pandemic and the subsequent mitigation measures stalled economic activities across the region. The pandemic's impact was felt most acutely in the region's high-performing tourism sector, and that impact led to a significant weakening of accommodation, transport, and wholesale and retail trade services.

Latin America and the Caribbean have suffered the devastating consequences of the pandemic, as evidenced by both the heavy human toll exacted and the massive economic damages incurred. The health crisis has been accompanied by an economic downturn of historic proportions, which follows several years of disappointing growth.

This grave situation has prompted UN Secretary-General António Guterres to remark: "We are facing the worst health and economic crisis in 90 years. As we mourn the growing death toll, we must remember that the choices we make now will determine our collective future."

The UN Chief was referring to the historic Great Depression—a worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, sparking fundamental changes in economic institutions, macroeconomic policy, and economic theory.

Some economists believe that the rearmament policies leading up to World War II helped stimulate the economies of Europe in 1937–1939. When the United States entered the war in 1941, it finally eliminated the last effects of the Great Depression.

In 2020, for several months uncertainties and panic began paralysing most economic activities in both developed and developing economies. Trade and tourism came to a grinding halt, while job and output losses exceeded levels seen in any previous crisis after the Great Depression. In a matter of months, the number of people living in poverty increased sharply, while income and wealth inequality trended towards new highs.

Governments around the world responded rapidly—and boldly—to stem the health and economic contagion of the crisis. Fiscal and monetary stimulus packages were quickly rolled out to save the economy.

While timely and massive fiscal interventions helped to prevent the worst, they did not mitigate the broader discontent that stems from the marginalization of the most vulnerable population groups and the stark inequality that divides the haves and the have nots.

Further, as the 'World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021' underlines, "limited fiscal space and high levels of public debt constrained the ability of many developing countries to roll out sufficiently large stimulus packages".

In fact, the short-term economic costs of the new edition of Great Disruption do not fully account for its long-term impacts on employment, productivity and potential output. While large-scale fiscal stimulus has prevented total economic collapse and supported the incomes of millions of households, there is little sign that these measures will boost long-term investments and create new jobs. And this, particularly in view of the fact that the global gross product fell by an estimated 4.3 per cent in 2020—the sharpest contraction of global output since the Great Depression. In contrast, world output had shrunk by 1.7 per cent during the Great Recession in 2009.

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However, the GDP estimates mask the severity of the employment crisis unleashed by the pandemic, notes the UN report. By April 2020, full or partial lockdown measures had affected almost 2.7 billion workers, representing about 81 per cent of the world's workforce. The aggregate unemployment rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reached 8.8 per cent in April 2020, before falling to 6.9 per cent in November. Unemployment rates still remain high relative to pre-crisis levels in all developed countries.

The COVID-19 crisis has also wreaked havoc on the labour markets in the developing world. By mid-2020, unemployment rates had quickly escalated to record highs: 27 per cent in Nigeria, 23 per cent in India, 21 per cent in Colombia, 17 per cent in the Philippines and above 13 per cent in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Women have been particularly hit by the pandemic, as they account for more than 50 per cent of jobs in labour-intensive service sectors, such as in retail trade and tourism, where working remotely is often not an option for many workers.

While some crimes have registered a decline, women and girls are increasingly becoming victims of violence during the implementation of the lockdown measures. It is also likely child marriages will see a global uptick against the backdrop of falling female labour force participation and rising poverty.

"The long-term consequences of the crisis will be equally severe," notes the report produced by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), in partnership with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the five United Nations regional commissions. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS) also contributed to the report.

The study warns that the pandemic will likely accelerate the pace of digitalization, automation and robotization, which will further depress labour demand in the medium term. "While productivity will experience some growth in economic sectors embracing automation, average productivity growth will falter. Declining investments in fixed capital, low average productivity growth and lower labour-force participation rates will further depress the potential output of the world economy."

Slow and protracted recovery of growth will in turn impact the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The pandemic has exposed the systemic vulnerability of the world economy. It has also shown that sustainable development—promoting inclusive and equitable growth, reducing inequality and enhancing environmental sustainability—can provide safeguards and resilience against future crisis.

In this context the UN report says, economic resilience with new fiscal and debt sustainability frameworks, societal resilience with universal social protection schemes and climate resilience with greater investments in the green economy must be the building blocks of resilient recovery.

"This will also require a stronger and more effective multilateral system which can complement and reinforce—not undermine—national efforts to put the world firmly on the trajectory of sustainable development," notes the report. [IDN- InDepthNews - 24 March 2021]

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UN Acclaims VODAN's Contribution to Fight COVID-19 in Africa

By Reinhard Jacobsen

BRUSSELS (IDN) — The United Nations has commended VODAN-AFRICA for their innovative approach to "data sharing and re-use under the present COVID-19 circumstances". The Virus Outbreak Data Network is a system of sharing data on Coronavirus that ensures that the information remains in the country that generated it, rather than being exported and unavailable to local doctors and scientists.

The network includes computer scientists and health data management experts, clinicians and social scientists from all of the participating countries. Presently, these include Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Tunisia, Liberia and Zimbabwe.

The UN's specialised agency, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in a report titled Engineering for Sustainable Development: Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals, published on March 3, mentions VODAN-AFRICA as a technical innovation for COVID-19 pandemic data:

"For instance, the principles underlying research at the Kampala International University in Uganda, centre around 'collaboration within context', bolstering its lead in the multi-country Virus Outbreak Data Network to manage African COVID-19 pandemic data within the precepts of data sovereignty."

Professor Mirjam van Reisen, VODAN's global coordinator and a lead researcher of the programme from Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC), is happy at the recognition by UNESCO. "VODAN-Africa was established a year ago when the COVID-19 crisis was declared as a global pandemic. The background was the experience of Ebola data from the crisis in Liberia. Today the Ministry of Health in Liberia does not have a complete set of these data."

Van Reisen says the experience in Africa is that health data leave the continent and do not return. Without a benefit to those data, there is little appetite on the continent to share data. "VODAN-AFRICA has solved that."

Data are repositied in residence. The data can only be visited—depending on whatever access is granted. All privacy and security of the data is respected according to the highest standard of the GDPR.

Queries can be executed over the data, and therefore this data can contribute to the understanding of COVID-19 on the African continent.



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VODAN-AFRICA provides a dashboard of real-life data within the clinic which is also where the data is stored. The real-time dashboard is realised as data is machine-readable. This technology is provided as the new smart technology that will help revolutionize health care. In addition, aggregate data queries can be executed if and when clinics approve, and under the guidelines of their respective Ministries of Health.

Just two weeks earlier, the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed the future of health data to be adopted to be SMART, with a focus of the benefit of these data to improve quality of health.

SMART stands for Standards-based, Machine-readable, Adaptive, Requirements-based, and Testable. The SMART Guideline approach includes documentation, procedures, and digital health tools, introduced in a new comment published in The Lancet Digital Health.

WHO envisions a future where everyone in the world benefits fully and immediately from clinical, public health, and data-use recommendations. SMART Guidelines are a new approach to systematize and accelerate the consistent application of recommended, life-saving interventions in the digital age.

Its importance lies in the fact that WHO guidelines articulate and endorse rigorously tested recommendations for health interventions to be adopted within country programs. "When applied correctly and consistently, guideline recommendations save lives," says WHO.

"In this day and age, the rigorous process of developing WHO guidance is only one part of improving health outcomes for people around the world," said Dr Soumya Swaminathan, WHO Chief Scientist.

"Recommendations become meaningful when they are lifted off the page and effectively applied to local systems at the country level; when they are aligned with an evolving evidence base. SMART Guidelines are a pioneering approach to digital health systems transformation."

The VODAN-AFRICA project is led by Kampala International University (KIU) in Uganda, and Prof Francisca Oladipo is executive coordinator of VODAN-AFRICA and a member of the Pan African Academy of Sciences.

Professor Oladipo says: "Since COVID-19 we have realised we can work easily over zoom with experts from all over the continent. We collaborate with 12 universities across the continent to enhance our capacities and that of our students. We meet every week with 40 experts on zoom. This programme has shown that collectively we can achieve critical innovation for the continent, and we are proud of it."

To take further advantage of the digitalisation on the continent, the team has also developed on-line learning curricula to ensure the innovation will be supported by sufficient expertise and will generate employment on the continent. The on-line curricula will be freely available to support teachers and students at the Digital Learning Platform of Kampala International University.

"In Africa, we are making the switch to digital health and education", says Professor Oladipo "and our youth is to benefit from their inclusion in the digital economy. We are happy to see the acclaim of the programmes and are determined to make impact that will benefit the people of our continent." [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 March 2021]

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UN Campaigns to Make Vaccines a Global Public Good

By J Nastranis

NEW YORK (IDN) — New research has cautioned against the growing trend towards "vaccine nationalism" where countries prioritize their own vaccine needs. The study warns that in monopolizing the supply of vaccines against the Covid-19 pandemic, wealthy nations are threatening economic destruction which will hit affluent countries nearly as hard as those in the developing world.

Even if wealthy nations are fully vaccinated by the middle of this year, and poor countries largely shut out, the study concludes that the global economy would suffer losses exceeding \$9 trillion, a sum greater than the annual output of Japan and Germany combined. Nearly half of those costs would be absorbed by wealthy countries like the United States, Canada and Britain.



Another new study warns that vaccine nationalism could lead to the unequal allocation of COVID-19 vaccines and cost the global economy up to \$1.2

trillion a year in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). Because even if some countries manage to immunise their populations against the virus, as long as the virus is not under control in all regions of the world, there will continue to be a global economic cost associated with the pandemic.

"The global cost associated with COVID-19 and its economic impact could be \$3.4 trillion a year. For the EU it will be about 5.6 per cent in annual GDP, about \$983 billion. The loss incurred by the UK is about 4.3 per cent — an annual loss of about \$145 billion. The US loses about 2.2 per cent in annual GDP, about \$480 billion," say authors of the study by Rand Corporation.

Even if nationalistic behaviour is inevitable, there are economic incentives for providing access to vaccines across the globe. Based on previous estimates, the study points out, it would cost \$25 billion to supply lower-income countries with vaccines.

The US, Britain, the European Union and other high-income countries combined could lose about \$119 billion a year if the poorest countries are denied a supply. "If these high-income countries paid for the supply of vaccines, there could be a benefit-to-cost ratio of 4.8 to 1. For every \$1 spent, high-income countries would get back about \$4.8," says the report.

These figures speak for themselves. But UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed says: "Over the past year, we've all missed out on doing the things we love to do with others—eating, hugging, and going to school and work."

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At the same time, millions of us have lost someone we love or had our livelihoods taken away. According to the World Health Organization, more than 2.5 million people around the world have died from COVID-19. The COVID-19 vaccines will stop people from dying, prevent new variants from emerging, reignite economies and offer the best hope to end the pandemic.

"Only together can we end the pandemic and transform a new era of hope," says the UN deputy chief. With this in view, the United Nations has launched a new global campaign, Only Together, to support its call for fair and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines around the world.

The campaign emphasizes the need for coordinated global action to ensure vaccines are accessible in all countries, starting with health-care workers and the most vulnerable. Ms Mohammed points out that an unprecedented global scientific effort for vaccines has indeed given us hope to defeat the virus.

In fact The biggest vaccine rollout in history is now underway with millions of doses being delivered around the world, including to some of the world's poorest countries, through the efforts of COVAX, the global vaccine equity mechanism.

Launching the initiative on March 11, UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed concern over "a small number of rich countries are rolling out a majority of the doses". He emphasized that "COVID-19 vaccines must be considered a global public good."

COVID19 vaccines should be available to "everyone, everywhere". This year of the crisis has caused a tidal wave of suffering, he added. "#OnlyTogether can we all end this pandemic & get back to the things we love."

As it is, the current number of doses will initially only cover a small segment of the populations —healthcare workers and the most vulnerable. By the end of 2021, COVAX, therefore, plans to offer vaccines to nearly 30 per cent of each participating country's population.

But that progress pales compared to ten rich countries who possess nearly 80 per cent of all COVID-19 vaccines, with some planning to vaccinate their entire population within the next few months.

COVAX, which is led by the World Health Organization, GAVI and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and in partnership with UNICEF, has 190 participating countries. It needs more than US\$2 billion to fully meet its goal to vaccinate those most in need by the end of the year.

The United Nations is of the view that pledging new funding for COVAX is critical, but more can be done to scale up vaccine access by sharing excess vaccines, transferring technology, offering voluntary licensing or even waiving intellectual property rights.

"If the world's scientists were able to develop safe and effective vaccines in just seven months, the aims of world's leaders must be equally record-breaking—to provide enough funding and to ramp up manufacturing to enable everyone on earth to be vaccinated," said UN Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming. [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 March 2021] *Top Photo: Syringes are assembled and then packaged in a facility in Spain. © UNICEF/Francis Kokoroko*

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UN's ECOSOC Chief Calls for Backing Up World's Poor Fight COVID-19

By Ramesh Jaura

BERLIN | NEW YORK (IDN) — UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) President Munir Akram has called for a 'Coalition of the Willing' to promote agreement at the global level, on a specific set of early actions to provide fiscal space and supplementary liquidity to developing countries suffering the disastrous impact of COVID-19.

In an email interview with IDN, Mr Akram said speedy actions should include comprehensive debt suspension, debt restructuring for countries in current or potential debt distress, creation of new Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) worth \$500 billion and redistribution of unutilized SDR quotas to developing countries.

Special drawing rights are supplementary foreign exchange reserve assets defined and maintained by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

ECOSOC President also called for an expansion in concessional lending including by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), comprising multilateral, regional and national development banks with international operations, implementation of the 0.7% Official Development Assistance (ODA) target, creation of a Liquidity and Sustainability Facility to provide low-interest loans to developing countries, and mobilization of \$100 billion in climate finance annually.

The coalition of the Willing would include the Group of Seven (G7), the Group of Twenty (G20), the Paris Club and the IMF Board, said Mr Akram who is also Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN.



Meanwhile, the G7 economic powers, who control a little under half of the world's economy, on February 19 agreed to "intensify cooperation" in response to the coronavirus pandemic and increase funding commitments for the rollout of vaccines in the world's poorest countries to \$7.5 billion.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said after the G7 leaders held a virtual meeting that fair distribution of vaccines was "an elementary question of fairness" and announced funding support worth \$1.5 billion.

A new study has taken up cudgels against vaccine nationalism that is haunting the vaccines-haves. The report is commissioned by the Research Foundation of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC).

The study found that the global economy stands to lose as much as \$9.2 trillion if governments fail to ensure developing economy access to COVID-19 vaccines, as much as half of which would fall on advanced economies.

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The study clearly demonstrates the economic case to invest in the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. Strikingly, a US\$ 27.2 billion investment on the part of advanced economies — the current funding shortfall to fully capitalize the ACT Accelerator and its vaccine pillar COVAX — is capable of generating returns as high as 166x the investment, found the study.

On his part, ECOSOC President has also proposed the creation of a public-private partnership (PPP) to accelerate investment in sustainable infrastructure in developing countries. Consultations are currently underway, he said. The facility would also utilize the UN's Resident Coordinator system: a vast network of agencies working on development issues in more than 130 nations worldwide.

"They are excellent instruments to be able to identify the possible infrastructure projects, to help the developing countries build the capacity to formulate good pre-feasibility and feasibility studies for those projects, and the facility would be designed to find the right partners for those projects in the investment world," Mr Akram said.

Mr Akram expressed the hope that "the forthcoming ECOSOC events will see the discussion of the financial needs of the developing countries" and expects these to "advance agreement on some of the above-mentioned urgent actions". He announced that ECOSOC will convene several forums this year where it is hoped countries will make "ambitious decisions" to respond to the fallout from the pandemic and to address climate change and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets.

The meetings will include a Financing for Development Forum in April, with the Science, Technology and Innovation Forum taking place the following month, culminating with the annual High-Level Political Forum in July. The importance of such events lies in the fact that the Economic and Social Council is at the heart of the UN system to advance the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental.

The concept of creating the ECOSOC at the time of the birth of the United Nations was that on the one side, the Security Council was conceived as an organ that would promote collective security and enforce peace in the world. The Economic and Social Council, on the other hand, was designed to promote peace through international economic cooperation.

One of the framers of the UN Charter was the (then) United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And his conception, which he voiced at the time, was that economic instability was like a disease and that if one country had it, then others would be affected.

So, the Charter says very clearly that the objective of the Economic and Social Council is to "promote better standards of living in larger freedoms". Subsequently, ECOSOC is the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus and cooperation on ways forward and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals. It is also responsible for the follow-up to major UN conferences and summits.

Since the Charter's adoption, the entire system of international cooperation on economic, social, health, humanitarian and development issues has been created under the umbrella of the Economic and Social Council. Today, twenty international organizations, regional commissions, and autonomous entities report annually to the Economic and Social Council. [IDN- InDepthNews – 22 February 2021] *Photo: Munir Akram, Seventy-sixth President of the Economic and Social Council. Credit: UN ECOSOC.*

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Mixed Feelings in Kenya's Pumwani Slums as Schools Open

By Francis Kinyua

The writer belongs to the Kamukunji Community Empowerment Initiative.

NAIROBI (IDN) – After being closed for nine months, schools in Kenya reopened to start a new term and resume the school year that was disrupted in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the morning of January 4, the streets were swarmed with elated children wearing colourful uniforms marching to their schools.

Children were excited to return to school. Cate's 12-year-old daughter Charlene, studying in New Pumwani Primary school, said staying at home had been tiresome and boring. "I missed learning, I missed my peers and teacher, and I am happy to return back to school," she said.

After visiting a few schools, the Kamukunji Community Empowerment Initiative (KCEI), a community-



Kamukunji Community Gathering

based group working in Kamukunji sub-county to enable youth to face their life challenges, observed that school authorities had installed sanitising machines, provided clean water, and made facemasks mandatory for entering the premises.

Most boys and girls put on masks as they queued outside their school's gates, waiting their turn as school officials took. Parents accompanying their children were happy and anxious at the same time as they were worried about their safety as Kenya continues to report new COVID-19 infections.

"As a parent, I am pleased that the children are back in school," said Irene, a parent. "But at the same time, we have a lot of fear because we really don't know if other children have the virus or even if the teachers have the virus, or even if the support staff in school have the virus. So, we have that concern, but we actually hope that our kids will be safe," she said.

"The government has said our children should go back to school, but they are not safe as I see it," said 30-year-old parent Saida, inquiring how social distancing will be practised with about 70 students squeezed into each classroom. "There are no new classrooms built and no additional desks here," she added. When the children sat down for class, they were shoulder to shoulder, three at a desk, as they were before the pandemic.

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"Our school is overcrowded, that is my leading concern in bringing my children back," the mother said. "We have suffered as parents, we have no money to buy books, pay bus fares, and meet the costs of masks and sanitisers. We are not sure of the safety of our kids in schools. I am worried but I have to obey the government and take my child back to school," she said.



In 2020, the World Health Organisation and UNICEF raised the alarm about prolonged school closures due to COVID-19, stating that the closure may increase the risks of teenage pregnancy, poor nutrition and permanent school dropouts for children in poorer countries.

While 15 million children were expected to return to school this week, KCEI observed that hundreds of children failed to report back to school in the Pumwani slums, with girls forming the largest part of these figures.

While it has not yet been determined why pupils did not go back to school, it could be due to girls becoming pregnant or marrying, so they are unable to return to school. "School provided a safe haven for female students to focus on their studies and avoid the marriage route", KCEI member Kinyua said. "But due to Covid-19, the safety net was detached, leaving them exposed to child marriage."

With diminishing household income, boredom and idleness, other learners resorted to child prostitution, drugs/alcohol, hawking, collecting scrap metals and plastics for sale, and begging during closure to supplement the household income, and this could also be a contributor to increased school absentee numbers during the school opening.

As many in the country are complaining about job losses and business closure due to pandemics and restrictions, many parents told KCEI that they are hesitant to send their children to school because the loss of income has affected their ability to pay tuition and other levies, buy new school uniforms, books and face masks, among others. "We have not worked for a year. We were confined to our homes. How are we to support our children to go back to school," said Jane, a parent at Kamukunji Secondary School.

"On top of the hand-washing points, schools need an adequate supply of water, soap and hand sanitisers for teachers and students. We also have a shortage of classrooms and desks, which makes it hard to properly observe the one-metre rule among learners," the headteacher at Pumwani Primary school said.

Overall, KCEI observed an average of 70 per cent of students returned to school this week. While the number may seem high, there is fear among teachers and school staff that children will continue to drop out of school for various socioeconomic reasons throughout the year.

In order to achieve Goal 4 (Quality education for all) of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all children despite their socioeconomic status should have equal access to education, hence all stakeholders should work together to make this goal a reality. [IDN-InDepthNews – 27 January 2021]

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Overcoming Vaccine Inequities and Enabling Small States' Post-Covid19 Recovery

Viewpoint by P. I. Gomes

Dr Patrick I Gomes, was Secretary-General of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States for five years until February 29, 2020. The 79-nation inter-regional body officially became the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) on April 5, 2020. Dr Gomes was previously Ambassador of the Republic of Guyana to the EU in Brussels.

PORT OF SPAIN, Trinidad and Tobago (IDN) – The “catastrophic moral failure” into which the world is seen as heading, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Director-General, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, can readily be understood as having its ideological basis in the callous principle of “profits before people for optimum shareholder-value”.

Our 21st century world of increasing gross inequality need not sound so “catastrophic”. Its origin lies in the historically dominant practice of large multinational pharmaceutical corporations delivering well-researched products, supposedly, to improve/save the plant, animal or human life. That sharp condemnation by the WHO DG, addressing the Executive Board of the UN specialized agency, once again, illustrates the dismal spectacle of large scale and structured inequality in the distribution and administration of vaccines for immunization against the Covid-19 pandemic.

In illustrating the scale of the inequity, *Euronews* reported (January 18), on the remarks made by WHO DG Dr. Tedros, that whereas more than 39 million doses of vaccine have been administered in at least “49 higher-income countries”, only 25 doses have been given in “one lowest-income country”.

In admitting to such facts, one understands the DG’s blunt language that the “the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure – and the price of this failure will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world’s poorest countries.”

Recent history of the lamentable mistakes that were made in treatment of the HIV and H1N1 pandemics confirms how some countries and medicinal companies prioritized “bilateral deals” that made prices on needed drugs escalate beyond the reach of many poor countries.

Restricted access to vaccines by small and poor states is not merely another “moral failure” but tragic outcomes of a pattern of systemic injustice between rich and poor, underlying the unequal distribution of wealth, technology and the world’s global



Credit: WHO/N.K. Acquah

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goods. This need not surprise those who can recall the historical experiences of the 1970s and 1980s by the multinationals, known for super-profits from pharmaceuticals and agro-chemicals with toxic side effects to farmers, farmworkers and rural households in developing countries in Africa and Latin America.

Chemicals for weed control or the baby-food scandals of high infant mortality rates due to aggressive promotion of baby foods in circumstances without proper instructions for usage and the absence of adequate water and sanitation. Profits from sales of baby products matter more than public health education and food safety.

Today's two million deaths from the Covid-19 pandemic was described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a "heart-wrenching milestone" and clearly demonstrates "the absence of global coordination". The Secretary-General regards this "deficit" of coordination as in need of "far greater solidarity" at the global level. Indeed, this is highly desirable and needs to be encouraged but it is far from coming to grips with the systemic inequality in the access to and distribution of what must be treated as a public good, to overcome the global crisis of 97 million infected persons and more than 2 million deaths.

Seen from a multilateral perspective, the Special Emergency Meeting of the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) on January 12, 2021, has proposed that a global summit be convened to address equitable access and distribution of the vaccines to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is indeed a commendable initiative and would hopefully receive the necessary widespread support. For instance, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) on June 21, 2021 – which was postponed last year – because of Covid-19 – could well witness an agenda item on the Pandemic and birth a robust debate and resolute action to address vaccines' inequity in a post-Covid Recovery strategy. Similarly, one would expect the Group of 77 & China to see the merit of the CARICOM initiative and mobilise the support of its 134 developing countries. Such an event can usefully include an agenda for deep interrogation of what is so conveniently captured under the concept of "global public goods".

If ever that concept needed its concrete applicability to be demonstrated in practice, for the benefit of all humanity, it is now. In the face of the world confronting the devastating loss of life, irrespective of national borders, but with harshly discriminatory treatment against "those most in need" among the aged and from poor countries, while the predominant access to vaccines is enjoyed by the developed countries, who can afford to pay and guarantee doses for their populations.

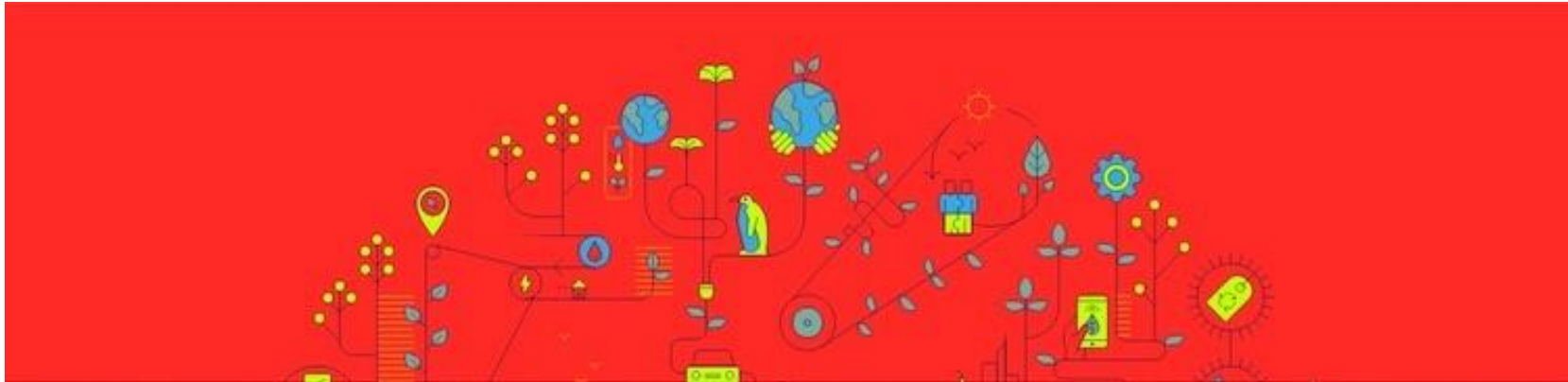
To partially address an equitable distribution and enable universal access to the knowledge, production and distribution of WHO-regulated vaccines, the COVAX facility is supposed to provide a 20% guaranteed supply of doses to all countries. But this still leaves countries to be part of the competitive scramble to secure supplies from the multinationals or through bilateral governmental arrangements with producing countries, such as Russia or India.

It is evident that major policy and organizational issues need a serious multilateral discourse and the practice of "global solidarity", about which Secretary-General Guterres spoke. Without that the systemic inequity that increasingly characterizes relations of government, business and society will persist. This will once again witness the predominance of "profits over people" and loss of lives will continue from Covid-19. It's good that hopefully several populations will be inoculated but one needs to bear in mind that "none are safe until all are safe"! [IDN-InDepthNews – 23 January 2021]

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A New UN Report Calls for Living in Balance with The Planet

By J Nastranis



Credit: UNDP

NEW YORK (IDN) – As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly pointed out, humanity is faced with a "defining moment", a warning that is highlighted in the 30th-anniversary edition of the Human Development Report (HDR), *The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene*. Though humankind has achieved incredible progress, we have taken the Earth for granted, destabilizing the very systems upon which we rely for survival.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which almost certainly sprang to humans from animals, took very little time to expose and exploit overlapping inequalities, as well as weaknesses in social, economic, and political systems, and threaten reversals in human development, notes the report.

"The next frontier for human development is not about choosing between people or trees; it's about recognizing, today, that human progress driven by unequal, carbon-intensive growth has run its course," says Pedro Conceição, Director and lead

author of the HDR Office of the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

"By tackling inequality, capitalizing on innovation and working with nature, human development could take a transformational step forward to support societies and the planet together," he adds.

The report demonstrates that we are at an unprecedented moment in history, in which human activity has become a dominant force shaping the planet. These impacts interact with existing inequalities, threatening significant development reversals.

Nothing short of a great transformation – in how we live, work and cooperate – is needed to change the path we are on. The Report explores how to jumpstart that transformation. In fact, the new HDR doubles down on the belief that people's empowerment can bring about the action we need if we live in balance with the planet in a fairer world.

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The climate crisis. Biodiversity collapse. Ocean acidification. The list is long and growing longer. So much so that many scientists believe that for the first time, instead of the planet shaping humans, humans are knowingly shaping the planet. This is the Anthropocene – the Age of Humans – marking a new geological epoch.

“Humans wield more power over the planet than ever before. In the wake of COVID-19, record-breaking temperatures and spiralling inequality, it is time to use that power to redefine what we mean by progress, where our carbon and consumption footprints are no longer hidden,” said Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator.

“As this report shows, no country in the world has yet achieved very high human development without putting immense strain on the planet. But we could be the first generation to right this wrong. That is the next frontier for human development,” he said.

The report argues that as people and planet enter an entirely new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, it is time for all countries to redesign their paths to progress by fully accounting for the dangerous pressures humans put on the planet and dismantle the gross imbalances of power and opportunity that prevent change.

How should we react to this new age? Do we choose to strike out on bold new paths striving to continue human development while easing planetary pressures? Or do we choose to try—and ultimately fail—to go back to business as usual and be swept into a dangerous unknown?

The Human Development Report is firmly behind the first choice, and its arguments go beyond summarizing well-known lists of what can be done to achieve it. The report introduces an

experimental new lens to its annual Human Development Index (HDI).

It offers a glimpse of our future, in which the strain on our planet mirrors the strain facing societies. While the devastating effects of Covid-19 have drawn the world’s attention, other crises, from climate change to rising inequalities, continue to take their toll. The challenges of planetary and societal imbalance are intertwined: they interact in a vicious circle, each making the other worse.

Thirty years ago, the UN Development Programme created a new way to define and gauge progress. Instead of using growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the sole measure of development, it ranked the world’s countries by their human development: by whether people in each country live the lives they value.

The adjusted HDI measures a nation’s health, education, and standards of living, to include two more elements: a country’s carbon dioxide emissions and its material footprint. The index shows how the global development landscape would change if both the wellbeing of people AND also the planet were central to defining humanity’s progress.

With the resulting Planetary-Pressures Adjusted HDI – or PHDI – a new global picture emerges, painting a less rosy but clearer assessment of human progress. For example, more than 50 countries drop out of the very high human development group, reflecting their dependence on fossil fuels and material footprint.

Despite these adjustments, countries like Costa Rica, Moldova, and Panama move upwards by at least 30 places, recognizing that lighter pressure on the planet is possible.

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"The Human Development Report is an important product by the United Nations. In a time where the action is needed, the new generation of Human Development Reports, with greater emphasis on the defining issues of our time such as climate change and inequalities, helps us to steer our efforts towards the future we want," said Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister of Sweden, the host country of the launch of the report.

The next frontier for human development will require working with and not against nature while transforming social norms, values, and government and financial incentives, the report argues.

For example, new estimates project that by 2100 the poorest countries in the world could experience up to 100 more days of extreme weather due to climate change each year – a number that could be cut in half if the Paris Agreement on climate change is fully implemented.

And yet fossil fuels are still being subsidized: the full cost to societies of publicly financed subsidies for fossil fuels – including indirect costs – is estimated at over US\$5 trillion a year, or 6.5 per cent of global GDP, according to International Monetary Fund figures cited in the report.

Reforestation and taking better care of forests, however, could alone account for roughly a quarter of the actions required to stop global warming from reaching two degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.

"While humanity has achieved incredible things, it is clear that we have taken our planet for granted," said Jayathma Wickramanayake, the UN Secretary-General's Envoy Youth. "Across the world young people have spoken up, recognizing that these actions put our collective future at risk. As the 2020 Human Development Report makes clear, we need

to transform our relationship with the planet – to make energy and material consumption sustainable, and to ensure every young person is educated and empowered to appreciate the wonders that a healthy world can provide."

Inequalities within and between countries, with deep roots in colonialism and racism, mean that people who have more capture the benefits of nature and export the costs, the report shows. This chokes opportunities for people who have less and minimizes their ability to do anything about it.

For example, land stewarded by indigenous peoples in the Amazon absorbs, on a per-person basis, the equivalent carbon dioxide of that emitted by the richest 1 per cent of people in the world. However, indigenous peoples continue to face hardship, persecution and discrimination and have little voice in decision-making, according to the report.

And discrimination based on ethnicity frequently leaves communities severely affected and exposed to high environmental risks such as toxic waste or excessive pollution, a trend that is reproduced in urban areas across continents, argue the authors.

According to the report, easing planetary pressures in a way that enables ALL people to flourish in this new age requires dismantling the gross imbalances of power and opportunity that stand in the way of transformation.

Public action, the report argues, can address these inequalities: ranging from increasingly progressive taxation to protecting coastal communities, a move that could safeguard the lives of 840 million people who live along the world's low elevation coastlines. "But there must be a concerted effort to ensure that actions do not further pit people against the planet." [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 January 2021]

The Rich-Poor Gulf Widens 5 Years After Adoption of Sustainable Development Goals

By J Nastranis



NEW YORK (IDN) – 2020 will be remembered as a year in which a contagious virus shut down the world, widened the gulf between the rich and the poor, triggered a spike in poverty for the first time in decades, and pushed back the United Nations efforts to create more equitable societies, jeopardising the Sustainable Development Goals universally agreed in September 2015.

By early December, the United Nations was warning that a record 235 million people would require humanitarian assistance in 2021,

comprising an increase of some 40 per cent on 2020 which is almost entirely a consequence of the pandemic.

"The picture we are presenting is the bleakest and darkest perspective on humanitarian needs in the period ahead that we have ever set out," said the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock. "That is a reflection of the fact that the COVID pandemic has wreaked carnage across the whole of the most fragile and vulnerable countries on the planet."

Mr. Lowcock warned that the scale of the challenges facing humanitarians next year are massive – and growing. "If we get through 2021 without major famines that will be a significant achievement," he said. "The red lights are flashing, and the alarm bells are ringing."

Progress in reducing child poverty also took a hit this year. The UN Children's Fund, UNICEF, and the World Bank reported that some 365 million children were living in poverty before the pandemic began, and predicted that those figures were set to rise considerably as a result of the crisis. This has been hitting efforts in reducing child poverty.

This has serious implications: extreme poverty deprives hundreds of millions of children of the opportunity to reach their real potential, in terms of physical and cognitive development, and threatens their ability to get good jobs in adulthood.

"These numbers alone should shock anyone", said Sanjay Wijesekera, UNICEF Director of Programmes: "Governments urgently need a children's recovery plan to prevent countless more children and their families from reaching levels of poverty unseen for many, many years."

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Achim Steiner, head of the UN's development agency UNDP points to another aspect of the situation: "Women are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis as they are more likely to lose their source of income and less likely to be covered by social protection measures".

He is referring to data released in September. It revealed that the poverty rate for women has increased by more than nine per cent, equivalent to some 47 million women: this represents a reversal of decades of progress to eradicate extreme poverty over the last few decades.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women Executive Director, said that the increases in women's extreme poverty are a "stark indictment of deep flaws" in the ways that society and the economy are structured.

Mr. Steiner is, however, of that the tools exist to create a huge improvement to women's lives, even during the current crisis. For example, more than 100 million women and girls could be lifted out of poverty if governments improve access to education and family planning and ensure that wages are fair and equal to those of men.

A UN-backed report in April revealed the scale of global suffering, adding that poverty and hunger were getting worse and that countries already affected by food crises were highly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. "We must keep critical food supply chains operating, so people have access to life-sustaining food," the study said, accentuating the urgency of maintaining the delivery of humanitarian assistance "to keep people in crisis fed and alive".

From using public transport as food hubs, traditional forms of home delivery, and mobile markets, communities have had to find innovative ways to feed the poor and vulnerable, whilst coping with COVID-19 restrictions on movement.

These are all examples of the ways that cities in Latin America rallied to support their populations, and reflect warnings from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), that the health risk for many urban citizens is high during the pandemic, particularly the 1.2 billion who live in slums, and other informal settlements, noted UN News.

The UN's labour-focused agency, ILO declared in February that the two billion people working in the informal sector were particularly exposed to the pandemic. In March, the agency followed up with projections which suggested that millions could be pushed into unemployment, underemployment, or the grinding condition of working poverty.

"This is no longer only a global health crisis, it is also a major labour market and economic crisis that is having a huge impact on people", said ILO Director-General Guy Ryder. The agency published recommendations on ways to mitigate the damage to livelihoods, which included employee protection in the workplace, economic and employment stimulus programmes, and income and job support.

While COVID-19 has wiped out important development gains in mere months, with extreme poverty rising for the first time in decades, the pandemic could spark the transformations needed to achieve stronger social protection systems, said the UN Secretary-General António Guterres in December.

Guterres argued: "The pandemic brings a new awareness of the social and economic risks that arise from inadequate social protection systems, unequal access to healthcare and other public services and high levels of inequality, including gender, race inequality, and all the other forms we witness in the world." [IDN-InDepthNews – 30 December 2020] *Top Photo: A World Food Programme (WFP) representative in Bolivia talks to Uru-Muratoindigenous women about COVID-19 awareness and healthy nutrition practices. Credit: WFP/Morelia Erósteg*

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Transforming Tea Trade with Taste and Impact in Tanzania

By Kizito Makoye

DAR ES SALAAM (IDN) – Nothing quite compares the taste of Ginger Mint Fusion tea whose aromatic steam mistily wafts off when served in a cup. As any customer at Salt restaurant in Dar es Salaam will attest, the tasty beverage is probably the best money can buy. Perched at the posh Oyster Bay neighbourhood with lush vegetation – the restaurant, which boasts a tacky décor and grandiose French Style architecture – is a magnet for tea-lovers.

Whether you take it with milk, sugar, lemon or just plain, ginger tea, which is spiced with exquisite flavours, is irresistibly tasty. From the swankiest of the city's hotels to Shoppers Plaza to Village Supermarket, the murky drink, whose flavour is intimately affected by how tea is grown and processed, is increasingly entrenched in people's way of life.



<<< *Photo: Women assembling tea. Credit: Kizito Makoye*

Stuck in a faint sense of mystery, customers are often taken by surprise – not knowing what flavour to expect when sipping one of the finest tea brands produced by truly Tanzanian tea blenders.

Kazi Yetu – 'Our work' in Swahili – is a start-up firm working to create jobs and economic opportunities for women in the yawning agricultural value chain, through value addition of locally produced tea products. The firm is responsible for processing, blending, packaging and exporting fairly traded tea products to and benefit the Tanzanian economy. While most agricultural products from Africa are often processed, branded and packaged abroad, the countries of origin,

including Tanzania do not always enjoy economies of scale.

The 32-year-old entrepreneur, Tahira Nizari and her business partner and husband, Hendrik Buermann, are defying the odds to challenge the status quo. Armed with impeccable academic credentials coupled with vast business experience – working for development organisations dealing with economic inclusion in the non-profit development sector in East Africa and South Asia, Nizari had in 2018 launched an organisation with an ambitious vision and hustle to tap the economic potential in agri-business through value addition.

Kazi Yetu's factory in Dar es Salaam, which employs an all-women team to produce what Nizari terms as "traceable products" is a beehive of activities. Distinctively intelligent and hard-working, Nizari has delved in market research, locally and internationally, to identify opportunities and build relations with a network of Tanzanian farmers, supplying produce for seven blends of the company's flagship Tanzania Tea Collection spiced up with local flavours. With her razor-sharp mind, Nizari sees many opportunities in agriculture that many of her Tanzanian peers don't see.

"Some young Tanzanians may not be excited to venture in agriculture, we are creating new opportunities along the agriculture value chain that are profitable," she said. With her refined interpersonal skills and unfettered social interactions

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with local partners both public and private sectors, Nizari strives to create more income-generating opportunities to lift women from the quagmires of poverty.

As a social enterprise, Kazi Yetu partners with nascent agri-businesses to increase value addition through packaging, branding and marketing thus creating opportunities and links with international markets.

From her humble beginning, Nazari and her husband, whose development work is changing the lives and increasing incomes for smallholder farmers and women entrepreneurs, have a clear vision for the future. "We wanted to establish a social enterprise that would propel investment and growth in a sustainable way" Nizari told IDN.

To quench the insatiable quest of consumers, Kazi Yetu makes various types of ethically-sourced teas blended with herbs from farms across Tanzania. "Consumers worldwide want to know the origin of the products and how it impacts the people in the supply chain," she said. The outbreak of the coronavirus early this year had affected the company, its logistics, customers and facilities – almost bringing it to the brink of financial ruins, since most tourists cancelled their travel plans to the country in most of 2020. "We had to temporarily close our factory early in April, and ask our employees to stay safe at home," Nizari said

Exporting tea by sea and air was a bit challenging logistically since most governments imposed travel restrictions and lockdown policies, she said. Despite wobbling in financial doldrums and logistical nightmares, Kazi Yetu got back to its feet – resuming most of its operations. The company is currently running an online store from Germany – primarily targeting a key European market. Nizari is upbeat to tap the potential of online customers, who according to her are quite receptive.

"We are excited to reach customers in Europe and are expanding to North America and the Middle East," she said. Through its mini-company in Germany, Kazi Yetu collaborates with like-minded social enterprises to increase value addition and reach African market. In order to identify and meet the growing needs of her business partners and suppliers, the company trains its associate to stick to organic principles. "We work with farmers to determine their specific needs and help grow their businesses," she said.

The company has, for instance, helped a smallholder farmer in the northern Kilimanjaro region, who needed a solar drier for drying edible herbs. "We have invested in the construction of the solar dryer, and she pays back the dues in instalments," Nizari said. The firm, whose factory in Dar es Salaam has facilities for storage, production and packaging, employs a dozen of all women employees. "We plan to invest in a tea packaging machine, to increase our uptake from farmers and create more jobs for women," Nizari said adding, the factory is hoping to employ 65 women by 2022 and increase the number of source farmers to 7,500.

The firm is targeting tea drinkers seeking fairly produced, organic and natural products. "We aim to supply organic supermarkets and shops that promote such products," she said Born in Canada, growing up in Dubai, Nizari owes her success to her humble family roots, which are deeply entrenched in Tanzania. Her mother grew up in Moshi on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro.

"My grandfather had a farm and a shop in the town centre... I always knew I wanted to come back here where my roots are," said Tahira whose husband delves in myriad agri-development projects in East and West Africa. Nizari, who doesn't have any children yet, loves walking her adopted street dog nicknamed Pilipili on the Indian Ocean beach. [IDN-InDepthNews – 08 December 2020]

The Forgotten HIV/AIDS Pandemic

Viewpoint by Somar Wijayadasa*



Photo credit: UNAIDS

NEW YORK (IDN) – Since the first identification of HIV/AIDS in the United States of America (USA), in 1981, approximately 76 million people have been infected with HIV, and nearly 35 million people have died of AIDS — the highest global death toll of all time — and also one of the world’s most politicized, feared and controversial diseases in the history of modern medicine.

However, this year, the deadly coronavirus (COVID-19) has thus far infected over 65 million and killed over 1.5 million people around the world.

COVID-19 has not only anaesthetized us to everything else that happens around us but also affects HIV and other epidemics and diseases that kill millions of people around the world.

Today, the whole world is focused on how pandemics affect people's lives and livelihoods, and how health is interlinked with other critical issues, such as reducing inequality, human rights, social and economic inequalities.

Every year, on December 1, people commemorate World AIDS Day with a specific theme to show support for those living with HIV and to remember those who have died from AIDS-related illnesses.

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Therefore, despite difficult times, it is most appropriate that the United Nations Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has selected “Global solidarity, shared responsibility” as the theme for this year’s World AIDS Day.

In her message on World AIDS Day, the UNAIDS Executive Director Winnie Byanyima said: “COVID-19 is threatening the progress that the world has made in health and development over the past 20 years, including the gains we have made against HIV.”

According to UNAIDS, since the start of the epidemic to the end of 2019, approximately 75.7 million people have become infected with HIV and 32.7 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses.

In 2019, 38 million people globally were living with HIV, 1.7 million people became newly infected and 690,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses.

It is startling to hear that every week, around 5,500 young women aged 15–24 years become infected with HIV, and that in sub-Saharan Africa, five in six new infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years are among girls. In 2019, women and girls accounted for about 48% of all new HIV infections.

At the 2016 United Nations High-Level Meeting on “Ending AIDS” countries pledged to increase the number of people living with HIV on treatment to 30 million by the end of 2020.

Treatment scale-up has been impressive with more than twice the number of people on treatment than in 2010.

However, as of June 2020 there were only 26 million people accessing antiretroviral therapy — that is 4 million short of the target for the end of 2020.

Almost 40 years after HIV/AIDS was identified, and quarter-century after UNAIDS was created to provide a concerted effort to eradicate this deadly virus, current data is still behind expectations, and that it is terribly discomfoting for me as the first Director and Representative of UNAIDS at the United Nations in New York.

[Note: All HIV/AIDS statistics mentioned in this article are from UNAIDS.]

Apart from its power to indiscriminately kill people, coronavirus severely affects the provision of health services for other diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria that kill millions of people all over the world.

Last month (November 2020), in the height of COVID-19 deaths, a New York Times article headlined “*The biggest monster is spreading. And it’s not the coronavirus*” caused me to realize how the COVID-19 pandemic is having a serious impact on the most vulnerable communities worldwide and impedes progress on HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases.

The article reads as follows: “It begins with a mild fever and malaise, followed by a painful cough and shortness of breath. The infection prospers in crowds, spreading to people in close reach. Containing an outbreak requires contact tracing, as well as isolation and treatment of the sick for weeks or months. This insidious disease has touched every part of the globe. It is tuberculosis, the biggest infectious-disease killer worldwide, claiming 1.5 million lives each year”.

For example, HIV/AIDS kills nearly a million people and tuberculosis claims 1.5 million lives each year. Malaria still kills several hundred thousand people yearly, two-thirds of whom are children under five.

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According to WHO, in 2016, malaria caused an estimated 216 million clinical episodes and 445,000 deaths. Despite popular misconceptions, these are not diseases of the past.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in sharp drops in diagnosis and treatment of other perilous diseases as many essential services (clinics and laboratories) are being diverted to fight COVID-19.

In almost all countries, activities related to HIV, tuberculosis and malaria are being disrupted due to COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions on gatherings of people, transport stoppages, resources diverted to the new virus, reluctance of health workers to attend to people suspected of having TB or malaria that often display similar symptoms as COVID-19.

And most importantly, almost all countries have been severely affected by its economic consequences – thereby limiting the vital human and monetary resources indispensable to maintain crucial healthcare services.

These are insurmountable barriers to HIV, TB and malaria patients who need to constantly gain access to medical attention, care and treatments.

According to scientists, “At the current rate, COVID-19 is killing about the same number of people every month as HIV, tuberculosis and malaria combined”.

Though the immense advancements in scientific research and treatment have thus far failed to find a vaccine to prevent HIV/AIDS, we finally have a ray of hope to eradicate COVID-19 thanks to the promising vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, and a dozen others in the making.

As in the case of HIV/AIDS, the guiding aphorism for all pandemics has been “only if we end the pandemic everywhere can we end the pandemic anywhere”. The entire world has the same goal: the number of cases of HIV/AIDS, COVID-19 and all other diseases all over the world needs to go to zero.

Reminding this year’s theme for the World AIDS Day, Winnie Byanyima said: “Only global solidarity and shared responsibility will help us beat the coronavirus, end the AIDS epidemic and guarantee the right to health for all.”

She opined that “The COVID-19 pandemic must not be an excuse to divert investment from HIV,” and that “There is a risk that the hard-earned gains of the AIDS response will be sacrificed to the fight against COVID-19, but the right to health means that no one disease should be fought at the expense of the other”.

**Somar Wijayadasa, is an International lawyer who worked for IAEA and FAO (1973-1985), and was UNESCO delegate to the UN General Assembly from 1985-1995, and was the Director of the UNAIDS New York Office, and simultaneously, Representative of UNAIDS at the United Nations from 1995-2000. [IDN-InDepthNews – 03 December 2020]*

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A Global Summit Calls for Transition to the Bioeconomy

By Rita Joshi



Photo credit: Global Bioeconomy Summit 2020.

BERLIN (IDN) – Global environmental threats, the opportunities brought by new sciences, and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic call for the transition to the bioeconomy, says the communiqué emerging from the Global Bioeconomy Summit 2020 organised by the International Advisory Council on Global Bioeconomy (IACGB) composed of about forty high-level policy experts and drivers of the bioeconomy in all hemispheres. The transition is "more critical than ever before".

The summit in Berlin from November 16-20 brought together key stakeholders from different sectors: governments, industry, academics among others. Its objective was to create an open dialogue on developing sustainable bioeconomy policies around the globe. It linked bioeconomy policy closely to global sustainable development and climate agendas.

The IACGB was initially formed to support the Global Bioeconomy Summit 2015 and has been maintained and extended since. It is composed of about forty high-level policy experts and drivers of the bioeconomy in all hemispheres. IACGB members act in their personal capacity as experts and do not represent an official government or organizational position.

The members combine a broad range of expertise and backgrounds and they are actively involved in different international bioeconomy-related policy and research fora. While currently being an informal mechanism, the IACGB has gained credibility and legitimacy as an expert think tank and are actively working to develop further in the coming years.

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The communiqué underlines that the bioeconomy has emerged as a globally impactful transformative force in industries and manufacturing on the supply side, and as a transformative force for consumption change and waste reduction on the demand side. In fact, in recent years the strong adaptive capacities of the bioeconomy to national and local circumstances have been demonstrated.

The statement notes three overarching bioeconomy contributions to people and planet: bioeconomy for health and wellbeing as a key element in building back better during and after COVID-19; science and technology breakthroughs advancing the sustainable bioeconomy; and climate action, ecosystems and biodiversity protection with and for sustainable bioeconomy.

The communiqué is accompanied by a "vision for a global sustainable bioeconomy". It stresses: Bioeconomy makes people and planet better off, by pursuing an economic system which is based on sustainable economic growth, while reducing resource consumption and by protecting and regenerating ecosystems. Using science to add value to biological resources and biological processes, the bioeconomy embraces principles of renewability, and circularity.

Furthermore, the bioeconomy aims at reconciling the needs of humans and nature. It purses an economic system that is far superior to today's: one that strives for achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals and one which is based on sustainable economic growth, which focuses on improving human well-being and social equity, while reducing resource consumption and regenerating ecosystems.

The vision is convinced that bioeconomy activities enhance economic, social, and ecosystem resilience, allowing both urban and rural communities to thrive especially during economic crises. A global sustainable bioeconomy includes all levels of society and aims at improving the quality of life for all people, while respecting biophysical limits to economic growth.

The vision points out that nature serves as the greatest source of inspiration in the bioeconomy. Besides valuable, renewable material and energy resources, biology provides critical know-how on natural cycles, its system and processes. The life sciences explore such characteristics, abilities and functions of natural organisms in order to develop novel, high-value solutions and applications.

"At the moment, many bio-innovations are still in their infancy, but are already demonstrating promising solutions with clear social, health and ecological benefits," notes the vision.

Pioneering examples in the health care sector comprise biological therapeutics for example in immuno-oncology, bio-degradable implants and sensors as well as bio-printed organs.

In the textiles and fashion industry, bio-innovations contribute to sustainable materials and processes, for example, biotechnologically produced spider silk, biobased water repellents or biobased dyeing and washing processes.

In the IT sector, DNA has already been tested successfully for super-efficient data storage and cells have been merged with chips to diagnose air pollution. Bio-innovators in the food and feed industry have developed pro-biotic health products, new vegan protein options, high-value products from food waste and side-streams, as well as microbiome solutions for agriculture, such as microbial-based fertilizers, and for combating obesity and non-communicable diseases for better animal feed and human health.

In industry, synthetic biology and applications of microbiome engineering not only result in advanced biomaterials, replacing plastics and steel but also inspire more sustainable manufacturing processes. Biotechnology and related converging

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technologies provide the remarkable potential to advance sustainable development and to accelerate job creation through innovative start-ups and global partnerships.

While German Federal Research Minister Anja Karliczek opened the event, the German Federal Minister for Food and Agriculture Julia Klöckner emphasized the key role of agriculture and the food system in the sustainable bioeconomy.

The Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations Qu Dongyu stressed the need to combine technology, social impact and ethics and emphasized the benefits of the Global Bioeconomy Summit as a multi-stakeholder platform. More than 1,000 participants followed the Livestream at times.

The Summit hosted and supported by the German government has five official partners representing the regions and countries of (East) Africa, Thailand for ASEAN, EU Commission and Latin America/Caribbean and Japan. Their contribution to the Summit highlighted how globally anchored, but also how diverse the bioeconomy is.

"The bioeconomy is locally adapted and globally connected. It is impressive to see how people are adapting the bioeconomy to their needs and local conditions," said Professor Joachim von Braun, co-chair of IACGB.

The diverse manifestations of the bioeconomy were made clear at a vibrant and supportive Bioeconomy Youth Champions workshop, serving as a starting point for lively discussions on how the young generation would shape regional bioeconomy concepts in their home countries and what prerequisites are needed for successful implementation.

"I was really struck by how deeply young participants understood that good policy is needed to shape a better future and that everyone brought their vision for how we get from where we are today to the future," said Ronit Langer from the US. She is one of the eight Bioeconomy Youth Champions. [IDN-InDepthNews – 24 November 2020]



COVID-19 and Lessons from Traditional Chinese Medicine

Viewpoint by Jayasri Priyalal*



Image source: IDNFINANCIALS

SINGAPORE (IDN) – They are fighting an invisible enemy taking a warpath. Many countries grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic interpret the situation like a war. Frontline heroes are found in battlefield scenarios.

These heroes come from different professions, medical and healthcare workers being the binding force, the rest including, security, transport, postal logistic, financial service providers, and employees attached to retail industries etc. Aside from them, many unsung heroes are working in hospitals, morgues, in burial grounds and the health and sanitary service providers who provide an invaluable essential service to keep the communities together.

The enormous risk they bear in carrying out their duties are often undervalued, like their health, and the health and safety their families are facing. Unfortunately, all these essential services providing unsung heroes fall into the bottom of the pyramid in societies without fundamental rights as enjoyed by others. As things stand today, with over 44.7 million infections and nearly 1.17 million deaths across the regions, the situation is beyond control. Taking control to manage the problem is what is expected from influential leaders in similar circumstances. Instead, in many countries, it appears that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken control of the situation.

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The American war veteran, General George S. Patton's quotes are used in handling challenging situations from his battlefield experiences. He said, prepare for the unknown and study how others in the past have coped with the unforeseeable and the unpredictable. What is seen in the current fix is that many political leaders are confused with known unknowns, and unknown unknowns and happy to disregard the science and medical advice for their own convenience. Attitudes demonstrate irresponsible leadership in many countries without any clue or strategic plan to manage the situation or to overcome the crisis, aside from learning from past experiences.

A similar global pandemic engulfed the world in 1918. The Spanish flu, also known as the 1918 flu pandemic, was an unusually deadly influenza pandemic caused by H1N1 influenza – a virus. In all fairness, this influenza did not originate in Spain. Almost 500 million people, about a third of the world's population, became infected. The flu spread across regions as the world was grappling with World War I, when European superpowers were fighting for their imperial dominance. At that time, the science was also not so advanced to be able to segregate the various pathogens whether they be bacteria or virus.

Even at that time, conspiracy theories said the flu originated in China. The fact remains that the spread of the pandemic and deaths resulting from the flu were meagre in China in comparison to other regions. With limited access to the records across China, some believe that the numbers were not accurate. A probable reason for this could be that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with its indigenous treatment methods were being used to counter the spread of the disease.

Having brought the COVID-19 situation under control in Wuhan, in Hubei province, China, the doctors practising western medicine commended the contributions of the TCM practitioners for their assistance in combatting the novel coronavirus imperiously.

Therefore, it will be useful to examine how TCM practice has evolved in China in order to understand the impact if any, and its relevance in restraining flu pandemics. TCM practice dates back to 3000 years. Chinese medical practitioners have been treating patients with traditional herbal decoctions with careful observations of symptoms and syndromes by maintaining records which have passed from one generation to the other.

Marco Polo the famous Italian traveller, who visited China in the 13th century, records having seen that the servants who served the emperor -Yuan Dynasty- during meals needed to wear silk scarves to cover their mouths and noses. A Chinese medical scientist Wu Liande invented a mask made of two layers of gauze called "Wu's mask" in response to a plague in Northeast China during the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Experts in different countries highly complimented this mask as it was simple to produce at low cost, and the materials were easy to obtain, and it served the purpose.

Although many of us are still grappling with knowing the origin of the COVID-19 virus, one thing is exact, as per the historical records the source of the facial mask what we all use now is from China. So, it is evident that those who doubt China's integrity find it challenging to put on a covering of the mouth and nose in order to protect their health, even when their face masks are produced outside China.

This writer has some basic understanding of TCM practice. Under TCM etiology, there are eight categories and principles applied to identify diseases and sources. Symptoms and syndromes are clinically examined to diagnose imbalances in yin, yang, exterior, interior, cold, heat, excesses and deficiencies. Accordingly, TCM practice in the past did not identify the pathogens such as bacteria or viral as we are now familiar. So, a flu pandemic such as COVID-19 is believed to be caused by exogenous pathogens in TCM clinical examinations.

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These exogenous pathogens enter the human body through the skin, nose and mouth. The nose is the orifice (opening) for the lungs, and mouth is the orifice for the spleen and the tongue is the orifice for the heart. A brief explanation to highlight why the facial mask used to prevent the spread of diseases originated from external wind pathogens in line with TCM principles originated in China. So, by wearing a face mask one can prevent the spread of the pathogens if already infected and get protection by not getting it from others in the community. Wearing a face mask is very common in most East Asian cultures – Japan, Taiwan – respecting this value as that of a responsible citizen.

The methods used in TCM to treat patients has many similarities with Ayurvedic and Helawedakam (Sri Lankan indigenous medicine) practices. When exogenous wind pathogens attack, the treatment methods focus mainly on strengthening the immune system and dispersing the pathogen from the body.

Many of the aromatic herbs usually have the actions of dispelling pathogens and promoting qi (unique in TCM which translates into some form of internal energy) and blood. Herbal ingredients used in Sri Lankan medicine and TCM decoctions have many similarities, but the properties may differ. Aside from these principles, TCM etiology also uses emotional factors and climatic conditions in identifying patterns causing various diseases.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous social media materials are circulating stressing the importance of improving the immunity and emotional wellbeing supporting this argument. They are all relevant, but what is most important is social distancing and wearing a face mask to contain the virus.

Historical facts concerning the flu pandemic restraining methods and TCM principles explained to show the issues contributing to ineffective leadership in managing the COVID-19 crisis outside of China. The authoritative governance style in China and the leadership demonstrated by President Xi Jinping's firm decisions to lockdown the provinces and cities thus prevented the spread of the virus and brought the situation under control. The cultural aspects and beliefs well established in Chinese society enabled citizens to obey the orders and remain disciplined. To drive this point, let me quote General George S Patton, again; "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." I think this worked in the same spirit in China, but not in other parts of the world.

In the worst-performing COVID-19 pandemic crisis management countries, the population did not receive a clear message about what to do as was the case of China. Mixed priorities and unclear messages confused the public. In many democracies, the current leaders got elected by riding the popularity waves stirring nationalistic emotions in the election process. They were good at managing misinformation to achieve their electoral success.

They lacked clarity in their message to tell people what to do, and they were not ready to learn from others who successfully coped with the unforeseeable and the unpredictable in the past. Moreover, they dared to neglect science and professional medical advice. That is how COVID-19 has tested the leadership abilities of many politicians.

At least from now on those leaders grappling need to find solutions for the problem, instead of finding problems in the solutions that have been proven effective in managing similar situations in the past. This article has enumerated some historical facts, issues and alternative options in order for readers to lobby and influence their poor leaders so that they may find the right path. [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 November 2020]

** The writer is the Regional Director responsible for Finance Sector of UNI Global Union, Asia & Pacific Organization - Singapore.*

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Australia: Environmentalists' Market 40 Years on Going Strong

By Kalinga Seneviratne



Photo: Channon Market. CC BY-SA 3.0

CHANNON (IDN) – At the peak of the hippie movement in the West, in 1976, the traditional farming village here in this scenic setting was a battleground between loggers and environmentalists who had travelled from across Australia, to stop the clear-felling of the rainforest at Terania Creek close by. This was the first direct action protest in Australia.

Many of the environmentalists decided to settle in the region, buying cheap agricultural land and setting up communities with a "back to the land" philosophy.

"We moved here in the 1970s with my husband to live a poor self-sufficient lifestyle. Soon as we arrived, we found that Terania Creek rainforests were to be felled. We fought for many years to protect that forest and protect other rainforests as well," says Nan Nicholson, a rainforest Botanist, who has lived in The Channon for over 40 years and published many books on rainforest plants and herbs.

It is newcomers like Nicholsons who settled down in the villages around here, that includes artisans and woodworkers, that started a traditional village market in a small hall here, where they could exchange and barter goods. It had a strict ethic of

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"make it, bake it, or grow it". It is still going strong after 44 years where over 200 stallholders and between 2000-3000 people visit this monthly market.

"This market is definitely a part of our local culture," Chris McFadden, secretary of the market management committee told IDN. "It gives people opportunities for employment and to sell their products, including artistic creations".

The Channon Crafts Market, held on the second Sunday each month, supports 100's of community groups, small business and individuals. The market was the site for environmental campaigners community meetings four decades ago and to this day the market still supports such activity. In fact, Nicholson, when she spoke to IDN was manning a stall promoting a new environment campaign to stop a dam planned to be built close by.

Due to its increasing popularity, the market outgrew the Channon Hall and moved to the beautiful Coronation Park to allow people to enjoy an open-air market experience. It is run by a Management Committee consisting of nine volunteers and a number of paid staff.

McFadden said that the land was donated to the village by a local landowner, which is now managed by the local council as a cricket oval and recreational park. "We are a non-profit community organization, not part of the council," she explained. "The stallholders pay us a small fee and also take out insurance". From this fee, they pay their staff and has recently built a second toiled block.

While the Channon market has outgrown its beginnings, its ethos has remained unchanged and it has the reputation as one of Australia's most vibrant markets. Many of the stalls sell the produce of local farmers and plants from their nurseries, arts and crafts of local people, and there are also a lot of food stalls run by people in the communities. Some stalls were selling imported items such as dresses from India and Thailand, or crafts from Maori New Zealand and Peru.

When asked how the latter products fit into their motto of "make it, bake it, or grow it", McFadden said: "After we moved to the oval here and the market became bigger and bigger, there was a diversity to what people sell here, but it's still an arts and crafts market. Whatever you make you sell. There are some imported goods, but we don't encourage it."

Besides amazing art and products, visitors have a chance to enjoy some local music with the 'band of the day' playing from the main stage, and all manner of impromptu musicians dotted around the park. If you stay to the end of the market you can experience the infamous 'Drum Dance' where people dance to the rhythms of a variety of drums.

But this was missing this month because the market was closed for four months due to Covid-19 lockdowns and social distancing regulations still in force outlaws such activity for now.

The Channon market has given rise to a surge of such Sunday markets across the region known as the Northern Rivers that includes tourist resort areas along the northern New South Wales coast. Many of these markets are scattered through the month on Sundays and Saturdays. Thus, there are some stallholders that go from one market to another, to make a living throughout the month.

One such stallholder is Adrienne Hmelnitsky from the village of Urunga about 3 hours' drive from here. She produces what she has branded as 'Sunlighters' that is made with colourful plastics, which gives a stained glass effect when they cling on to glass windows. "I'm an artist and all these are handmade," she told IDN, pointing out the products gleaming colourfully

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from the transparent walls of her tent stall. "This is the fourth time I'm here and I do a number of markets in northern rivers". She also pointed out that her products are made of non-toxic material and are reusable.

A local artist who cuts various coloured rocks and makes jewellery and necklaces use this market to sell his products. "I buy rough stones, cut and polish them to make these" he explains. "I live off a van and don't need to spend for accommodation. I sell it at the market". The artist who gave his name as Sam sells most of his necklaces at between \$50-150 per piece.

John Arklan is a third-generation Sikh-Australian who used to be a banana grower. He drives three hours each way from his home in Woolgoolga

in his mobile Indian food kitchen to sell butter chicken and dhal curry with rice and naan. "This is a spectacular setting," he told IDN. "I enjoy the atmosphere here and I sell a lot of food. They embrace whatever you cook, and the people here are different (in their outlook)."

The government recognized the unique contribution this market has made to the people and culture of the region so that they included the staff in the "job keeper" scheme that pays business to keep their staff on the payroll while the Covid-19 lockdowns are in place.

"When we were closed our staff helped to improve the facilities here like painting the railings and toilet walls," McFadden said. She also added that they started developing an online market for the stallholders from the local community, but it is being handicapped due to the cost of transporting the goods.

"Thousands come here each month [November], even as far away as Brisbane," says McFadden. "But we try to limit the stallholders to a 100 km radius. We want to give the opportunity to local farmers and artistes to sell direct (to the public)."
[IDN-InDepthNews – 17 November 2020]



AndryaHart: Rocky creek in the rainforest that could be submerged or destroyed by the Dunoon dam.
Credit: Andrya Hart.

Migrants Face “Double Threat” Amid Coronavirus Pandemic

By Jacqueline Skalski-Fouts*



Photo: Migrants onboard a boat headed for Tripoli in July 2019. Critics say the EU should not be helping the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept and return people to a war-torn country where they face abuse and extortion. (Filippo Rossi/TNH)

VIRGINIA, USA (IDN) – Migrant workers have been at the forefront of the world economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, as essential workers. And this with enormous risk to themselves. They are facing what the International Rescue Committee refers to as an “unimaginable double emergency”.

Facing conflict and displacement, migrants must also face not only a worldwide pandemic and the effects of an economic recession. They are vulnerable to poverty, facing conflict, displacement, or unsafe working and living conditions. Therefore, they require greater economic support as unemployment rises, access to personal protective equipment (PPEs), and legal assistance.

In the United States, migrant workers labour in the fields of California’s Central Valley, the state’s wine region, as fires burn along the West Coast, turning the air red and hazardous.

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In the farms of Almería, Spain, Moroccan migrant farmworkers, have complained about the “severe” lack of personal protective equipment, like masks and hand sanitizer, to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Within the EU, Spain has one of the highest proportions of migrant workers, where at least 25% of the country’s agriculture is carried out by non-citizen migrants. Similarly, 30% of agricultural workers in the United States are undocumented and around 3.9-4.1 million workers in the EU are undocumented. Yet these workers play an important role in the national and world economy and are now facing the dangers of the pandemic head-on.

Like migrant workers, refugees and displaced people are also vulnerable to the effects of closures and health concerns associated with the pandemic.

With closures, many who struggle to afford basic living are at high risk of losing their jobs and are ineligible for government financial support.

Coronavirus shutdowns have devastated small businesses in countries throughout the world and are expected to result in “severe” economic downturns. As a result, 1.06 million people are expected to be at risk of poverty by the end of the year. Among those are migrants and refugees, who are “particularly vulnerable” to the effects of the crisis as they make up a large percentage of informal sector workers.

Recent studies estimate the number of informal workers in Morocco is around 2.4 million (more than a third of Moroccan workers), and is expected to increase as consumers lose their jobs and companies seek cheaper goods and services. During closures, many informal workers were unable to find clients or reach areas of work due to lack of transportation.

While in Morocco, the labor market and the private sector have been heavily impacted by closures, those most impacted are workers employed in the informal sector where 66% have already lost their jobs. The Moroccan government has tried to cushion the effects of income loss, particularly for informal workers, but as of mid-July, has only reached 19% of households. Much of this aid does not reach immigrants, especially those that are irregular or undocumented.

Most immigrants will not return home, as evidenced by past financial crises. Instead, facing poor economic prospects at home, many are migrating north to Europe. In recent months, Tunisia has seen an increase in the number of migrants heading to Italy, six times the number who emigrated last year.

But with traditional land migration routes closed, more migrants are turning to sea routes and trafficking, which so far has resulted in more than 675 fatalities this year.

Human Rights Watch has warned of the complications the Coronavirus pandemic can bring. Migrant workers often face unsafe working and living conditions, which can make them more vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

Kavita Datta, who studied Bulgarian migrants in London during the 2009 recession, suggests that there are only two solutions: one is to reduce migration; the other is to provide more legal access and wider understanding of migrants’ rights within the country so as to reduce the chances of exploitation.

In a webinar hosted by the Migration Policy Centre, guest speaker and the Centre's director Andrew Geddes calls for a new debate on immigration, suggesting the need for governments to reinvestigate current policies such as responsibility-sharing and legal pathways.

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Much of the blame falls on North African emigration countries, like Libya and Morocco, where a majority of irregular migrants travel through to Europe. The UK government's recent plans to reduce migration include building off-shore detention centers in countries like Morocco, a similar plan the Australian government used in Papua New Guinea, which has been criticized by the United Nations and other human rights groups.

But rather than taking a detention-centred response to increased migration, legal aid organizations and migration assistance programs take a more humanitarian approach, which may more efficiently reduce irregular migration.

Moroccan organizations like Droit et Justice and the student-run *Clinique Juridique de la Faculté de Droit (CJFD)* at the University Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah in Fes are doing just that.

CJFD is supported by the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative and the National Endowment for Democracy and implemented in partnership with the High Atlas Foundation. There, law students provide legal aid to migrants as part of a multidimensional approach to reducing European-bound migration while promoting human rights, social integration, and entrepreneurship training. This way, traditional emigration hubs become places of support and encourage more-permanent stay.

In response to COVID-19, volunteerism and community solidarity around the world has increased. This provides the basis for greater support of migrant protection and inclusion programs. Emigration countries should increase partnerships between governments and community-run social organizations in order to reduce the number of migrants risking dangerous migratory routes, exploitation, or poverty. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 October 2020]

* *Jacqueline Skalski-Fouts is an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia.*



Source: *MigrantsDatenportal*

UN Survey Finds COVID-19 Has Enhanced Online Shopping

By Jamshed Baruah



Photo: Online shopping will never be the same after the coronavirus pandemic. Source: UNCTAD

GENEVA (IDN) – "The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards a more digital world. The changes we make now will have lasting effects as the world economy begins to recover," says Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

The acceleration of online shopping globally underscores the urgency of ensuring all countries can seize the opportunities offered by digitalization as the world moves from pandemic response to recovery, he adds.

Mr Kituyi's remarks are based on the survey, entitled "COVID-19 and E-commerce", which examines how the pandemic has changed the way consumers use e-commerce and digital solutions. It covered Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, South Africa, Switzerland and Turkey.

Following the pandemic, more than half of the survey's respondents now shop online more frequently and rely on the internet more for news, health-related information and digital entertainment. Consumers in emerging economies have made the greatest shift to online shopping, the survey shows.

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The survey conducted by UNCTAD and Netcomm Suisse eCommerce Association, in collaboration with the Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and Inveon, shows that online purchases have increased by 6 to 10 percentage points across most product categories.

The biggest gainers are ICT/electronics, gardening/do-it-yourself, pharmaceuticals, education, furniture/household products and cosmetics/personal care categories.

However, average online monthly spending per shopper has dropped markedly. Consumers in both emerging and developed economies have postponed larger expenditures, with those in emerging economies focusing more on essential products.

Tourism and travel sectors have suffered the strongest decline, with average spending per online shopper dropping by 75 per cent.

"During the pandemic, online consumption habits in Brazil have changed significantly, with a greater proportion of internet users buying essential products, such as food and beverages, cosmetics and medicines," said Alexandre Barbosa, manager of the Regional Center of Studies on the Development of Information Society (Cetic.br) at the Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br).

Increases in online shopping during COVID-19 differ between countries, with the strongest rise noted in China and Turkey and the weakest in Switzerland and Germany, where more people were already engaging in e-commerce.

The survey found that women and people with tertiary education increased their online purchases more than others. People aged 25 to 44 reported a stronger increase compared with younger ones. In the case of Brazil, the increase was highest among the most vulnerable population and women. Also, according to survey responses, small merchants in China were most equipped to sell their products online and those in South Africa were least prepared.

"Companies that put e-commerce at the heart of their business strategies are prepared for the post-COVID-19 era," said Yomi Kastro, founder and CEO of Inveon. "There is an enormous opportunity for industries that are still more used to physical shopping, such as fast-moving consumer goods and pharmaceuticals."

"In the post-COVID-19 world, the unparalleled growth of e-commerce will disrupt national and international retail frameworks," said Carlo Terreni, President, NetComm Suisse eCommerce Association.

"This is why policymakers should adopt concrete measures to facilitate e-commerce adoption among small and medium enterprises, create specialized talent pools and attract international e-commerce investors."

According to the survey, the most used communication platforms are WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook Messenger, all owned by Facebook.

However, Zoom and Microsoft Teams have benefitted the most from increases in the use of video calling applications in workplaces. In China, the top communication platforms are WeChat, DingTalk and Tencent Conference, the survey shows.

The survey results suggest that changes in online activities are likely to outlast the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents, especially those in China and Turkey, said they'd continue shopping online and focusing on essential products in the future. They'd also continue to travel more locally, suggesting a lasting impact on international tourism. [IDN-InDepthNews – 09 October 2020]

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UN At 75: How the Law of The Sea Has Shaped A More Fair and Equal Society

Viewpoint by Michael W. Lodge

Secretary-General of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) based in Jamaica.



Photo: International Seabed Authority.

KINGSTON (IDN) – In his address to the United Nations Economic and Social Council in July 2020, reflecting on what kind of UN we need at the 75th anniversary, the Secretary-General of the UN called for strengthened and renewed multilateralism, geared towards the overarching goals of peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.

One of the greatest and most enduring successes of the UN is the establishment of the legal regime for the ocean that is reflected in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which has rightly been described as the constitution for the oceans. The Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, which lasted from 1973 to 1982, was the largest and most complex multilateral conference convened up to that time. It took place against a background of uncertainty in the law of the sea created by a proliferation of unilateral claims and the failure of two previous conferences in 1958 and 1960. Some of these claims resulted in violence and international conflicts over access and rights of passage, such as the 'cod war' between UK and Iceland.

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Rapid decolonization and the consequent emergence of some 100 new States challenged the traditional maritime order reflected in the doctrine of the freedom of the seas, but which effectively meant that the oceans were claimed for the exclusive use of a small number of maritime powers. At the same time, rapid advances in science and technology increased our understanding of the vulnerability of the ocean to over-exploitation and the impacts of pollution.

The 1982 Convention established certainty in the law of the sea and brought peace and order to the oceans. It provides for an equitable relationship among States in their use of the ocean and has been a major contribution to international peace and security. Although the Convention is multi-faceted, covering every aspect of humanity's use of the oceans, *four elements* stand out.

First, the Convention resolved the vexed question of the extent of the maritime jurisdiction of States. After 400 years during which naval power was the ultimate arbiter of right, an agreement was reached on a 12-mile territorial sea, a 200-mile exclusive economic zone, the definition of the continental shelf and a system for resolving disputes over overlapping claims. Essential rights of passage through straits used for international navigation were preserved for all States and landlocked countries were assured of perpetual rights of access to the sea. Since more than 90% of goods are carried by sea, this has made a major contribution to the development of international trade and commerce.

Second, and often overlooked, is the fact that the Convention is one of the most important environmental treaties ever adopted. In addition to an entire chapter focused on the protection of the marine environment, it is the first treaty to include a definition of pollution that also applies to anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, regardless of their source. Furthermore, the provisions of the Convention relating to the marine environment are mandatory, unqualified and without exception, with a marked absence of phrases we have become accustomed to in more recent years such as 'in accordance with capabilities', 'as appropriate' and 'as far as practicable'.

Third, and obviously most dear to my heart, the Convention established an entirely novel legal regime for the largest untapped mineral resources on the planet, designating these resources as the 'common heritage of mankind', to be managed by an international agency - the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and used sustainably for the benefit of all humanity. Access to these resources is assured to both developed and developing States, rich and poor, large, and small. No other resource on the planet is managed in this way and we have struggled so far to apply similar ideals to extra-terrestrial resources.

Fourth, the Convention has endured. Adopted when the UN was only 37 years old, the Convention has gone from strength to strength and now has 168 States Parties, including the majority of the major maritime powers. Maritime disputes have been resolved peacefully in accordance with the Convention, supported by the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, through a comprehensive system for dispute settlement that goes beyond that contained in any other treaty.

The Convention has shown that it is adaptable to changing circumstances and new challenges with the adoption of two implementing agreements in 1994 and 1995, on deep seabed mining and international fisheries, respectively. What is particularly significant is that these agreements develop the provisions of the Convention in the light of new scientific knowledge and growing environmental concerns without in any way undermining the underlying package of rights and jurisdictions agreed in 1982. . [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 September 2020]

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The Great Green Wall Is Paving the Way Ahead to 2030

By Rita Joshi



Image credit: UNCCD

BONN (IDN) – The Great Green Wall (GGW) initiative has over the past 13 years restored close to 20 million hectares of land, according to a report released on September 7 at a virtual meeting of environmental ministers from Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti together with regional partners, international organizations and development agencies.

The GGW Initiative was launched in 2007 under the leadership of the African Union Commission and Pan-African Agency, and with the financial support from the government of Ireland. The Initiative unites African countries and international partners to transform the lives of millions of people by growing an 8,000 km long and 15 km wide mosaic of trees, grasslands,

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vegetation and plants along the southern tip of the Saharan desert. Once complete, the GGW will be the largest living structure on the planet, three times the size of the Great Barrier Reef.

Titled *The Great Green Wall: Implementation Status and Way Ahead to 2030*, the report is the first comprehensive status testimony. It states that over 350,000 jobs were created and around \$90 million in revenues was generated from 2007 to 2018 through the GGW activities.

Over 220,000 people received training on the sustainable production of agro-pastoral and non-timber products to support the shift to more responsible consumption and production. The restored area will sequester over 300 MtCO₂ by 2030, roughly 30 per cent of the envisioned target for the GGW.

The report also indicates that to reach the target restoration of 100 million hectares of land by 2030, the GGW countries need to restore 8.2 million hectares of land every year at an annual financial investment of \$4.3 billion. The initiative also aims to create 10 million jobs by that date.

"The Great Green Wall can – and will – change the lived reality of millions of our people. More jobs, better health, greater stability. More resilient and cohesive communities and stronger inclusive economic growth," said UN Deputy Secretary-General Ms Amina Mohammed in her opening remarks to a ministerial meeting.

"As we survey the wreckage of COVID-19 and make our plans to rebuild through robust stimulus packages, it would be a missed opportunity not to see investing in the Great Green Wall as an integral component of an inclusive sustainable economic response and recovery," Ms Mohammed added.

UNCCD Executive Secretary Mr Ibrahim Thiaw also emphasised: "The GGW is yielding immediate benefits for the local communities and long-term ecosystem benefits at the international level. It shows that when countries dare to dream, work together and make the right choices, we can prosper and live in harmony with nature. And where innovative ideas emerge, positive, dramatic change that benefits both the local and international communities will happen."

At the closing of the ministerial meeting, a declaration on The Great Green Wall was adopted to highlight the potential of the GGW as one of the levers for achieving the post-COVID economic recovery, poverty reduction, ecosystems restoration, climate change adaptation and mitigation, women empowerment, fight against irregular economic migration and jobs creation. The declaration emphasizes the need for sustained and multifaceted support as well as the active participation of all partners to achieve the GGW goals.

Ministers, representatives of the member states of the Panafrican Agency of the Great Green Wall of Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan and Chad expressed deep concern about "the current global health situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whose socio-economic consequences in the short, medium and long term will also have a certain ecological impact".

In their declaration, Ministers reaffirmed that the implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative is and remains a priority for each of our eleven member countries. We reiterate our shared vision of making the Great Green Wall one of the levers for achieving the post-COVID economic recovery, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the 2063 Agenda and the Paris Agreement in our respective countries.

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They called on all partners to provide sustained and multifaceted support to the member countries of the Pan-African Agency for the Great Green Wall, as the implementation of the Great Green Wall is a priority for our States, which can contribute to the creation of jobs, wealth and prosperity.

They urged development partners to combine their efforts and initiatives in order to contribute to, and facilitate, the alignment of interventions aimed, inter alia, at poverty reduction, ecosystems restoration, adaptation to, and/or, climate change mitigation, women empowerment, fight against irregular economic migration and jobs creation in rural areas.

They further called upon their partners, in particular the Green Climate Fund, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the Global Environment Facility, the World Bank Group, the European Union, the African Development Bank Group as well as the French Development Agency and other interested bilateral partners, to support our States in developing an umbrella program on the Great Green Wall. [IDN-InDepthNews – 16 September 2020].

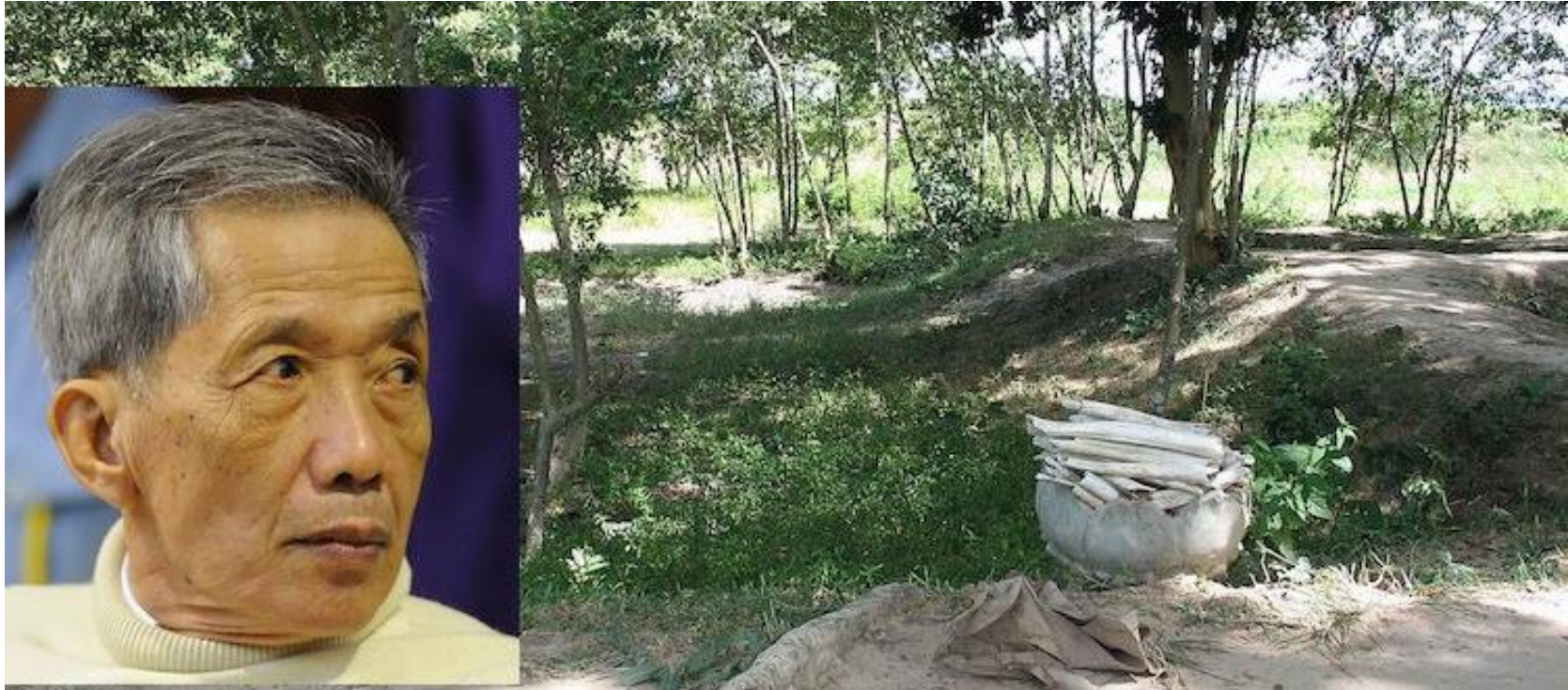


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Death of The Leader Of "The Killing Fields" Raises Questions

Will there be more genocides that the world will ignore until it is too late?

Viewpoint by Jonathan Power*



Collage of the mass grave at the Killing Field of Choeung Ek with the leader of the Killing Fields on the left. Wikimedia.

LUND, Sweden (IDN) – One of the cruellest men ever to have lived died on September 2 in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Kaing Guek Eav, popularly known as "Duch", was 77 and had been convicted of mass torture by the UN/Cambodian war crimes court. He was the only one of the five defendants to admit his crimes. In July 2010 in a trial I witnessed first-hand he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

According to Seth Mydans, the New York Times's correspondent in Cambodia at the time of the rule of Pol Pot who founded the guerrilla movement, the Khmer Rouge, "he was a schoolteacher before the Khmer Rouge came to power. He took his revolutionary name from a children's book about an obedient schoolboy named Duch. 'I wanted to be a well-disciplined boy who respected the teachers and did good deeds', he told the court. That obedience made him an effective operative for the top Khmer Rouge leadership. His chief defence was that he, too, had feared for his life if he did not carry out orders.

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But the vigour, creativity and cruelty with which he ran his torture house belied that defence. 15,000 or so died at his command. And his brashness and arrogance during the trial were anything but that of a young innocent”.

Cambodians knew him as the cruellest of the cruel who ran the main prison. He was the author of such directives as “Use the hot method, even if it kills him”. In the margin of a list of 17 children he wrote, “Kill them all”. Ironically, he said later that torture had taught him not to believe in confessions carried out under duress -- only about 40% of what they confessed to was true.

Once captured he tried to present himself as a different person. “I think my biography is something like St Paul’s, he told Nate Thayer, an American reporter who recounted this strange story in the Far Eastern Economic Review. “I feel very sorry about the killings and the past. I wanted to be a good communist. Now in the second half of my life I want to serve God by doing God’s work to help people”. In fact, he seemed to spend much of his spare time in fancy restaurants.

Cambodia had been heavily and barbarously bombed by the US during the Vietnam War, following a policy initiated by the US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger who, despite his war crimes, is feted among many of the political elite in the US today.

Vietnam is Cambodia’s neighbour and through Cambodia the North Vietnamese ran guns to its allies in the south during its war with the US. Cambodia was almost flattened. It created a political vacuum which the Khmer Rouge occupied and took advantage of. They ruled until 1979 when they were overthrown by Vietnam which installed the present, almost dictatorial, regime.

A week after the Khmer Rouge took power they forced as many as two million people living in the capital to leave the city and work in the countryside. Thousands died during the evacuation. It was carried out in a hurried, merciless, way, forcing the inhabitants to leave behind all their possessions. Children were separated from their parents and many old and sick died on the road. 1.7 million people died from execution, torture, starvation, untreated disease or overwork. (An unusually good film, “The Killing Fields” was made of this.)

The communist Khmer Rouge believed this was a levelling process that would turn the country into a rural, classless, society. They abolished money, free markets, normal schooling, foreign clothing styles, religious practices and traditional culture. There was no public or private transportation, no private property and no non-revolutionary entertainment. People had to work 12 hours a day and be married in mass ceremonies with partners chosen by the party. Showing affection to family members was forbidden. Dissidents and complainers by the thousand were shot in the back of the head.

The sadistic practices of the Khmer Rouge only came to a halt in January 1979 when Vietnamese troops (supported politically by the Soviet Union) and the forces of the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea (Cambodia) fought their way into Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge then fled westward and re-established themselves close to the Thai border, posing as refugees. UNICEFs, other UN agencies and Western NGOs, taken in by the misrepresentations of the murderous movement, fed them and gave them medical attention, and thus strengthened them enough to fight another day.

The US, still reeling from its defeat in the hands of the North Vietnamese, acted on the old adage, “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”. It persuaded the UN to give the Khmer Rouge Cambodia’s seat in the UN. Its flag flew outside the UN’s headquarters in New York. From 1979 to 1990 it was recognized as the only legitimate representative of Cambodia. Every Western European country voted for this, with the exception of Sweden. The Soviet bloc voted against but failed in its quest to embarrass the West.

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Right through the presidencies of Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan this policy was continued. Not until George W.H. Bush came into office was this wicked era of tolerance ended.

Even after that evil farce was brought to a close, the Khmer Rouge continued to exist until 1990 by which time its leaders had either died, been arrested by the Vietnamese-backed government or defected to it -- like Hun Sen, then and now the prime minister.

At the same time as the US and Europe were supporting the Khmer Rouge regime's seat in the UN, many left-wing intellectuals and activists in the West were also giving them support. They saw them as a clean communist broom sweeping out the old order. They closed their eyes or looked the other way, despite the publicity given to the genocide by the New York Times, the Washington Post, Le Monde and the International Herald Tribune where I wrote columns about it. (The rest of the media more or less ignored it.)

Shortly after the US's termination of its pro-Khmer Rouge policy the Big Five of the UN's Security Council surprised the world by announcing that Cambodia would become a UN protectorate. The competing armies would be disarmed, and a new democratic government chosen by a fair ballot. The UN had never done anything quite like this.

In October 1991 Cambodia's factions and the representatives of 19 nations met in Paris to sign the Peace Accords. Bush's secretary of state James Baker told the conference "What makes the case so extraordinary and its claim for international support so compelling is the magnitude of the suffering its people have endured".

Nevertheless, the US, preoccupied by its first war in Iraq, soon lost interest. Later, the next president, Bill Clinton, seemed to be indifferent or oblivious.

It wasn't until the UN persuaded the Hun Sen government to agree to a war crimes court with Cambodian and UN-chosen judges that justice began to be done. It was set up in 1997, seven years after the demise of the Khmer Rouge. Finally, the Cambodian authorities arrested Duch and Ieng Sary (the Khmer Rouge's foreign minister, his wife Ieng Thirith (ex minister for social affairs) and two other senior leaders, Nuon Shea and Khieu Samphan. All have been found guilty apart from Ieng Thirith who was excused because of Alzheimer's.

One can ask the question: How much does the outside world care or even know? The Khmer Rouge has faded into history. Some of us asked will there be more genocides that the world will ignore until it is too late? It seems so. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 has been and gone with little shame shown by the outside world. As Martin Luther King once said, "We must break the silence of the night.....No lie can live for ever.....Truth pressed to earth must rise again."

Note: The writer was for 17 years a foreign affairs columnist and commentator for the International Herald Tribune. Visit his website: www.jonathanpowerjournalist.com [IDN-InDepthNews – 08 September 2020].



Skulls of Khmer Rouge victims

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Ladakh Buddhist Monk Leads A Campaign for Peaceful Resolution of Border Conflict

By Kalinga Seneviratne



Photo: Bhikkhu Sanghasena, a leading Buddhist monk, based in the state capital Leh, led a procession of local spiritual leaders across the town centre. The spiritual leaders included not only Buddhists but also Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. Credit: Mahabodhi Meditation Centre.

SINGAPORE (IDN) – When India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow on September 10, Wang noted that it was "normal for India and China to have differences as two neighbouring major countries".

According to India's NDTV network, he added, as Asia's emerging powers, India and China need to cooperate and not confront each other, and promote mutual trust, not suspicion.

Himalayan mountain state of Ladakh has the biggest ratio of Buddhists of any Indian union territory, and Bhikkhu Sanghasena, a leading Buddhist monk, based in the state capital Leh has been leading a campaign for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, since the deadly clash between Indian and Chinese forces in June 2020 on the border that killed 20 Indian soldiers.

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"If war breaks out, Ladakh being the border will be the first victim of war," he told *Lotus News, a partner of IDN-INPS*; in a WhatsApp interview from Leh. "People of Ladakh will suffer the most. We will become another Kashmir or Afghanistan," he added.

When Ladakh was declared a union territory last year by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Buddhists in Ladakh were happy because, for the first time in India, Buddhists would have a greater say in the running of a state in the Indian federal system. But, Bhikkhu Sanghasena – who heads the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre in Leh, a large Buddhist organisation with a variety of social service projects for the community – has lamented that spiritual leaders in India have been silent on the brewing conflict.

"It is the duty of every spiritual leader to promote peace," he argues. "India is a land of millions of Yogis, Rishis (Hindu sages) and Munis (ancient Indian ascetics) who always said 'Ahimsa Paramo Dharma' (non-violence topmost duty). Thus non-violence has been the first slogan of Indian gurus. I'm surprised no gurus have come up to speak for a peaceful solution of the border conflict between India and China."

On September 8, under the banner of "Work, Walk and Pray for Peace", Bhikkhu Sanghasena led a procession of local spiritual leaders across Leh town centre that included not only Buddhists but also Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. The local spiritual leaders prayed for the elimination of so much hatred, tensions, fear and instability that has gripped the community, and the speakers from each community called for wisdom to overcome ignorance, to enable them to live in peace and harmony.

"I'm very much disappointed with most of the Indian media. They promote hate, war and violence, and mislead the public" Bhikkhu Sanghasena told Lotus News. "It is very sad; they lack moral responsibility towards the nation".

"Indian news media talks of peace invoking figures like Mahatma Gandhi or Gautama Buddha but their inclination is towards a jingoistic nationalism" noted Sanjay Ranade, Communication and Journalism Professor at Mumbai University in an interview with Lotus News. "Imagining a role to play as peacemakers in international conflict is beyond the capacity of the present editorial departments of news organisations in India. They will either toe the line of the ruling dispensation or side with the political opponents of the government" he added.

When asked why the spiritual leaders have been silent on the brewing conflict between India and China, two civilizations that have had spiritual bonds going back centuries, he argues that spiritual leaders in India do not comment on politics "although they clearly keep company with the politicians". They also see the India-China situation as something where critical assessment and commentary should be given by political or military leaders, not spiritual leaders.

"One reason for this is that the spiritual sphere has become narrowly confined to the Hindu-Muslim duality," argues Prof Ranade. "Although India, over the many centuries, is home to nine darshanas or philosophical visions (today's) spiritual leadership is very narrowly focused on ritual than theosophy or philosophy."

A timely book titled '*The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's Quest for Strategic Dominance*' published last year by former Indian diplomat Phunchok Stobdan warned that the Himalayan mountain region that encompasses both India and China, and its neighbours Nepal and Bhutan could become a new geopolitical hotspot. It argues for India and China to come together to help empower Buddhists in the region and develop peaceful co-existence as taught by the Buddhist philosophy.

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The author, who is a Buddhist himself, points out that the "Himalayas has been a theatre of competition by proxy between India and China for over half a century now". But he notes that the region that encompasses the mountain ranges between Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh has been a hotbed of border disputes between the two Asian giants with occasional standoffs. He argues that outside powers like the US could use the Tibet issue to sow discord in the region.

At the height of the border incursions by China in June, Stobdan created controversy when he asked in a television discussion why His Holiness The Dalai Lama has been silent on the border issue. He raised a volley of questions during the program, asking, "why are Chinese coming there? Who told them it is their land? Chinese are far from there. Why Dalai Lama is not speaking? Why he is not saying this is not Tibetan territory but Indian territory?" He added: "Dalai Lama has to speak, and he cannot keep focusing on his prayers while China takes away the land."

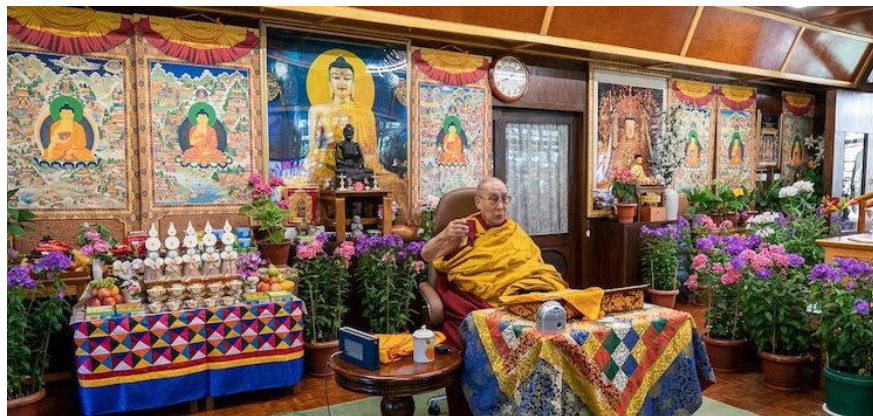
The Buddhist community in Leh, who have great reverence for the Tibetan spiritual leaders took offence at the comments and closed all shops and businesses for a day in protest.

"India and China have some sense of competition in recent times," the Dalai Lama said in a magazine interview later. "Both over a billion population. Both [are] powerful nations yet neither one can destroy the other one, so you have to live side-by-side."

Bhikkhu Sanghasena points out that when he talks about a peaceful solution, he doesn't mean any compromise of integrity and security of his motherland. But he argues, spiritual persons "should go beyond the boundaries of nations to promote peace".

Meanwhile, at the end of the Jaishankar-Wang meeting, brokered by the Russians, India and China have reached a five-point consensus regarding the current situation, including the disengagement of border troops and easing of tensions.

According to the joint statement, two foreign ministers agreed that border tension is not in the interest of both sides and the two countries should "expedite work to conclude new confidence-building measures to maintain and enhance peace and tranquillity in the border areas". [IDN-InDepthNews – 12 September 2020]



The Dalai Lama speaking during his online teaching from his residence in Dharamsala, HP, India on the occasion of Saka Dawa on May 26, 2021. Credit: dalailama.com

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In a Historic Move, Africa Eradicates Devastating Polio

By Ronald Joshua



Photo: A child being given polio oral vaccination. Credit: WHO Regional Office for Africa

GENEVA | BRAZZAVILLE (IDN) – While COVID-19 pandemic is playing havoc with the global economy and a frantic search continues for a vaccine, thanks to a concerted campaign of immunization, Africa is free of a highly infectious disease which mainly affects children under 5 years of age. It is a significant development marking the eradication of the second virus from the face of the continent since smallpox 40 years ago.

"Today is a historic day for Africa," said Professor Rose Gana Fomban Leke, Chairperson of the African Regional Certification Commission for Polio eradication (ARCC), which has declared the region free of polio.

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The virus invades the nervous system and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. The virus is transmitted by person-to-person spread mainly through the faecal-oral route or, less frequently, by a common vehicle (for example, contaminated water or food) and multiplies in the intestine.

Initial symptoms are fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness of the neck and pain in the limbs. One in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis (usually in the legs). Among those paralysed, 5% to 10% die when their breathing muscles become immobilized.

The African region has "successfully met the certification criteria for wild polio eradication, with no cases of the wild poliovirus reported in the Region for four years", the ARCC Chair said.

The ARCC's decision comes after an exhaustive, decades-long process of documentation and analysis of polio surveillance, immunization and laboratory capacity of the region's 47 member states, which included conducting field verification visits to each country, the World Health Organization (WHO) Africa said in a press release on August 25.

In 1996, African Heads of State committed to eradicating polio during the Thirty-Second Ordinary Session of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Yaoundé, Cameroon. At the time, polio was paralyzing an estimated 75,000 children, annually, on the African continent.

In the same year, Nobel Peace laureate Nelson Mandela with the support of Rotary International jumpstarted Africa's commitment to polio eradication with the launch of the Kick Polio Out of Africa campaign. Mandela's call mobilized African nations and leaders across the continent to step up their efforts to reach every child with the polio vaccine.

The last case of wild poliovirus in the region was detected in 2016 in Nigeria. Since 1996, polio eradication efforts have prevented up to 1.8 million children from crippling life-long paralysis and saved approximately 180,000 lives.

"This is a momentous milestone for Africa. Now future generations of African children can live free of wild polio," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa. "This historic achievement was only possible thanks to the leadership and commitment of governments, communities, global polio eradication partners and philanthropists. I pay special tribute to the frontline health workers and vaccinators, some of whom lost their lives, for this noble cause."

"However, we must stay vigilant and keep up vaccination rates to avert a resurgence of the wild poliovirus and address the continued threat of vaccine-derived polio," said Dr Moeti.

While the eradication of wild poliovirus from the WHO African Region is a major achievement, 16 countries in the region are currently experiencing cVDPV2 outbreaks, which can occur in under-immunized communities.

The 16 countries in Africa currently affected by circulating vaccine-derived polioviruses outbreaks include Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Zambia.

"Africa has demonstrated that despite weak health systems, significant logistical and operational challenges across the continent, African countries have collaborated very effectively in eradicating wild poliovirus," said Dr Pascal Mkanda, Coordinator of WHO Polio Eradication Programme in the African Region.

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"With the innovations and expertise that the polio programme has established, I am confident that we can sustain the gains, post-certification, and eliminate cVDPV2," added Dr Mkanda.

"The expertise gained from polio eradication will continue to assist the African region in tackling COVID-19 and other health problems that have plagued the continent for so many years and ultimately move the continent toward universal health coverage. This will be the true legacy of polio eradication in Africa," said Dr Moeti.

Thanks to the dedication of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), polio cases have reduced by 99.9% since 1988, bringing the world closer than ever before to ending polio, according to WHO Africa.

Over 90% of the world's population are now free of the wild poliovirus, moving the world closer to achieving global polio eradication. Only two countries worldwide continue to see wild poliovirus transmission: Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The GPEI has congratulated the national governments of the 47 countries in the WHO African Region for the latest achievement.

"Ending wild poliovirus in Africa is one of the greatest public health achievements of our time and provides powerful inspiration for all of us to finish the job of eradicating polio globally," said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "I thank and congratulate the governments, health workers, community volunteers, traditional and religious leaders and parents across the region who have worked together to kick wild polio out of Africa."

Strong leadership and innovation were instrumental in stopping the wild poliovirus in the region. Countries successfully coordinated their efforts to overcome major challenges to immunizing children, such as high levels of population movement, conflict and insecurity restricting access to health services, and the virus's ability to spread quickly and travel across borders.

In addition, the continued generosity and shared commitment of donors – including governments, the private sector, multilateral institutions and philanthropic organizations – to achieving a polio-free world helped build the infrastructure that enabled the African region to reach more children than ever before with polio vaccines and defeat wild polio.

"During a challenging year for global health, the certification of the African region as wild poliovirus-free is a sign of hope and progress that shows what can be accomplished through collaboration and perseverance," said Rotary International President Holger Knaack.

The resources and expertise used to eliminate wild polio have significantly contributed to Africa's public health and outbreak response systems. The polio programme provides far-reaching health benefits to local communities, from supporting the African region's response to COVID-19 to bolstering routine immunization against other vaccine-preventable diseases.

While this is a remarkable milestone, we must not become complacent. Continued commitment to strengthening immunization and health systems in the African region is essential to protect progress against wild polio and to tackle the spread of type 2 circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV2), which is present in 16 countries in the region. Pockets of low immunity mean such strains continue to pose a threat and the risk is magnified by interruptions in vaccination due to COVID-19, which have left communities more vulnerable to cVDPV2 outbreaks.

The GPEI calls on countries and donors to remain vigilant against all forms of polio. Until every strain is eradicated worldwide, the incredible progress made against polio globally will be at risk. [IDN-InDepthNews – 25 August 2020]

STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

COVID-19 Derails Education in Southern Africa

By Jeffrey Moyo



MUSINA, South Africa (IDN) – His three teenage children play home-made paper ball on the dusty streets of Musina, exercise books scattered on the veranda of their rented home in the South African border town with Zimbabwe. Yet Gerald Gava, the children's 47-year-old father, lies on a reed mat spread on the veranda, apparently with nothing to do after he stopped working three months ago as the lockdown took toll on the construction company that employed him.

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Gava, who is a migrant from Zimbabwe, said even his children have had to remain home as schools also shut down, thanks to the coronavirus that has pounded the entire globe.

Now, Gava's 42-year-old wife, Mirirai has become the sole breadwinner, operating a market stall by the roadside very close to their home, a job she had abandoned back in their home country until they sought greener pastures in South Africa. But the pastures are no longer green.

With education halted in the face of coronavirus across Southern Africa, Gava's children stand out amongst millions of school-going children whose education has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I can tell you that even as I force my children to read on their own, they have become tired and have turned to play games because the lockdown has become so monotonous," Gava, who holds a teaching qualification from his home country, told IDN.

It is the same story in Zimbabwe, where primary and secondary school pupils remain confined in their homes with prospects fast dwindling that they would ever return to school anytime soon as coronavirus cases skyrocket across Southern Africa.

For many Zimbabwean parents like 31-year-old Miranda Mutasa in Harare's Mufakose high-density area in the country's capital Harare, homeschooling and even online learning is beyond her reach.

Yet, as coronavirus derails education across the region here, in a joint letter with UNICEF to its member states, the African Union (AU) in June this year pushed for resilience to keep pupils abreast with their studies during lockdowns. "Provide distance learning content, deploying radio, TV, podcast and online/e-learning," read part of the letter.

The AU-UNICEF letter also said: "Ministries of Education should document good practices and monitor learning engagement and learning outcomes to improve the education sector response to COVID-19." But, with many Southern Africans like Gava now out of a job, embracing e-learning, for instance, maybe a pipeline dream even as AU pushes for this mode in particular to ensure continuity in education.

For retired educationists in Zimbabwe like 72-year-old Bernard Mungoni based in Masvingo, the country's oldest town, south of the country, "coronavirus has introduced new costs which many can't shoulder nor bear". Miranda, who works as a street vendor selling fruits and vegetables, said, "Internet bundles to access the required learning material for her children, are too expensive". As such, for her (Miranda), coronavirus has halted education in her country, leaving her children at a disadvantage.

As the COVID-19 pandemic cases spiral across Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community through its secretariat agreed to work with UNESCO, leading a Global Education Coalition to support the SADC Member States in mitigating the effects of the coronavirus on education, and in ensuring the continuity of education and learning programmes.

Now, cornered by a coronavirus, countries like South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia bear the baggage of the pandemic on school children. This situation has forced the countries to have a second thought on the reopening of schools.

In Angola, starting on March 24, stung by the spread of coronavirus, the Angolan government announced the interruption of lessons in public and private schools. Angola's Ministry of Education went on record in the media saying the suspension of the educational activities countrywide were in sequence with instructions given by government concerning preventive measures against the novel coronavirus.

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In Swaziland, come March, as coronavirus pounced, the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) urged the government to close all schools, colleges and universities temporarily

In a statement, Swaziland's association of teachers said, "the SNAT is worried about the fact that no measures have been put to fight back this spectre, particularly in public places such as towns, cities and schools".

In Botswana, as coronavirus hit Southern Africa earlier this year, the country went on a seven-week closure of schools before it opened in June and immediately re-shut amid fresh spikes of the dreaded disease.

Announcing a return to the lockdown back then in June, Botswana's health minister, Dr Lemogang Kwappe, said: "I regret to inform you that the situation has worsened in the last 24 hours. Botswana has recorded 30 new positive cases of COVID-19, with the majority of the cases emanating from schools in the greater Gaborone".

Hammered to the core by the spread of coronavirus which has not spared its schools, South Africa in July also announced that schools were to remain closed, this as the government would extend the 2020 school year into 2021.

"We have taken a deliberately cautious approach to keep schools closed during a period when the country is expected to experience its greatest increase in infections," said South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressing the nation in July.

Turning to Namibia, on August 1 this year, the country's President Hage Geingob announced that his government was suspending schools from August 4 for 28 days, saying the move was necessary to eliminate the risks associated with the spread of coronavirus.

With COVID-19 heavily disrupting education here, in March again this year, Namibia's Ministry of Education had shut down schools for the first time following two confirmed cases of COVID-19 at one the country's public schools.

In Malawi, a spike in COVID-19 cases in July forced authorities to delay plans to reopen schools.

Now, with schools shut in South Africa, for instance, it has meant Gava and his family have to bear the suffering and monotony together.

"My children are bored here at home; I am bored too, but I am also suffering because I have lost my job due to COVID-19," Gava told IDN. [IDN-InDepthNews – 18 August 2020]

Photo: With the lockdown to fend off the spread of COVID-19, many Southern Africans, have lost their jobs and switched to vending on the streets where they engage in cat and mouse games with police enforcing lockdown rules. Consequently, the game to survive still remains tough for most Africans as they battle to support their children amid school's closure. Credit: Jeffrey Moyo | INPS-IDN

STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

UN Chief Makes an Impassioned Plea for Discarding Fallacies and Falsehoods

By Jaya Ramachandran



*Photo: UN Secretary-General António Guterres delivers the annual Nelson Mandela Lecture.
Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe*

NEW YORK (IDN) – UN Secretary-General António Guterres has in a surprise dramatic move, castigated a series of "fallacies and falsehoods" perpetrated particularly on the deprived of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed all lies such as the lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat". Exposing this misleading myth, he says: "*While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to the floating debris.*"

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These remarks stood out in a hard-hitting speech as he was delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, held online for the first time, in light of the ongoing pandemic. The lecture series organized annually by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, on the birthday of the African icon and first democratically-elected President of South Africa, aims to encourage dialogue by inviting prominent personalities to discuss major international challenges.

Global risks ignored for decades – notably inadequate health systems, gaps in social protection, structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and the climate crisis – have been laid bare, he said. The vulnerable are suffering the most: those living in poverty, older people, and people with disabilities and pre-existing conditions.

Mr Guterres pointed out that inequality takes many forms. Income disparity is stark: the 26 richest people in the world possess as much wealth as half the global population. On the other hand, life-chances depend on factors such as gender, family and ethnic background, race and whether or not a person has a disability.

Everyone suffers the consequences, because high levels of inequality are associated with "economic instability, corruption, financial crises, increased crime and poor physical and mental health".

Turning to inhuman colonialism, the UN Chief said that today's anti-racist movement points to that historic source of inequality: "The Global North, specifically my own continent of Europe, imposed colonial rule on much of the Global South for centuries, through violence and coercion."

This led to huge inequalities within and between countries, including the transatlantic slave trade and the apartheid regime in South Africa, and left a legacy of economic and social injustice, hate crimes and xenophobia, the persistence of institutionalized racism, and white supremacy.

Elaborating racism and the legacy of colonialism, the UN Chief noted that the anti-racism movement that has spread from the United States around the world in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing is "one more sign that people have had enough: enough of inequality and discrimination that treats people as criminals on the basis of their skin colour; enough of the structural racism and systematic injustice that deny people their fundamental human rights".

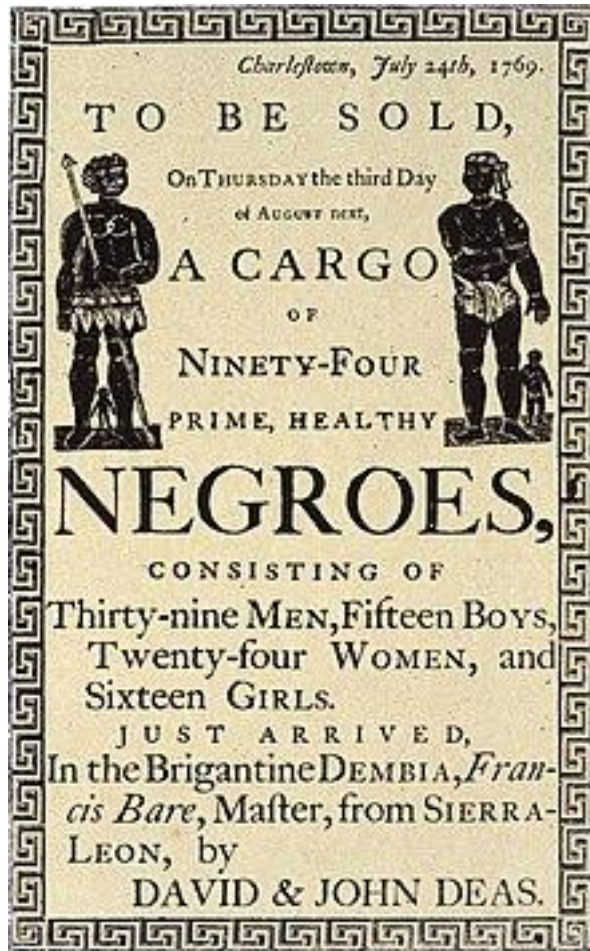
Africa has been a double victim, stressed Mr Guterres. First, as a target of the colonial project. Second, African countries are under-represented in the international institutions that were created after the Second World War, before most of them had won independence.

Referring to inequality in global governance, he said: The nations that came out on top more than seven decades ago have refused to contemplate the reforms needed to change power relations in international institutions. The composition and voting rights in the United Nations Security Council and the boards of the Bretton Woods system are a case in point. Inequality starts at the top: in global institutions. Addressing inequality must start by reforming them.

Touching the sizzling issue of patriarchy, UN Chief said: "We live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture. Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women. Inequality and discrimination are the norm. Violence against women, including femicide, is at epidemic levels." Mr Guterres, who described himself as "a proud feminist", said he was committed to gender equality, and has made gender parity a reality across senior UN posts. He also announced his appointment of South African international rugby captain, Siya Kolisa, as a global champion for the Spotlight Initiative, which aims to engage men in fighting violence against women and girls.

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The heavily male-dominated tech industry is not only missing out on half the world's expertise and perspectives. It is also using algorithms that could further entrench gender and racial discrimination. The digital divide reinforces social and economic divides, from literacy to healthcare, from urban to rural, from kindergarten to college.



He commended who, he said, are on the frontlines of the fight against inequality, and called not only for climate action, but also climate justice. He urged political leaders to raise their ambition, businesses to elevate their sights, and people everywhere to raise their voices. "There is a better way, and we must take it."

A New Social Contract within societies will enable young people to live in dignity; will ensure women have the same prospects and opportunities as men; and will protect the sick, the vulnerable, and minorities of all kinds. He pleaded for education and digital technology which he said must be two great enablers and equalizers.

Against that backdrop, Mr Guterres called for a *New Global Deal* to ensure that power, wealth and opportunities are shared more broadly and fairly at the international level.

A new model for global governance, he said, must be based on full, inclusive and equal participation in global institutions. In a clarion call, he held a strong plea for the developing world to have a far stronger voice in global decision-making.

Turning to contemporary inequality, Mr Guterres said that the expansion of trade, and technological progress, have contributed to "an unprecedented shift in income distribution". Low-skilled workers are bearing the brunt, he warned, and face an "onslaught" from new technologies, automation, the offshoring of manufacturing and the demise of labour organizations.

Meanwhile, he continued, widespread tax concessions, tax avoidance and tax evasion, as well as low corporate tax rates, mean that there are reduced resources for social protection, education, and healthcare – services that play an important part in reducing inequality.

Some countries have allowed the wealthy and well-connected to benefit from tax systems, but "everyone must pay their fair share", said Mr Guterres, and governments need to tackle the "vicious cycle" of corruption, which weakens social norms and the rule of law, and shift the tax burden from payrolls to carbon, which would help to address the climate crisis. [IDN-InDepthNews – 19 July 2020]

Image: Reproduction of a handbill advertising a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1769. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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The Path Forward for Higher Education After COVID-19

UN Academic Impact Talks to Students from Several Countries

By Santo D. Banerjee



Image credit: UN

NEW YORK (IDN) – COVID-19 pandemic has forced more than 1.5 billion students in 165 countries out of school, enforcing the global academic community to explore new ways of teaching and learning, including distance and online education, according to UNESCO estimates.

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This has proven challenging for both students and educators, who have to deal with the emotional, physical and economic difficulties posed by the illness while doing their part to help curb the spread of the virus, notes United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI).

UNAI is an initiative that aligns institutions of higher education with the United Nations in supporting and contributing to the realization of United Nations goals and mandates, including the promotion and protection of human rights, access to education, sustainability and conflict resolution.

"The future is uncertain for everyone, particularly for millions of students scheduled to graduate this year who will face a world crippled economically by the pandemic," UNAI alerts.

In the COVID-19 and higher education series, United Nations Academic Impact talked to students, educators and researchers in different parts of the world to find out how the pandemic has affected them and how they are coping with the changes.

Bowen Xu, a student of Chinese-English Language Translation at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation, Shanghai International Studies University, is in his final year of graduate school, scheduled to graduate in summer 2020.

He moved from China to New York for an internship at United Nations Headquarters in January; weeks after that, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the celebration of the 2020 Spring Festival in all parts of China.

As Bowen approached the end of his internship, the situation in China had improved, but his return flight was cancelled and it became extremely difficult to book a flight, as New York rapidly became the epicenter of the pandemic.

Listen to the interview with Bowen, in which he shares his story of not being able to return home, and the different ways in which COVID-19 has impacted his life. He also talks about the overwhelming sense of loss that all graduates are experiencing, unable to have a traditional celebration for their graduation or say goodbye to their friends and professors, and the feeling of uncertainty about their professional aspirations as they graduate into an economic recession.

Despite all the difficulties, Bowen remains positive and has used the time to develop new skills and do things he normally didn't have enough time to do.

Another person UNAI talked to is Talitha Dias, a Brazilian lawyer currently pursuing a master's degree in International Contractual Relations at the Federal University of Pernambuco in the Northeast of Brazil.

Talitha's master's program was scheduled to begin in March, but classes have been postponed due to COVID-19. With the unexpected changes in her 2020 calendar, Talitha had to quickly devise a plan B: she started teaching English online, began taking online courses for her professional development, and explored new skills such as cooking. This new routine has helped Talitha remain patient and positive despite all the uncertainties about her future.

Like many countries, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on Brazil and Talitha shared her concerns about the capacity of the country's public health system to handle the number of coronavirus cases. It has also been difficult for many Brazilian schools and universities to pivot to distance learning and it is taking time for them to adapt to the new virtual learning landscape, while some Brazilian students have misgivings about the quality of online education.

Despite the challenges, Talitha believes this difficult time will pass and it will teach us some important lessons such as the value of time spent with loved ones and empathy for and solidarity with others. Listen to the full interview with Talitha [here](#).

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UNAI also talked to Hana Ibrahim, a medical student at the University of Paris, who has been volunteering at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the Lariboisière Hospital in Paris during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Hana is 21 years old and is in the middle of her practical training, but when the pandemic started many departments of the hospital, including the Department of Endocrinology and Diabetology where she works, were closed and those resources diverted to treating patients with COVID-19.

Seeing the struggle that the Intensive Care and Infectious Disease departments were going through with the overwhelming number of patients pouring in, Hana decided to volunteer for the ICU, despite her heavy academic commitments.

Hana shared with UNAI her story of being a medical student and a volunteer during a global health emergency, including the extraordinary levels of mental and physical pressure and concerns that many members of the public don't realize the gravity of the situation. Hana has also thought about changing her medical specialty as a result of this experience.

In an interview, Madalitso Kamenya, a student pursuing his master's degree in Agricultural Economics at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, said the lockdown caused by COVID-19 has created great challenges.

Trapped in a student bedroom at his university, he has been trying to keep a daily routine that includes physical exercise, conversations with family and friends in his home country of Malawi, and academic assignments. For him, being alone and isolated is one of the most difficult parts of this pandemic, but technology has played an important role in helping him stay connected with people.

Madalitso remains optimistic and believes the world will be a better place after COVID-19, but he also doesn't believe this is the last pandemic we will face. He believes this situation presents opportunities for us to change the way we do things and universities should continue exploring new ways of teaching so we will have systems in place if there is another pandemic. Listen to the full interview with Madalitso Kamenya [here](#).

Listen to the full interview with Marina Romanova. She is an undergraduate student of International Relations at the Lomonosov Moscow State University in Russia. The COVID-19 outbreak began in the middle of her exchange program in Switzerland and she was forced to leave the country and return to Russia due to the uncertainty of the situation.

Despite the stress created by the pandemic, Marina is grateful that she and her parents are healthy, and she has the tools necessary to continue her studies remotely. Her classmates in Russia had to go through a much more challenging time, as Moscow State University did not have online learning platforms prior to the lockdown. However, the situation is improving, and new platforms are being developed for the students.

Marina is scheduled to graduate next year, but the pandemic has made her future uncertain as it is now more difficult to travel overseas and to do an internship or pursue a master's degree. Marina has been able to find the positive aspects of the pandemic, saying the quarantine has helped her study habits and she has developed a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of the world and the importance of good healthcare systems for citizens. [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 July 2020]

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A Landmark Project Aims at Reforestation in Togo - Income Opportunities for Women

By Ramesh Jaura



Photo: Women tend a community nursery created as part of a completed ITTO project to assist forest landscape restoration in Togo. Credit: ODEF

BERLIN | TOKYO (IDN) – Togo in West Africa is the venue of a milestone project between Soka Gakkai, a global community-based Buddhist organization and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). The two have signed a memorandum to launch a reforestation project offering income opportunities for women's groups in two rural areas of Togo.

The memorandum involving a donation of 10 million yen (US\$93,300) for the initial one-year phase of the project was signed on July 1 at the Soka Gakkai (SG) headquarters in Tokyo. The project will kick off on September 1. It will address climate change, poverty and gender issues in Togo, where forests are being lost rapidly and poverty is increasing. The coronavirus pandemic has also constrained people to return to rural villages, increasing the strain on forest resources.

The Soka Gakkai promotes peace, culture and education centered on respect for the dignity of life, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The focus among others is on: protection of the natural environment through projects and institutions including the Soka Institute for Environmental Studies and Research of the Amazon, as well on raising awareness of the pressing need of achieving SDGs through media projects such as the one with IDN, flagship of the non-profit International Press Syndicate. The Soka Gakkai has 12 million members around the world, who contribute to society based on the humanistic philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism.

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The ITTO is an intergovernmental organization promoting the sustainable management and conservation of tropical forests and the expansion and diversification of international trade in tropical timber from sustainably managed and legally harvested forests

The Soka Gakkai-ITTO project is in line with Togo's national climate adaptation plan (NAP) and the national determined contribution (NDC) under the UNFCCC Paris Agreement of 2015. It will contribute to SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 5 (Gender Equality), 13 (Climate Action), and 15 (Life on Land).

Forests are dwindling rapidly in Togo due to pressure from a growing population, the expansion of agriculture, over-exploitation, extreme weather events, and a lack of local capacity to implement sustainable forest management, leading to negative impacts on food security, wood supply and livelihoods.

The Ministry for the Environment and Forest Resources (MERF) revealed in 2018 that the rate of degradation of Togolese forests is one of the highest in the world. Women in rural communities are among the most affected due to gender inequalities. The project will help them increase their organizational, managerial and technical skills in nursery establishment and maintenance, enrichment planting for woodfuel, agroforestry, food cropping, and the production of wood and non-wood forest products for sale in local markets.

ITTO Executive President Dr Gerhard Dieterle said: "Often people talk about protecting the forest without concern for people's lives. This project will protect women's rights, boost the rural economy and food security and restore degraded forest." This is exactly the kind of innovative, grassroots initiative that can make a huge difference to the lives of rural women as well as protect local forests, added Dr Dieterle.

Soka Gakkai President Minoru Harada said his organization was glad to support the project, which will bring real benefit to rural women and their families. Tracing the origins of the joint project, a Soka Gakkai source explained that the organization is keen to support Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa – in particular ending poverty, achieving gender equality and empowering women, encouraging urgent action to fight climate change and its impacts, as well as protecting, restoring and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, and halting and reversing land degradation and halting biodiversity loss.

With this in view, Soka Gakkai had over the years been discussing ways and means of realising the four objectives. Subsequently, the organization exchanged views with the ITTO which has its headquarters in Yokohama, the port city south of Tokyo. It developed interest in the organization's activities aiming to promote women's empowerment and poverty reduction through reforestation.

Soka Gakkai also learned about the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF), a non-governmental organization (NGO), a local partner of ITTO. The NGO has been successful in developing activities which Soka Gakkai found worth emulating in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Soka Gakkai learned that REFACOF was planning new similar undertakings and offered to support a joint project. According to the SG-ITTO memorandum, the REFACOF NGO will support women's groups in two of Togo's poorest prefectures; Blitta and Lacs. In the Pagala-gare village of Blitta Prefecture, forest restoration and enrichment planting will take place, and in Lacs Prefecture, a community forest for fuelwood will be created on a plot made available by the chieftaincy of Agouegan village. In both villages, agroforestry trees will also be planted on family land. [IDN-InDepthNews – 05 July 2020]

STRIVING FOR PEOPLE, PLANET AND PEACE

The Media Can Stimulate Sustainable Development in Africa

Viewpoint by Siddharth Chatterjee

The writer is the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kenya.



Photo: The media is critical for the success of the #SDGs, UN Secretary-General Mr António Guterres and Deputy SG Ms Amina Mohammed . Credit: UN Photo

NAIROBI (IDN) – When 17-year-old high school student Darnella Fraizer filmed the last minutes of George Floyd’s life under the knee of police officer Derek Chauvin, she could not have imagined that her footage would reignite the explosive global question of racial inequality and the subsequent clamour for reforms in policing. This act of filming validates the force of the media globally; we need a similar drive for urgent action in Africa. We need the continent’s media to help ensure the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are achieved, and the life of every African afforded the opportunity they deserve.

“Around the world, success in achieving the SDGs will ease global anxieties, provide a better life for women and men and build a firm foundation for stability and peace in all societies, everywhere,” said the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed.

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Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a wave of demonstrations from Lebanon to Chile, from Iran to Liberia, was sweeping across countries. This was a clear sign that, for all our progress, something in our globalized society is broken.

The COVID-19 pandemic has struck the world like a bolt of lightning exposing the contours of deep inequalities. Media reports have helped reveal the interwoven threads of inequality and health, with poorer people suffering a strikingly disproportionate share of the fallout from the virus, either through infection or loss of livelihoods.

The global sweep of protests due to years of disenfranchisement and racism has made it clear that the world must change to offer equal treatment to all people. Media can do the same for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Achieving the SDGs, and so improving the lives of millions of Africans, depends heavily on increasing public awareness, and the focused action and funding that such awareness ignites.

One major shortcoming of development progress is the lack of widespread knowledge about the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. We must look to the media to push the SDG discourse; what is reported and how it is reported helps shape policy and has implications for the millions of people whose lives are affected. Knowledge is power and if citizens are aware of the issues, they are empowered to help determine the national response.

Traditionally, development experts have failed to explain the relatively new concept of sustainable development to influencers such as educators, politicians, and the media. Doing so is key, so that easily understood narratives are developed to raise public support.

We are already a third of the way towards the 2030 Agenda deadline which 193 UN member states committed to. But at the current pace of change – notwithstanding the global pandemic – Africa is likely to miss out on the time-bound targets in key sectors – including health, education, employment, energy, infrastructure, and the environment.

Improved public awareness of the SDGs themselves, and of the actions needed and the bodies responsible for such actions is essential. By stepping up to address and explain the global quest for social justice and equality which the SDGs represent, the media can help galvanize civil society, business, international bodies, regional organizations, and individuals.

Pressure from an informed public pushes policymakers into action, offering hope to millions of poor people.

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Development is never far from the media agenda in Africa, so the opportunity to build understanding of sustainability is there. Sustainable development experts must explain why the SDGs are important, and why 'business as usual' in development is no longer viable in the face of increasing populations and climate change. Then, news outlets, who would then be able to develop compelling narratives to make the concept understandable by all can help raise the SDG profile, thereby raising public support.

We must "flip the orthodoxy".

What is reported, how it is reported, and on what channels helps in shaping policy and has implications for the millions of people whose lives are affected.

To this end, the media must be brought into the conversation and be made to understand the role they can play towards the greater good.

The SDGs pledge that "no one will be left behind" and to "endeavour to reach the furthest behind first." In practice, this means taking explicit action to end extreme poverty, curb inequalities, confront discrimination and fast-track progress for the furthest behind.

The media can shine a spotlight on those left behind, for example by using COVID-19 to examine the wider issue of universal health coverage, the subject of SDG 3.

It also plays a critical role in holding governments to account for their Agenda 2030 commitments. Though these commitments demand that countries have clear reporting and accountability mechanisms, most nations still have no reliable data on their progress towards specific goals. This matters because countries can only unlock financing for the SDGs by disaggregating data to understand where resources are required. In Africa, where national commitments are rarely backed by adequate investment, this is particularly important.

Rapid mobile penetration in Africa offers unparalleled opportunities for content sharing on digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Though the lack of affordable internet connections and poor connectivity remain a challenge, mobile technology is a powerful enabler across many sectors'

One in every six people on Earth lives in Africa; its problems are the world's problems and solving them is the world's responsibility. If Africa fails to achieve Agenda 2030, the implications will be felt across the planet through conflict, migration, population growth and climate catastrophe.

The media in Africa is a stakeholder in the achievements of the SDGs. [IDN-InDepthNews – 26 June 2020]

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African Women Respond to Covid-19 Hunger Emergency

Viewpoint by Linda Eckerbom Cole

The writer is Director/Founder, African Women Rising, shuttles between Santa Barbara, California and Gulu, Uganda.



SANTA BARBARA, California (IDN) – African Women Rising (AWR) has created a campaign to build 2,000 new Permagardens, which will help feed 15,000 at-risk people who are experiencing food scarcity due to COVID-19. Permagardens empower communities to meet their own food needs and are a long-term solution to hunger.

Margaret has not been able to sell her fish at the local market for two months now. The restrictions put in place to prevent COVID-19 from spreading in Northern Uganda have had devastating consequences for her and her household. With no other income, the family is struggling. Margaret is old and doesn't have the strength to work in the field.

Her husband is blind and not healthy, leaving Margaret as the primary caretaker and breadwinner for the eight grandchildren in their care. They have reduced food intake to once a day. This is the situation for many of the women in the communities where African Women Rising works.

The restrictions are also affecting the 1.4 million South Sudanese refugees in the region as they are unable to access markets, agricultural fields or other sources of income. To compound the situation, the World Food Program (WFP) has reduced food distributions due to lack of funding. Refugees receive food once a month, but it only last two weeks.

As a response, African Women Rising is rapidly increasing the scale of our Permagarden program to reach the most vulnerable and food-insecure families both in the refugee camps and in the host communities. A Permagarden is a proven, regenerative approach that can start producing food within two weeks and can support a family for years to come.

More than teaching techniques, African Women Rising's Resilience Design Field Crop and Permagarden programs are about sharing the principles behind water and soil management and developing a contextual understanding to design a system to be as productive and regenerative as possible. AWR's programs have 24 different agroecology-focused indicators they track.

The overall goal of the Permagarden Program is to increase access to diverse and nutritious sources and adequate quantities of vegetables and fruit throughout the year. Farmers do this through the design and establishment of small Permagardens around their home.

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The Permagarden method combines components of permaculture – an agricultural approach using design principles to utilise natural systems for production – and bio-intensive agriculture, a farming approach that maximises crop production through sustainable practices that increase biodiversity, to create a highly productive garden and homestead compound.

It is designed to work in both the rainy and dry seasons and is a whole compound approach that improves soil fertility and water management to produce nutritious crops. The method shows how farmers with only a small amount of land can produce food throughout the year by learning principles behind proper gardening and resource management and matching those principles to fundamental practices.

The approach helps meet the short-term food needs of program farmers even as it builds their long-term resilience. Farmers learn to manage natural resources through the intentional design of their compound, harvesting water and capturing waste streams to enhance the fertility and productivity of their plots.

The management of existing trees and planting of other fruit and multipurpose trees, a living fence and other biomass plantings provide materials for building, pest remedies, dry season nutrition and medicine. This helps reduce pressures on the environment – such as the collection of fuelwood, gathering of wild foods, burning of charcoal – that will continue to worsen as time goes on.

To reach 2,000 more vulnerable families (impacting upwards of 15,000 individuals), we need to raise \$200,000. The cost of one garden is only \$100. This includes: three separate pieces of training each lasting three days, seeds and fruit trees, and monthly visits and technical support for one year.

Mary started her Permagarden in 2014. As a landless widow was taking care of four grandchildren, her life can be a challenge. Her Permagarden is right next to the house and bursts with production throughout the year. She grows papaya, tomatoes, pumpkins, four kinds of leafy greens, onions, yams, peppers, okra, passion fruit and citrus. On 15'x15' she can produce enough always to have something to eat. There is even extra food that she has been selling at the market and to neighbours. With that weekly income, she has been able to buy essential items such as salt, soap and school supplies. She has also invested in chickens and goats.

Mary's success is not an exception. Results like these are standard in our Permagarden program, and we have data to prove it. Families become food secure, have new income, can invest in assets, can send children to school and pay for medical care. The Permagardens can provide relief in time of instability, assistance that is not merely a Band-Aid but offers long-term solutions.

Help us spread Mary's success to those who need it most. Your support can go a long way to ensure that women like Margaret have the tools and skills they need to provide for their families now and well into the future. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda has been effectively shut down. We have temporarily closed our programs, except for an increase in targeted, regenerative agricultural activities to ensure people have access to food.

Our staff have been redeployed into COVID-19 response, especially in the refugee camps. There are 1.4 million refugees in 11 camps in Northern Uganda. An outbreak in the camps would lead to a humanitarian disaster. In addition to the Permagarden programs, African Women Rising is distributing soap, installing hand washing stations and providing information on how to keep the virus from spreading. This is a critical emergency. [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 June 2020]

Top Photo: Margaret with one of her granddaughters. Credit: Brian Hodges for African Women Rising.

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Racism and Exceptionalism Are Backbones of Trump Doctrine

Viewpoint by John Scales Avery*



Photo: Lorie Shaull/Flickr – Xena Goldman, Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain, Niko Alexander and Pablo Hernandez (artists)

COPENHAGEN (IDN) – Elimination of excessive economic inequality makes societies happier and better, underlines the incontrovertible evidence that a new *freely downloadable book* presents.

Going back to history, the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated the world of ideas during the 17th to 19th centuries. Sir Isaac Newton's rational explanations for cosmic phenomena demonstrated that reason is better than superstition.

Diderot's Encyclopaedia and the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau paved the way for the end of Feudalism, the end of the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, and the liberation of serfs and slaves throughout the world.

In England, John Locke was expressing the spirit of the times when he wrote: "Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them, is properly the state of nature... A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature and the use of the same facilities, should also be equal amongst one another without subordination or subjection..."

"But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence... The state of nature has a law to govern it, which obliges every one; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions."

Locke's ideas were reflected in the wording of the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among

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these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

Sadly, these ideals do not hold in the United States today, and perhaps they never did. Although years of slavery were ended after the Civil War, and despite the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, racism is widespread today, and in fact, U.S. President Donald Trump was elected on an openly racist platform. During his term of office, he has been a racist in both word and deed.

Recently many American cities have erupted in protests over the senseless killing by police of yet another black man – George Floyd. The country is deeply divided.

Racism, colonialism and exceptionalism

It seems to be possible for nations, and the majority of their citizens, to commit the worst imaginable atrocities, including torture, murder and genocide, while feeling that what they are doing is both noble and good. Some understanding of how this is possible can be gained by watching the 3-part BBC documentary, "The History of Racism".

The series was broadcast by BBC Four in March 2007, and videos of the broadcasts are available on the Internet. Watching this eye-opening documentary can give us much insight into the link between racism and colonialism. We can also begin to see how both racism and colonialism are linked to U.S. exceptionalism and neocolonialism.

Looking at the BBC documentary we can see how often in human history economic greed and colonial exploitation have been justified by racist theories. The documentary describes almost unbelievable cruelties committed against the peoples of the Americas and Africa by Europeans.

For example, in the Congo, a vast region which King Leopold II of Belgium claimed as his private property, the women of villages were held as hostages while the men were forced to gather rubber in the forests. Since neither the men nor the women could produce food under these circumstances, starvation was the result.

Leopold's private army of 90,000 men were issued ammunition, and to make sure that they used it in the proper way, the army was ordered to cut off the hands of their victims and send them back as proof that the bullets had not been wasted. Human hands became a kind of currency, and hands were cut off from living men, women and children when rubber quotas were not fulfilled. Sometimes more than a thousand human hands were gathered in a single day. During the rule of Leopold, roughly 10,000,000 Congolese were killed, which was approximately half the population of the region.

Oligarchy and war

Today the world spends almost two trillion dollars (\$ 2,000,000,000,000) every year on armaments. This vast river of money, almost too large to be imagined, is the "devil's dynamo" driving the institution of war. Politicians notoriously can be bought with a tiny fraction of this enormous amount; hence the decay of democracy. It is also plain that if the almost unbelievable sums now wasted on armaments were used constructively, most of the pressing problems now facing humanity could be solved.

Because the world spends almost two thousand billion dollars each year on armaments, it follows that very many people make their living from war. This is the reason why it is correct to speak of war as an institution, and why it persists, although

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we know that it is the cause of much of the suffering that inflicts humanity and that we live under the constant threat of an all-destroying thermonuclear war.

Money from wealthy oligarchs in military-industrial complexes buys the propaganda of the mass media and the votes of politicians. Numbed by the propaganda, citizens allow politicians to vote for obscenely bloated military budgets, the oligarchs are further enriched, and thus the circular flow of money continues. Excessive economic inequality is at the root of the problem of war, as well as the loss of our democratic institutions.

The poor suffer most in the COVID-19 pandemic

The poor are suffering most from the COVID-19 pandemic. While the rich can isolate themselves in comfort, working people with no savings are faced with the choice between risking their lives in unsafe work-places or starvation because of lack of income. Here are quotations from a recently-published article by Jake Johnson entitled "*Grotesque*": "While 41 Million People Lost Jobs Due to COVID-19, U.S. Billionaires Grew Nearly \$500 Billion Richer" – *Common Dreams*, May 28, 2020:

"Billionaire wealth is surging at the same time that millions face suffering, hardship, and loss of life. This is a grotesque indicator of the deep inequalities in U.S. Society.

"Statistics released Thursday (June 4) by the U.S. Department of Labour show that with 2.1 million new unemployment claims filed last week, a staggering 40.7 million Americans have lost their jobs over just the past 10 weeks as mass lay-offs induced by the coronavirus pandemic continue.

"During that same 10-week period, according to a new analysis by the Institute for Policy Studies, the combined net worth of America's billionaires soared by nearly half a trillion dollars, bringing their total wealth to \$3.4 trillion."

The Green New Deal can simultaneously address the climate crisis and the problem of excessive economic inequality. In this context, it is interesting to look at the social and economic systems of the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland.

In these countries, the contrast between the rich and poor has been very much reduced. It is almost true to say that poverty has been eliminated in these countries. At the same time, the Scandinavians have strong policies to address the climate emergency. Thus, Scandinavian successes are a counter-argument to those who say that the Green New Deal cannot be put into practice.

The Scandinavian countries also rank very highly on the *Global Happiness Index* and the *Human Development Index*, thus demonstrating the benefits of equality. To achieve a happy and sustainable world, we urgently need to decrease excessive economic inequality, both within and between nations.

** John Scales Avery (born in 1933 in Lebanon to American parents) is a theoretical chemist noted for his research publications in quantum chemistry, thermodynamics, evolution, and history of science. Since the early 1990s, Avery has been an active World peace activist. During these years, he was part of a group associated with the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. [IDN-InDepthNews – 06 June 2020]*

Related: Other books and articles about global problems are on these links: <http://eacpe.org/about-john-scales-avery/> and <https://wsimag.com/authors/716-john-scales-avery>

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COVID-19: Fake, Shocking & Good News Stalks Africa

By Lisa Vives, Global Information Network



Photo: Collage with images from Ghana and Sierra Leone.

NEW YORK (IDN) – A new fact-checking industry had its hands full recently in Senegal when a fake news post on social media claimed that children were “dying on the spot” from vaccines against the coronavirus.

The post, titled “Scandal in Senegal”, was shared thousands of times on Facebook even as the fact-checkers insisted it was a hoax.

“There is a big scandal in Senegal,” the misleading news spot was heard to say on a Facebook video in Wolof. “There is a guy who came into a house to vaccinate kids for coronavirus. He vaccinated seven children who died on the spot.”

But when fact-checkers looked into the matter, the story quickly fell apart. Alassane Mbodji, who lives in the house seen in the video, strongly denied that any child had died. “Everything said on social networks is false,” he said firmly. “No one died of any vaccine. Our children are healthy... The fellow introduced himself as an agent of the Health Ministry but we quickly realized that he was not. He had no badge and had cosmetic and traditional medicines for sale in his bag.”

Mbodji reported him to the authorities and the matter was ended, but the rumour mill had picked up the story and run with it. Instagram picked up the post from an account called “bye_bye_big_pharma” which alleged that “CV vaccine tested in patients in Africa was passed without any animal safety studies. 7 children died on the spot after injection.”

From there, the story popped up in Ghana on ezone57.com, which ran the video under the headline: “Coronavirus: COVID-19 Vaccine Killed 7 Children in Senegal (West Africa) [VIDEO].” That post garnered considerable attention, and its headline appeared in screenshots on Facebook, before the website took down the story and published another debunking the claim.

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A spokeswoman for Senegal's health ministry picked apart the story that had raised fears in the population. First of all, she pointed out, there is no vaccine. "We have medical experts at the Institut Pasteur (a medical research institute) in Dakar working to create and certify a vaccine according to the procedure. They will be completely transparent about their findings."

There is no clinical trial currently underway in that country, or anywhere in Africa, according to a list of vaccine candidate compiled for the scientific journal Nature Reviews Drug Discovery. As of April 8, there were 115 candidates worldwide — and while 78 were confirmed as active, only five are in the clinical trial phase. Those five trials are happening in the U.S. and China.

The story follows an alarming actual report of two French scientists quoted to say that Africa would be a good testing ground for prospective vaccines. Their comments were immediately denounced by the World Health Organization.

Africa Check, which claims to separate fact from fiction, also looked into the matter and checked out the false claim, namely that China was sending coronavirus vaccines to Africa. They found that claim to be false.

According to the Chinese embassy in Ghana, China donated medical personal protective equipment like N95 face masks, medical protective suits, goggles, gloves and temporal artery thermometers. The donated supplies did not include vaccines and, according to the World Health Organization, there is currently no vaccine for Covid-19.

Another Facebook post spreading misinformation said that face masks "should be used for a limited time as they reduce oxygen in the blood and the brain, cause weakness, and may lead to death".

Misinformation and hoaxes are regularly picked up by Africa Check, an independent fact-checking organization which is expanding the number of languages fact-checked by 10.

Noko Makgato, executive director of Africa Check, says the expansion helps ensure that misinformation in languages other than English and French can be identified and dismissed.

Ghana Issues Warning after 'Superspreader' Event

Speaking at a night national address on May 10, President Nana Akufo-Addo revealed that a single worker at a fish factory here has infected 533 co-workers, bringing the total number of infections to 4,700 – the highest number in West Africa.

A superspreader event is a large COVID-19 infection cluster. The latest infection is part of a roughly two-week backlog of nearly 1,000 cases that had only just been reported, the president said.

Some 22 people have died of coronavirus-related causes, while 494 have recovered.

There are two large fish-processing plants in Tema, one owned by Thai Union Group PCL, the world's top producer of canned tuna, and another owned by a local company called Cosmo Seafoods Company Ltd.

Abraham Koomson, the head of the Ghana Federation of Labour, said the 533 cases were at Thai Union's Pioneer Food Cannery Limited plant and that the facility had closed down. He said a handful of Cosmo Seafoods workers had also tested positive.

With 160,501 tests since the outbreak, Ghana has carried out more tests per million people than any other country in Africa, the president said.

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The government has been employing a "pool testing" strategy, which involves collectively reviewing up to 10 samples together and then only individually testing those in positive batches.

But as a result of the increased testing, Ghana's case numbers will continue to rise above the current 4,700 confirmed infections in the country of 30 million.

"The more people we test for the virus, the more persons we will discover as positive," the President said.

President Akufo-Addo's speech came three weeks after he eased a 21-day lockdown on the capital Accra and the city of Kumasi, in the centre of the country, over concerns about economic repercussions for the many Ghanaian who work in the informal economy and live hand-to-mouth.

Ghana's ban on mass gatherings and the closure of schools and universities will continue until the end of the month, he said.

Meanwhile, Veronica Bekoe, a Ghanaian public health official, has been travelling around the country introducing people to her invention, named the Veronica Bucket. A dustbin-sized plastic receptacle, it enables people to wash their hands in the absence of running water.

Desecration of Priceless Forests in Sierra Leone Halted

The crashing economies in Asia have been a blessing – if temporary to the endangered forests of Sierra Leone – particularly the tall stands of redwood trees, prized for their beauty, their rich mahogany colour and their high quality for furniture.

The illegal trade in the wood is one of the world's most lucrative businesses and affects much of Southeast Asia and parts of Africa and South America. When demand started to increase in West Africa around 2010, exports went from basically zero to hundreds of millions of dollars in just a few years.

Over the last decade, about US\$9 billion in rosewood was imported into China, and this accounts only for wood officially listed as rosewood, which excludes many species sold as 'rosewood' but not recorded as such.

But now the contraction in the Chinese economy has paused the illegal logging in the Outamba-Kilimi national park more than 1,100 square km of park protected by 27 unarmed rangers.

"No Chinese men are coming here any more, and they're the only people to come here and help us by buying what we cut," said Ishmael Sessay, who has been harvesting timber from Sierra Leone's oldest park since last year.

Logging for domestic use is allowed, but the government says logging in the park goes far beyond what is needed to satisfy home demand, and it does not have the resources to stop it.

"I feel pain in my heart when I see this forest cut," said Musa Kamara, who worked as a ranger in the park from 1981 to 2018. "This sickness is the only thing keeping them away."

In a related development, Nigeria is facing life without oil revenue as oil prices, now around \$20 a barrel, have already skidded to the zero points. "Global efforts to fight the spread of coronavirus have driven oil prices to low that they no longer cover the cost of pumping barrels... let alone providing the government with crucial cash," wrote Bloomberg news wire.

Nigerian environmentalists should cheer this development. Their slogan has been "Keep the oil in the soil, keep the coal in the hole." [IDN-InDepthNews – 14 May 2020]

COVID-19: Should Economy Have Priority Over Migrant Workers' Health?

Viewpoint by Kalinga Seneviratne



Photo: Transporting new migrant workers to Doha, Qatar. Source: tellmemoreblogger.com

SYDNEY (IDN) – Many critics have described labour migration as the 21st-century slave trade and Covid-19 crisis has exposed this stark reality. Eastern European migrant labour in Europe. Unpaid construction workers on the brink of starvation in the Middle East. Hundreds of South Asian dormitory locked down migrant labourers infected with Covid-19 in Singapore.

Global economy's lack of compassion for the migrant workers that drives its engines is very much in display today.

Speaking on Al Jazeera's Inside Story, Thulsi Narayanasamy, head of labour rights at the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC) argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the structural inequalities that face migrant workers all over the world.

World Bank says that global remittances will decline by over \$100 billion this year. Most of the migrant workers haven't received their wages for over two months and "they are facing worse destitution possible", she claims, adding "they are left with no food and no access to food and living in such conditions that makes them extremely vulnerable to the virus".

She pointed out that workers such as in Qatar and Kuwait have been living in very unhygienic and cramped conditions that preceded the arrival of the virus. Rather than taking responsibility for improving the conditions of the workers' living quarters, the onus is now put on sending countries to bring their people back home.

It is these conditions that contributed to the second wave of Covid-19 in Singapore. 'Today' newspaper reported that close to 90 percent of the 728 Covid-19 cases (May 11) in the second wave have been migrant workers, especially from India and

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Bangladesh working in the construction industry. They are housed in crowded dormitories where 10-20 people live in one room.

Singapore's authorities have come down hard on workers who break social distancing rules, including revocation of work permits and bans on working in Singapore. But, migrant worker advocacy group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) has spoken out against the "harsh and disproportionate" punitive actions and called for better communication and improved living conditions to help the foreign workers comply with the measures. The government has now promised that they will require employers to provide better housing for their migrant workers in the future.

Real estate developers in Singapore are some of the wealthiest in Asia, and the low cost of labour flows from South Asia, for example, helps to keep costs down in the construction of condominiums. Giving sub-standard accommodation to their construction workers helps to lower the cost of the condominium units for Singaporean and other Asian buyers, while giving higher profits for developers.

Amnesty International along with Human Rights Watch, Migrant-Rights.org, and BHRRC sent a letter to six Arab countries including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on April 17 calling for the protection of migrant workers' rights during the pandemic. Between them, these six countries host the majority of the 23 million migrant workers living in Arab states, who come mainly from Asia and poorer Arab and African countries.

"Gulf countries are highly dependent on migrant workers in almost every major sector to help grow their economies and yet they have utterly failed to protect migrant workers, and treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve," said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International's Middle East Research Director, in a statement. "This pandemic has further exposed their extremely vulnerable position, with many cases of Covid-19 being reported amongst migrant worker communities."

Migrant workers from poorer Eastern European countries working in the EU are also facing similar conditions. London's Guardian reported that when Spain imposed a lockdown in mid-March many such migrant workers in the farming sector were left with no or limited access to water and food. The workers also fear they are unprotected against the virus, both in the unhygienic settlements and when working side-by-side on the farms.

Clare Carlile from Ethical Consumer, a UK campaign organization supporting better conditions for migrant workers in the EU, pointed out to the Guardian that the situation is the result of years of neglect of workers. "They got visited by the Spanish army on the 18th of March and told to stay put, even though in some places running water is several kilometres away."

Now, with Covid-19 fears, a water truck comes twice a week. "If you are at work and miss it, you must walk several kilometres for water after a hard day," she said. "Failure of employers to provide basic rights has for years created dire circumstances for the inhabitants of the settlements. Now, the pandemic has pushed the situation to crisis point."

BHRRC says that the world's biggest manufacturer of rubber gloves Malaysia has seen a surge in orders from the EU and US since these regions became the epicentre of Covid-19. The orders have been flowing to companies that have earlier been blacklisted for the exploitation of migrant labour. One such company is WRP Asia Pacific, which the US says no longer use forced labour.

UK's National Health Service (NHS) has recently bought 88.5 million medical gloves from Supermax, a Malaysian company that was blacklisted last year (according to BHRRC), for recruiting migrant workers that were reportedly exploited such as

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for paying excessive recruitment fees to agents, passport confiscations, working 12 hours per day for up to 30 days without rest, poor working and hostel conditions, and wage deductions for speaking out against working conditions.

Supermax has denied the claims, but activists are calling on governments importing medical gloves from Malaysia to uphold their modern slavery commitments to ensure protection for the workers producing rubber gloves to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

Neighbouring Thailand is home to more than 4 million migrant workers, most of whom are from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the governments of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have urged migrant workers to stay put and avoid travelling back to their countries of origin. However, many migrants have been compelled to return, as remaining in Thailand, for many, means no job, no food and a real risk of homelessness.

Mekong Migration Network (MMN) urges relevant authorities in countries of origin and destination to take immediate action to protect and support the welfare of migrants and their families. Many of the migrant workers are left to their own means because most of those in Thailand are either undocumented or ineligible for government assistance because they are in the informal sector says MMN.

Narayanasamy argues that the focus has to shift from concerns about remittances drying up to the welfare of the migrant workers. "The real question is what's the cost of the remittances of those who continue to work under the pandemic," she points out. "People are concerned about the welfare of their family members who are far away and may not even have enough money to pay for phone credits, to keep in touch with their families ... communication is impacted on an unprecedented level."

Rather than focusing on remittance figures, the media needs to question whether those sending countries like India are putting enough pressure on host governments to ensure the safety and health of the workers and their wages are paid. "We have seen the situation in Singapore where the migrant workers are being infected and that should be of serious concerns for their families," she says. "If you can't speak to your children to say how you are going, I think concerns about those remittances and the impact on the economy should be secondary." [IDN-InDepthNews – 13 May 2020]



Recognise, Respect, Promote the Rights of All Migrants in the Mekong

Kenyans Are Innovative in Finding Ways to Fight COVID-19

By Justus Wanzala



Photo: A passenger washing hands using the new device before boarding a public service vehicle at Muangatsi Market Centre Bus Stage, Busia County, Kenya. Credit: Kevin Wafula.

BUSIA, Kenya (IDN) – It is a hot afternoon at a bus station at Mungatsi market centre, Nambale Sub-County, in Busia County, Western Kenya. Many people, many travellers, are queuing to wash their hands. Each person is maintaining a distance from the other as they wash their hands and board public service vehicles heading to their various destinations.

Hand washing before boarding public service vehicles and maintaining social distance are new practices that Kenyans are constrained to observe. They have been declared mandatory by health authorities as a safety measure to contain the spread of COVID-19.

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Nevertheless, a quick look at how they are washing their hands reveals something novel. The passengers are washing hands using sanitation equipment that has pedals which when pressed with a leg ejects water from a bucket on a metal stand and liquid soap directly on their hands. This enables them to wash their hands without touching any part of the equipment.

The equipment is an innovation of two young men from the county. They improvised the device to enable people to wash their hands safely. The two, Bernard Dindi and Christopher Butsunzu, have no technical training except high school education. They say that they were motivated to design the device after noticing challenges of maintaining hygiene following the outbreak of COVID-19.

They then did research on the internet to develop a hand-washing device that could aid in curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

As they worked on their idea, the country was witnessing a sharp rise in infections shortly after confirmation of the first case on March 13, 2020. Indeed, the infection rates have continued to grow exponentially with the infected reaching 296 and 74 recoveries by April 21, 2020.

The duo reiterates that the device lowers the risk that faces people using ordinary sanitizers. "Normally, when people wash or sanitize their hands, they have to touch the bottles with sanitizer and water taps. We saw the danger they face of contracting and spreading the virus," they explained.

While using the device, one only presses the first pedal situated underneath the machine and sanitizing liquid comes out and then presses the second pedal to eject water.

Dindi says they decided to place the first device at the local market centre's bus park for use by the public free because they realized the area has many people who risked infection. "It is an area with high human traffic that is why we thought the equipment would be helpful," says Dindi.

He adds that many people find it user-friendly.

"I have been using it daily since it was installed. I find it convenient to use," says Anne Nekesa, a trader at Mungatsi market. "We are amused by the technology these youths have developed. This is so impressive, and we are happy about it. We feel safe to wash our hands," says John Wandera, a bus operator.

The young men say the devices cost them at least ten thousand Kenya Shillings (USD 100) and several days to make.

Buoyed by the positive response from users, they intend to make more and distribute them across the country.

"We've just managed to make a few because of limited resources. But if we secure financial support, we'll make more," they stress.

Both members of the public and county officials have welcomed the device.

Busia county chief officer for health and sanitation, Isaac Omeri hails the device noting that it will help a great deal in the war against COVID-19, "This is unique equipment which minimizes chances of one contracting the virus while washing and sanitizing their hands," he observes.

He has already bought six of the devices, which will be used in various health offices within the county.

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Indeed, as Kenya puts in place measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, innovation seems to be a preferred path.



Equipment (PPEs), which a few months ago was imported.

Besides, the government has put in place a multifaceted COVID-19 containment strategy involving a raft of measures. It has heightened surveillance at all points of entry, health facilities and communities across the country. It has stopped people from travelling out and into four of the 47 counties in the state and initiated targeted mass testing in areas with a high number of COVID-19 incidents.

Members of the public too have been encouraged to remain vigilant given that the risk is still high and advised to continue taking precautionary measures by maintaining first-hand and respiratory hygiene, safe food practices, maintain social distancing and avoiding close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections.

Meanwhile, wearing of masks in public places has been declared compulsory while all institutions of learning have been closed. Also banned are public and private meetings that involve crowding of people.

Already, Kenya shillings two Billion (USD 200m), has been allocated to fight COVID-19. centres for handling patients have also been established in all the country's 47 counties although many faces the challenge of necessary equipment. [IDN-InDepthNews – 27 April 2020]

Early this April, Kenyatta University, based near Kenya's capital Nairobi, announced that it had developed a ventilator that could save lives of victims of the coronavirus.

Ventilators are crucial equipment for coronavirus patients who develop difficulty in breathing. Unfortunately, they are only a handful in Kenya.

As a result, university students came up with a prototype called Tiba Vent (*Tiba* is the Swahili word for a treat).

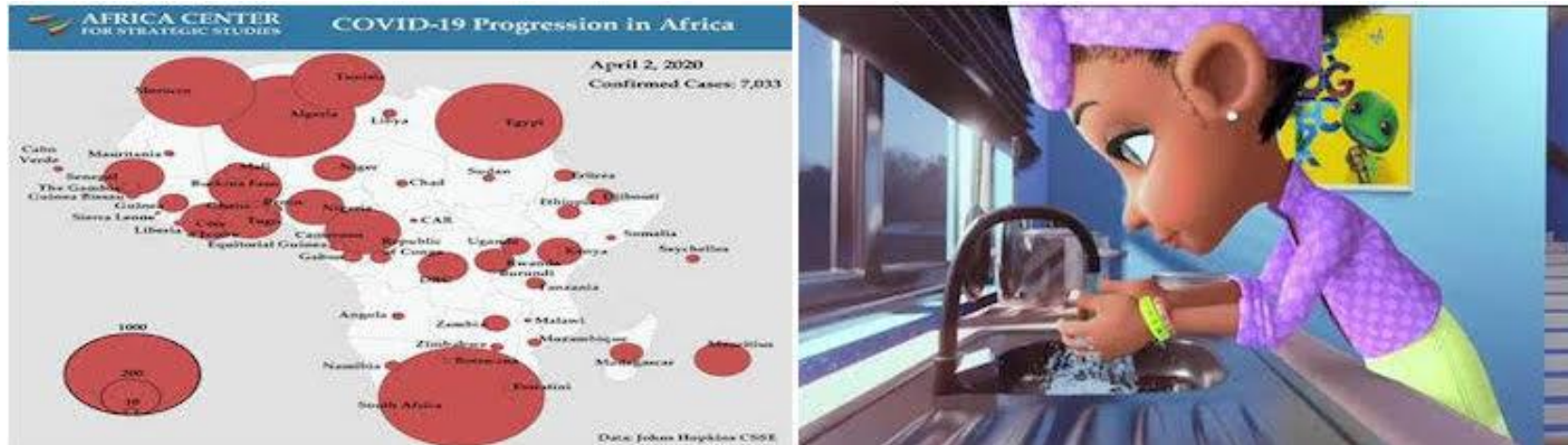
Some 16 students from different faculties developed the prototype, a cubical unit made of hard silver plastic parts with pipes connecting to an oxygen tank and two other pipes delivering the air. It also linked to a computer monitor. The university's Vice-Chancellor, Paul Wainaina said the university could produce 50 ventilators a week.

Moreover, the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) also started manufacturing COVID-19 rapid test kits early April to hasten to test of COVID-19. The institute has a production unit capable of making diagnostic testing kits and hand sanitizers.

Several companies are also making facemasks for use by the public and medical personnel as well as Personal Protection

The Impact of COVID-19 Stalks Africa – Animated Video Tells Children About It

By Lisa Vives, Global Information Network



Collage of coronavirus affected Africa and animated video by INPS-IDN.

NEW YORK (IDN) – While Africa, like the international community on the whole, is engaged in a tough fight against the coronavirus, a World Health Organization (WHO) expert has called into question frightening estimates of those affected by COVID-19. At the same time, Ghana in a surprise move has ordered a partial lift of the lockdown. The pandemic virus is luring Rwanda into massive 'loans' under the garb of debt reduction.

Animated video

Famed Nigerian filmmaker Niyi Akinmolayan has created an animated video to help youngsters understand why they have to stay home and forego outdoor games with their friends. That is where Akinmolayan's cartoon monster comes in.

In a 90-second animation, the animation tells the story of two siblings, Habeeb and Funke. Habeeb gets tired of staying at home and decides to sneak out to play soccer. His older sister Funke, busy washing her hands, warns him not to go out, but he insists, only to be confronted by an ugly green monster!

Akinmolayan, best known for directing "The Wedding Party 2", Nigeria's highest-grossing film, said he was inspired after several attempts to explain the lockdown to his 5-year-old son.

"But he still didn't get it until I kind of changed the narrative and said the coronavirus actually looks like a big monster and it is out there in the street and if you go it will catch you," he told Reuters.

Ezichi Nwaogu, 9, described his favourite part was when the boy opened the door and saw the coronavirus, the monster, outside, and he slammed the door and had to go inside. "Now I know that this is not the right time to go anywhere or outside," he said.

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Akinmolayan made the animation through his production company, Anthill Studios, using a 10-strong crew all working separately from their homes. It is being distributed for free and can be downloaded in English, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, French and Swahili.

Overstated estimates

According to provisional modelling, anywhere between thousands and millions of Africans may become infected with the coronavirus. But this frightening statistic by regional WHO spokesman was disputed by the head of emergency operations for WHO Africa.

"This is still to be fine-tuned," said Michel Yao at a media teleconference. "It's difficult to make a long-term estimation because the context changes too much." Also, he added, "public health measures when they're fully implemented can actually have an impact."

Yao noted that similar worst-case predications for the Ebola outbreak had not come true because people changed behaviour in time.

So far, there have been 17,000 confirmed cases of the COVID-19 disease on the African continent and about 900 deaths – relatively little compared to some other regions.

Infections in South Africa, which has the highest number of cases, have slowed after they launched a strict lockdown, but other nations – like Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Algeria – have seen higher than average fatalities.

The WHO is working with authorities there to improve patient care and reduce fatalities, said Matshidiso Moeti, director for WHO's Africa region, which comprises 46 sub-Saharan nations and Algeria.

These efforts, however, could be stalled by President Donald Trump's recent attacks on the UN health body including his threat to withdraw funding for the agency.

This could harm both the fight against the virus and against other disabling and life-threatening diseases like polio, HIV and malaria, Ms. Moeti warned.

"The impact, potentially, of this decision will be quite significant on polio eradication," said Moeti, "just when Africa was close to being declared polio-free."

Trump accused the Geneva-based WHO of promoting Chinese "disinformation" about the new coronavirus, saying this had probably worsened the outbreak and that he would stop its funding even as he defended his own handling of the crisis.

More than 2 million people have been infected globally, with the largest number in the United States.

Washington is the biggest donor to the WHO, which tackles specific diseases and also strengthens national health systems. The United States contributed more than \$400 million to the WHO in 2019, roughly 15% of its budget.

"We are very much hoping (suspension of funding) will be re-thought because the U.S. government is an important partner not only in financial terms but as an important strategic partner," Moeti said.

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Partial lift of lockdown in Ghana

"In view of the modest successes at containing the spread of the coronavirus," President Nana Akufo-Addo announced in a televised address "the partial lockdown in Accra and Kumasi is being lifted."

Four major cities in the Greater Accra, Ashanti and Central regions had been under lockdown since March 31, following confirmation of 137 cases. The president said the decision was based on science and data and any future course of action would be determined by these same factors. He acknowledged, however, the severe impact the lockdown had on the poor and vulnerable.

This makes Ghana the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to lift movement restrictions.

According to Bloomberg news, the most recent number of infections after 21 days of movement restriction was 1,042.

Residents of the capital, Accra, and major centres were allowed to return to work starting even though other restrictions such as school closures and a ban on sport and religious meetings remain in place, Akufo-Addo said in a televised address.

The disease brought three years of economic expansion of 6% or more to a sudden halt in the nation of 30 million people, with the finance ministry forecasting that growth could slow to 1.5%, the least in 37 years.

The President highlighted the country's accomplishments, namely undertaking aggressive contact tracing of infected persons, enhancing the capacity to test, expanding the numbers of treatment and isolation centres, "our better understanding of the dynamism of the virus, the ramping up of our domestic capacity to produce our own personal protective equipment, sanitizers and medicines."

The ban on mass gatherings and the closure of Ghana's borders to human traffic, however, remain in force.

The announcement came as a surprise to some who were anticipating an extension or a national lockdown following a spike in the number of confirmed cases across the country.

Ghana's coronavirus case count has increased steadily since the index case was reported on March 12 and has spread to 10 of its 16 regions.

Of the total of 1,043 cases, the majority are in Accra (882) and Kumasi (62). Of the number, 99 persons have recovered and have been discharged while nine have died.

Rwanda saddled with 'loans'

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund stretched out their hands this month to struggling countries in Africa, most recently approving a \$109.4 million debt reduction grant to Rwanda under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative.

This will serve to meet Rwanda's urgent balance of payment needs stemming from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fund said in a press release.

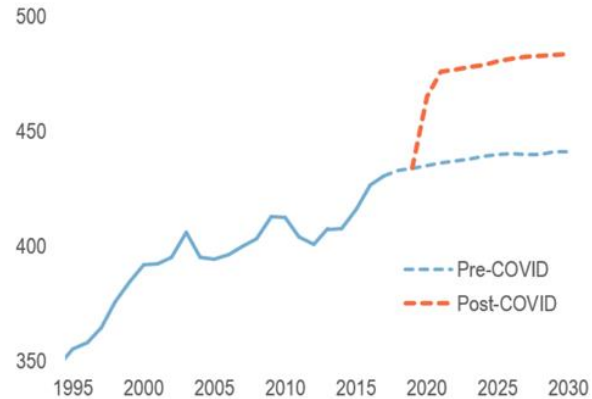
The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly unfolding, the IMF continued, with the near-term outlook deteriorating quickly. This has given a rise to significant fiscal and external financing needs. The authorities have acted fast by putting in place measures to help contain and mitigate the spread of the disease, they said.

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Extreme poverty spikes

In sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic pushed more than 32 million people into extreme poverty.

(persons living below \$1.90 per day, millions)



Sources: Mahler et al. (2021) and IMF staff calculations.

INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

The funds will provide financing to the budget for increased spending aimed at containing the epidemic and mitigating its economic impact, noted the IMF. But unlike a grant, the IMF funds must be repaid "to preserve debt sustainability in the medium term."

Private creditors have agreed on a voluntary basis to roll over or refinance \$8 billion in debt, a French finance ministry source said, but not cancel it, meaning interest would continue to accrue.

Even French President Emmanuel Macron agreed that African countries should be helped by "massively cancelling their debt."

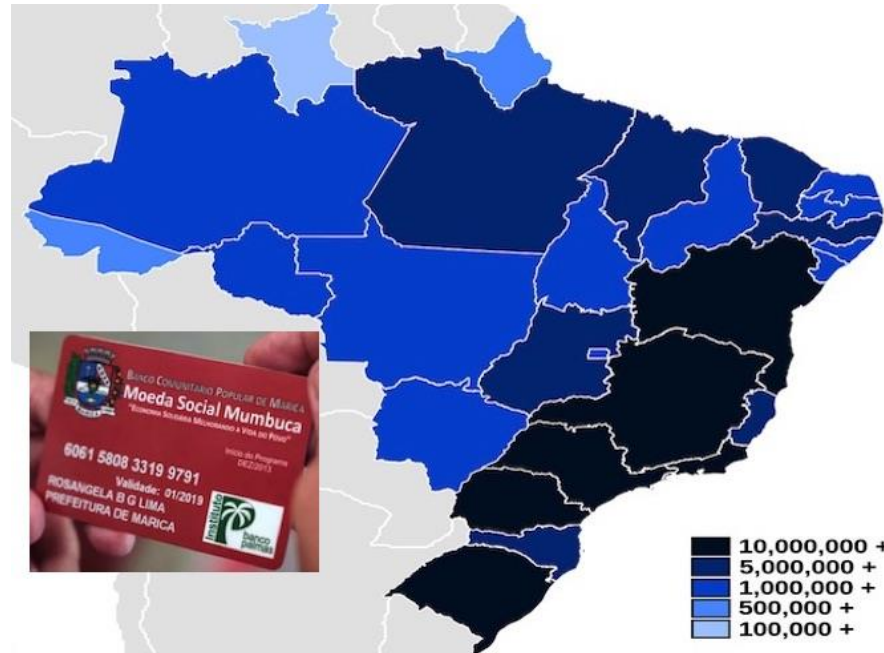
David Himbara, a Rwandan-Canadian professor, in an article titled: "(President) Kagame is drowning Rwanda in Debt", observed that this is the second brush with massive foreign debt for the central African nation. Under the IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, some \$1.4 billion was erased from Rwanda's obligations in 2008, leaving \$668 million. Its total debt today, according to the Public Debt Clock is over \$13 billion.

The UK-based Jubilee Debt Campaign is leading a push by nearly 140 campaign groups and charities for cancellation – not moratoriums – of debt payments by the poorest countries. Tim Jones, the head of policy at the Jubilee Debt Campaign, urged the IMF and World Bank to waive payments to themselves and urge private investors to suspend taking debt payments.

"It would be outrageous if private speculators keep taking high interest payments from poor countries at this time of crisis," Jones said. [IDN-InDepthNews – 22 April 2020]

Brazil Implements Basic Income Policy Following Massive Civil Society Campaign

By Pedro Telles



Collage with map of Brazilian states by population (from Wikimedia Commons) and Basic Income card (from Vox).

The writer is 2018-19 Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity at the International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics

SÃO PAULO (IDN) – Tens of millions of Brazilians have begun receiving basic income payments aimed at addressing the economic impact of COVID-19, following Congress' approval of a bill prompted by a country-wide grassroots campaign that began just three weeks ago.

Like many crises, the coronavirus pandemic has served to make social and economic inequalities more evident around the world, often in very harsh ways. In Brazil, which has officially recorded 20,727 cases and 1,124 deaths from coronavirus as of April 13 (with actual figures likely to be 12 times higher), the poorest and most marginalized have been worst affected, with less wealth and fewer resources to draw on to protect themselves, their health and their livelihoods.

Building on decades of debate around the idea of a universal basic income, and spurred by the impact of the pandemic in one of the world's most unequal nations, a coalition of over 160 Brazilian civil society organizations and movements seized the moment last month (March) to turn theory into practice with A Renda Básica que Queremos (The Basic Income that We Want).

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Launched on March 20, the campaign swiftly built the support of over 500,000 citizens and 3,000 social media influencers. It also had the backing of five key organizations: Rede Brasileira de Renda Básica (Brazilian Basic Income Network), Coalizão Negra por Direitos (Black Coalition for Rights), Instituto Ethos de Empresas e Responsabilidade Social (Ethos Institute for Business and Social Responsibility), Nossas, and INESC - Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos (Institute for Socioeconomic Studies).

The campaign presented a detailed policy proposal to several members of Brazil's national Congress, which was then put on the legislative agenda. The bill was approved unanimously by federal deputies and senators (with negotiated changes) by March 30. Three days later, it was sanctioned by President Jair Bolsonaro, who had previously proposed much more limited plans to supplement the income of Brazil's most vulnerable.

By April 9, law became reality as the first payments of BRL 600 (more than half of the Brazilian minimum monthly wage) were being sent out. Up to 59 million low-income Brazilians will benefit directly, and twice that number indirectly, or more than half of the country's population in total. The basic income payments will continue for at least three months, with a potential extension already foreseen in the approved law.

"We have no doubt that our campaign in favour of a clear and effective basic income policy proposal strongly influenced the decision taken by Congress that is now being implemented," Leandro Ferreira, president of the Brazilian Basic Income Network, said.

"By directly and unconditionally helping those who need it the most, basic income has entered the landscape. It has begun as a policy option to address the current crisis, but it must remain in place for whatever comes after," Ferreira added.

Many activists, experts and politicians now hope that the Emergency Basic Income will become a permanent one after the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided. There is also the hope that it will become universal, rather than limited to those who meet the criteria set out in the current law. Significantly, the new legislation means that basic income is now an established right in Brazil and taking back a right to income is never easy, however much a government might wish to do so.

This remarkable achievement, which will lift or keep tens of millions of Brazilians from poverty, is a reminder that crises can open political space for civil society to push for policy changes that would otherwise be hard or nearly impossible to achieve. When public attention turns to the need for urgent action around inequalities and their consequences, politicians become more sensitive to calls for bold action.

Brazil's new basic income law is a testament to the strength of people power in pushing for policies that fight inequality, even under the rule of far-right administrations. It is also a clear example of how civil society can find opportunities to set the agenda during the COVID-19 crisis, demanding not only basic income, but also universal health care and other key policies for equity. The fight against inequality goes on.

Note: Pedro Telles is also a co-founder of Bancada Ativista (Activist Caucus), an independent political movement in Brazil focused on electing activists to political office, and currently Chief of Staff for the movement's collective State Deputy mandate in São Paulo – where eight activists who were elected jointly with over 149,000 votes share a single office in the country's largest state parliament. He tweets at @pedrortelles. [IDN-InDepthNews – 17 April 2020]

COVID-19 Could Lead to Better Protection of Biodiversity and Wild Animals

By Kalinga Seneviratne



Photo: "Wet market" in Indonesia. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne | INPS-IDN

SYDNEY (IDN) – A positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic could be a better understanding of protecting biodiversity and a global ban on the trade in wild animals for food. The belief that COVID-19 began at a "wet market" in Wuhan in China, where wild animals were being sold for human consumption, has led to the Chinese government banning the trade in wild animals and a growing international campaign for this to be made into an enforceable international law.

At the Wuhan "wet market" and in many such markets across China and Vietnam as well, numerous wild animals, including live wolf pups, salamanders, crocodiles, scorpions, rats, squirrels, foxes, civets and turtles are being sold for human consumption.

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However, the international media's use of word "wet markets" is dangerous because such markets exist right across Asia, including squeaky clean Singapore, where wild animals are not sold. Farmed animals, fish and vegetables are sold at these "wet markets" and it is named as such because the vendors wash the market stalls every morning for hygienic reasons before the food items are displayed for sale.

Such "wet markets" are where the poorer segments of the society come to do their daily shopping because of the low overheads, the food there is less expensive than in supermarkets and often fresher. The International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) argued in a recent blog post that rather than pointing fingers at "wet markets" we should be looking at the burgeoning trade in wild animals. "It is wild animals rather than farmed animals that are the natural hosts of many viruses," state Eric Fèvre and Cecilia Tacoli in their blog.

The legal and illegal trade of wildlife for human consumption is a multi-billion-dollar industry and recognized as one of the most severe threats to biodiversity. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, ecologists and virologists have warned about the dangers of destroying biodiversity and the advent of new viruses as humans interact more directly with wild animals by destroying forests for "development" such as building roads and railways, expanding farmlands and human habitats.

In 2008, a team of researchers from the school of ecology and biodiversity from the University College London identified 335 diseases that emerged between 1960 and 2004, at least 60% of which came from animals.

Almost every global pandemic that has occurred in the past three decades are due to pathogens crossing from animals to humans. Among them are the 1996 Ebola, 2003 SARS, 2012 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and 2013 Avian Flu outbreaks – in all the virus transmission went from animals or birds to humans.

On February 2, the most powerful arm of the Chinese Community Party, the Politburo Standing Committee headed by President Xi Jinping issued a statement banning the sale of wild animals for human consumptions across China.

"We must strengthen market supervision, resolutely ban and severely crack down on illegal wildlife markets and trade, and control major public health risks from the source," the statement said. However, recent reports in the international media of some of those wild animals' markets re-opening has raised concern about the Chinese government's resolve to implement the order.

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Meanwhile, an international campaign is gathering steam to ban wild animal markets. A U.S. based organisation that promotes plant-based, preventative medicine called 'Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine' which has a membership of 12,000 physicians, has begun a petition asking both the U.S. Government and World Health Organization (WHO) to ban wild animal markets.

The petition has been signed by 225 physicians, including Eric J. Brandt, cardiologist and lipidologist at Yale University School of Medicine, and Michelle L. O'Donoghue, a professor at Harvard Medical School, according to LIVEKINDLY Media, an American Vegan-promoting news site.

The petitioners point out that live animal markets aren't exclusive to China. They are located around the world, including in Europe and the U.S. "Live animal markets are a welcome mat to coronaviruses," the doctors state in the petition. "The failure to close a single live animal market in China led to a pandemic that has closed countless businesses worldwide and led to an enormous death toll and economic havoc."

According to The Guardian of London, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the acting executive secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity has also called for a global ban on wildlife markets to prevent future pandemics, but she has cautioned against unintended consequences.

"We should also remember you have communities, particularly from low-income rural areas, particularly in Africa, which are dependent on wild animals to sustain the livelihoods of millions of people," she told the Guardian. "So, unless we get alternatives for these communities, there might be a danger of opening up illegal trade in wild animals ... we need to look at how we balance that and really close the hole of illegal trade in the future."

In October 2019, an article in the American 'Science' magazine pointed out that there is a widespread trade in wild animals in biological diverse tropics and up to 8,775 species are at the risk of extinction due to this trade. It called for proactive, rather than reactive, measures to stop this trade.

In the U.S., Senator Lindsey Graham is leading calls for China to keep its wild animal markets closed, as the U.S. media claims these are being reopened. Earlier in April, he called on Senate lawmakers to sign on to a letter he sent to the Chinese ambassador to the U.S. "urging the immediate closure of these wet markets for the safety of the world at large".

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in a radio interview on April 3, called for a global crackdown and ban on what he calls "Chinese wet markets". His call came after there was widespread coverage in the Australian media of wild animal markets reopening in China after a national two-month long lockdown to eradicate the virus.

If this trade in wild animals for human consumption is going to be halted across the globe, David Quammen, author of 'Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Pandemic' argues that we need to look at the broader picture of human behaviour and destruction of biodiversity.

"We invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbour so many species of animals and plants – and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses," he said in a recent article published by the New York Times.

"We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it." [IDN-InDepthNews – 10 April 2020]



SDGs for All



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